ONE NATION, UNDER ARUGULA: THE OBAMA WHITE HOUSE KITCHEN GARDEN AS CULTURAL DISPLAY AND PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I seek to excavate the social, economic and cultural implications of the Obama kitchen garden. The analysis presented here views the Obama kitchen garden as a cultural display. It is a display that utilizes exhibitionary strategies in a museal tradition to organize public knowledge about healthful nutrition and ecological living. My central contention is that the White House garden functions like an artifact in a museum setting and that it represents a pedagogic project that seeks to improve the bio-political competencies of the national viewing public. Through a museological lens, I explore the rationality, rhetoric and repercussions proffered by the symbolism of this 1100 square foot vegetable patch. In the first chapter, I examine the logic behind the garden as a function of liberal governmentality. The second chapter looks back into the annals of American history to explore the mythic construction of the idea of the garden so as to render knowable how the symbolism of the Obama garden recalls an agrarian mythos. In the final chapter, I examine the class politics associated with the “grow your own food” movement with a view to expose discourses that destabilize the garden’s pedagogic project.
For my parents, Anil and Vatsala Batra.
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INTRODUCTION

On the 9th of April 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama, accompanied by the students from a local elementary school and the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, planted an organic kitchen garden on the South Lawn of the White House. While planting a vegetable garden can seem like the most innocuous of acts, this particular garden garnered an enormous amount of press and public attention. In a front page article, The New York Times claimed that the garden was much more than mere landscaping; it was a powerful political and environmental symbol (Burros, Marion. “Obamas Prepare to Plant Vegetable Garden at White House.”) Exuberant cheers rang forth from food activists and conservationists while the internet reverberated with foodies and gourmands furiously blogging about their euphoria.

In this thesis, I seek to excavate the social, economic and cultural implications of the Obama kitchen garden. The analysis presented here views the Obama kitchen garden as a cultural display. It is a display that utilizes exhibitionary strategies in a museal tradition to organize public knowledge about healthful nutrition and ecological living. My central contention is that the White House garden functions like an artifact in a museum setting and that it represents a pedagogic project that seeks to improve the bio-political competencies of the national viewing public. Through a museological lens, I explore the rationality, rhetoric and repercussions proffered by the symbolism of this 1100 square foot vegetable patch. In the first chapter, I examine the logic behind the garden as a function of liberal governmentality. The second chapter looks back into the annals of American history to explore the mythic construction of the idea of the garden so as to render knowable how the symbolism of the Obama garden recalls an agrarian mythos. In the final chapter, I examine the class politics associated with the
‘grow your own food’ movement to expose discourses that destabilize the garden’s pedagogic project.

Background Information

The past decade has seen an unprecedented rise in food reform activism. These movements have made issues like food system localization, school lunch reform, alternative agriculture, organics and sustainable practices visible to the public like never before. With the election of Barack Obama, food and environmental reformers pinned their hopes of change on the new administration. Prominent food advocates like Alice Waters and Michael Pollan wrote open letters to the President directing his attention to the issues of food and environmental reform. In his letter, titled “Farmer-in-chief,” Pollan writes, “If what’s needed is a change of culture in America’s thinking about food, then how America’s first household organizes its eating will set the national tone… [and communicate a] set of values that can guide Americans toward sun-based foods and away from eating oil.” By eating “oil” Pollan is referring to the fact that the industrial agricultural sector is the second largest consumer of fossil fuels in the American economy, right after automobiles. In her letter, Alice Waters asked the Obamas to set up a special “Kitchen Cabinet” in the form of an advisory group to help them find the most competent White House chef: choosing a “person with integrity and devotion to the ideals of environmentalism, health, and conservation would send a powerful message to our country: that food choices matter.” And food choices do matter. In fact, food is the most immediate connection we have not only to our culture, but also to the environment.

So I am sure they were delighted when Michelle Obama decided to plant a vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House. As someone with more than just a passing interest in food and agriculture policy, I, too, was pleased by the symbolism of this gesture and
continue to hope it that it will reflect hard policy changes to come. As a ‘soft policy’ initiative, the White House garden represents a powerful counter-hegemonic stance taken against conventional and industrial food in favor of alternative agriculture and sustainable practices. As this thesis will document, the American nation faces a dire environmental crisis and an equally intractable food crisis. We are a nation that is only now waking up to the consequences of unbridled consumption and unregulated industrial growth.¹ According to Michael Pollan, 37% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the industrial food sector. This means that for every 1 calorie of food produced, the industry uses 10 calories of fossil energy, which reflects just how inefficient, wasteful and environmentally negligent the system is (Pollan “Farmer-in-Chief”).

Concurrently, we are facing a public health emergency that is paradoxical in nature. On the one hand, we have an obesity crisis, and on the other, we are witnessing an unprecedented rise in food scarcity and hunger. These are issues that have been amplified by the recent recession that has atrophied the economy and pushed millions to the brink of poverty.

What is interesting is that symbolically, the White House garden represents a kind of magic bullet, a panacea that assuages all the imprudent and irresponsible decisions that got us here in the first place. It is emblematic of the rise of the New Agrarian movement, a movement that Eric Freyfogle says is marked by a “challenge to materialism and the dominance of the market” where there is a “heightened interest in land conservation…which has taken on a distinctly ecological cast” (xviii). Freyfogle contends that this incarnation of agrarianism holds true to the core beliefs associated with agrarian concerns like “the land, natural fertility, healthy families and maintenance of durable links between people and place” (xviii). The Obama garden

¹ As I write this, thousands of gallons of crude oil are spilling into the Gulf of Mexico making for the worst environmental crisis in the history of this nation. The BP oil spill is the quintessential symbol of ‘unrestrained consumption and irresponsible regulation’ and its impact will be felt in our food system, our ecology and our economy for many years to come.
gives a token expression to all these values. Note that Mrs. Obama publically couched her decision to plant the garden using vocabulary like “healthy eating” and “nutrition,” and chose not to highlight the garden’s ecological rationality. While this is deeply problematic and is a concern that I address in my first chapter, there is no doubt that the gesture presents an alternative foodview, one that challenges our national dietary preoccupations with convenience and quantity.

Not all, however, were ecstatic at the prospect of this highly visible emblem of a progressive food system. The Mid-America Crop-life Association (MACA), for example, wrote to Mrs. Obama extolling the virtues of the industrial agricultural sector, contending, “if Americans were still required to farm to support their family's basic food and fiber needs, would the U.S. have been leaders in the advancement of science, communication, education, medicine, transportation and the arts?” (McCarvel). Embedded in this push-back are sentiments that express the larger national mentality about the nature and definition of progress. While the philosophical developments of these intellectual inclinations are detailed in the second chapter, it should be noted that big agriculture is not the only voice of dissent circulating in public discourse. Charges of elitism and class privilege have dogged the Obamas since the inception of their campaign for office. The same charges have been leveled at advocates of alternative foodways who tend to valorize labor processes and the ecologies of food production without offering substantive alternatives to the economic values in place (Guthman, “Fast Food/Slow Food” 56). I address this subject in the third chapter of this thesis.

Thus, the White House garden sits at the intersection of a new politics of consumption, representative of what Michael Pollan refers to as “ecological eating,” or what Julie Guthman believes exemplifies “reflexive eating par excellence” and the old status quo, a hegemonic
industrial food system sustained by the politics of privilege and the free market (11; 46). The Obama garden then, expresses a bundle of signifiers that are complex, manifold and even contradictory. These signifiers indict not only the familiar categories of race, class and gender but also the nation’s foundational mythologies of individualism and self-sufficiency. It should be noted that my analysis only examines the garden through the category of class and excludes race and gender. This is not to imply that race and gender are not meaningful sites of inquiry through which to approach the garden. However, they are beyond the scope of my analysis, and I leave it open to future scholarship.

As the cultural ramifications of this garden are complex, it is imperative that scholarly attention critically examine the rationalities as well as the material and visceral realities that it presents. Before proceeding further, however, I would like to confess my stake in the research presented here, which emanates from a profound interest in the cultural politics of food. As an immigrant to this country, I have been deeply puzzled by native attitudes towards food and eating. On the one hand, there is indulgence and an obsession with ‘big everything’—large portions, super-sized plates and ‘all you can eat’ menus, and yet, on the other hand, there is abstention, a fad diet for every season, anorexia, bulimia and obligatory exercising. American environmental tendencies are equally dichotomous with people shopping ‘green’ while driving their Hummers to the grocery store. So in large part, this research project emerges from a desire to demystify the logic behind some of these antithetical and dysfunctional propensities, especially as my analysis finds that the Obama garden reflects the push and pull of these tendencies. In conjunction with my interest in food studies, I am also a student of public history and museology. As I began to study the rationale and rhetoric of the garden, I was struck by the exhibitionary strategy used by the White House to display it. The Obama garden is displayed as a
part of the living history circuit of the presidential home. It is evocative of a life style and life choices that ought to be emulated and, analogous to other museal artifacts, represents a pedagogic agenda. It is a quintessential teachable moment that shows the public how to eat and live healthfully in an ecologically reflexive manner, just like the First Family does.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My theoretical framework draws heavily on theories emerging from new museum studies (or what is known as critical museum theory) and is especially reliant on the work of Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Janet Marstine summarizes this approach: “Museums frame objects and audiences to control the viewing process, to suggest a tightly woven narrative of progress, an ‘authentic’ mirror of history, without conflict or contradiction” (5). The White House is a living history museum with AAM accreditation. It is the frame from which the garden is publicly viewed as a kind of artifact and it constructs the garden’s narrative context. Seeking to ameliorate the twin predicaments facing American public health and the environment, this narrative discursively constructs the garden as a “site of memory” that recalls and promotes the legacy of Jeffersonian agrarianism. I use the term “site of memory” in the vein of Pierre Nora, who coined the term to describe museums and monuments around which collective memories aggregate (Crane 105).

It is imperative to note that the White House is rendered in public discourse as a site of authority and, as a museal institution, functions as a mechanism of governance as well as a cultural tastemaker. By mechanism of governance, I am referring to Tony Bennett’s notion of “The Exhibitionary Complex” in which he argues that the traditional museum model uses exhibitionary strategies and cultural technologies that are concerned with organizing “a voluntary self-regulating citizenry”(76). These “cultural technologies” are pedagogic
mechanisms that are constructed by those in power to regulate the masses while reproducing their worldview (in this case, foodview). Bennett’s work forms the theoretical backbone of my analysis. His study, following the work of Michel Foucault, reveals that museal displays are regulatory technologies in the service of liberal governance. Thus, while museum spaces are seen as utopic and objective, and representative of universal standards of excellence, they are also highly constructed spaces that expose systems of power and class. Here, Michel Foucault’s massively influential explication of power/knowledge and modes of governmentality helped me frame the bio-political implications of the garden’s rhetoric and proved to be an equally invaluable theoretical source.

The vital work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Janet Marstine informed my study on the class ethics of display. The ability to show, to exhibit or to display implies the existence of a hierarchy because the one constructing the display has the power of representation and is able to produce and shape knowledge. Museal exhibits like the White House garden speak to a certain worldview; they voice a particular set of values. The analysis presented in this thesis aims to deconstruct the garden’s narrative by interrogating the power structures implicit in its display. New museology is particularly well suited to this type of deconstruction because, as a body of scholarship, it emerged to challenge the authority demonstrated by the traditional museum model. Thus the application of this framework enables a critical analysis of the garden’s discursive construction, circulation and contestation.

Methodologically, I use textual analysis to read the garden’s cultural significance. As a graduate student trained in cultural studies, my approach is staunchly multidisciplinary and draws on a wide variety of secondary sources from history, performance studies, folklore, politics, sociology, economics and American studies. The work of three scholars of the mid-
twentieth century American studies myth-symbol school bear special mention here, and they are Roderick Nash, Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. Their work gave me a rich genealogical perspective into how Americans relate to the mutually dependent notions of the garden, wilderness and industry and how deeply influential the image of the garden remains in the collective mindscape today. Note that throughout this work, I use the terms White House garden and the Obama garden interchangeably.

Chapter Outlines

In the first chapter, I detail the theoretical framework that grounds the analysis presented in this work and enables an understanding of the garden within the contemporary food zeitgeist. I posit that the Obama garden is deployed as a rhetorical strategy in service of constructing the ideal bio-political subject and is thus primarily pedagogic in nature. To demonstrate this assertion, I examine the role of the White House as a cultural institution and argue that its display of the garden is a form of tactical museology that aims to circulate new economies of taste that are guided by the liberal governmentality of the present administration. Central to the garden display is the role played by the Obamas, who are rendered as sites of authority by virtue of their occupation of the White House. In their presentation of self, I explore the constitution of a hegemonic ideal that is represented to the public as normative and worthy of emulation. The alimentary choices made at the White House play a significant role in shaping the public discourse around the production and consumption of food. My analysis reveals how an exhibitionary technology like the garden works to discursively circulate these eating and ecological regimes.

The second chapter of this thesis examines the constitution of the Obama garden as a ‘site of memory’ that recalls the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer. As an artifact on display,
the White House garden articulates the legacy of collective memory by building on an unyielding and powerful set of myths that construct the notion of the authentic American experience. Here, I rely on a historiographic frame to detail the way in which the garden is constructed in American memory with a view to situate the Obama garden within the matrix of agrarian mythos. There is a rich and immense array of literature devoted to explicating the American relationship to nature and land. In this chapter, I include a literary overview of the most influential critical analysis in the works of Roderick Nash, Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. I examine the symbolic and material functions that the idea of the garden has fulfilled in American history and politics and reveal how the image of the White House garden is reminiscent of the same. I explore the ways in which the garden figures as an ideal in the organic, sustainability, and local food movements, all of which find their embodiment in the White House garden. I contend that the Obama garden summons back a nostalgic vision of agrarian subsistence and does so to counter hegemonic eating standards that are deeply rooted in an industrial food system. My analysis will demonstrate the dichotomous and dysfunctional intellectual impulses that exist alongside each other in the form of the pastoral ideal and the utilitarian obsession with industrial progress.

In the final chapter of this work, I problematize the pedagogic project represented by the White House garden. To do this, I use the category of class to examine the ways in which the counter-hegemonic foodview enunciated by the garden (as signifier) is being contested in public discourse. I complicate the issue of instrumentality posed by the garden by excavating the flow of power implied by the very nature of exhibitions. I examine the efficacy of the garden display by unearthing the class values it gives voice to and investigate how well the garden represents its contemporary public. Using Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class differentiation, I explore the White House garden as a product of upper and middle class tastes by investigating
the individual botanical objects that are displayed in the garden collection and argue that the array of vegetal and fruit varieties on display are a function of access to education and, more importantly, capital. Drawing on the latest available economic statistics, my analysis exposes the problematics associated with growing your own food, not with the view to discount the solutions offered by the garden, but to complicate the real-world implications of asking the poor to provide food for themselves when the means to do so remain outside their reach.

In many ways, the White House garden represents a shift in the cultural tectonics of the American foodscape. Never has the highest office of the United States been occupied by an African-American president, let alone a president who shops at Whole Foods. Never has a First Lady challenged the industrial food system. In fact, not since Eleanor Roosevelt’s victory garden during the Second World War has the White House even had a kitchen garden on the property. In the work that follows, I present a critical examination of this symbolic gesture and hope to shed some light on the politics of the counter-hegemonic foodview it represents.
CHAPTER I.
PRUNING THE BIO-POLITICAL SUBJECT: THE OBAMA GARDEN AS REGULATORY MECHANISM

The 44th president of the United States eats organic, seasonal and locally grown food. The source of much of this food can be found on the South Lawn of the White House where in April of 2009 an organic vegetable garden was sown. This, of course, is no ordinary kitchen garden. With over fifty five varieties of vegetables, a berry patch for desserts, an herb patch and two honey hives, this 1100 square foot plot of land represents an almost Edenic gastronomic paradise. It also constitutes a quintessential teachable moment, an exercise in showing by doing. In this sense, the Obama garden is a purposive enterprise seeking to renovate the nation’s relationship to food. It aims to reign in the ballooning corporeality of a nation addicted to industrially engineered foods whilst recasting the notion of what it means to eat American. The White House kitchen garden is therefore an attempt at creating an ideal eating subject: one whose consumption ethics are socially, economically and ecologically progressive. Within this context, the garden is positioned as a mechanism of communication designed to shape public discourse about what the administration sees as healthful and sustainable eating. Thus, the garden is both the medium and the message.

In this chapter, it is my intention to posit that the Obama kitchen garden is deployed as a rhetorical strategy in service of constructing the ideal bio-political subject. To do so, I examine the role of the White House as a meaning-making agency in its capacity as the presidential residence and public museum. I assert that the White House functions as a cultural institution by organizing public knowledge by virtue of its authority and by its deployment of what Buntinx and Karp define as “tactical museologies…[which] refer to processes whereby the museum idea
is utilized, invoked and even contested in the process of community formation” (208). In this context, I read the garden as a living museological artifact framed in a politically specific environment. Functioning within this modality, the garden as artifact represents a bundle of manifold signifiers. Interrogating these signifiers will reveal the ideological substratum that informs a new economy of taste as guided by the liberal governmentality of the current administration. My intention in this chapter is to build a contextual framework that enables an understanding of the garden within the contemporary food zeitgeist. Specifically, I see the White House garden as an artifact on public display that functions as an instrument of bio-pedagogy, promotes ecological literacy and constructs a sense of place in the local. The work of Michel Foucault and Tony Bennett inform the theoretical backbone of my analysis.

Barack Obama was voted into the office of the President at a time when the nation was on the brink of bankruptcy, fighting two wars and embroiled in contentious culture wars. His election marked a tectonic shift in the political landscape of this nation. He is the first person of African American descent to hold this office and the third youngest. He is an Ivy League educated lawyer, a community organizer, a masterful rhetorician, a bestselling author, a Grammy award winner, an Emmy award winner, 2008 Time magazine “person of year” and was most recently awarded the high honor of the Nobel Peace prize. The first lady, Michelle Obama, boasts a similarly distinguished resume. She is a Princeton and Harvard educated lawyer, an activist, a feminist advocate and now a fashion icon and trendsetter. A remarkably telegenic couple, the Obamas have captured the popular imagination of the American public. Their ascension to power is illustrative of a left leaning cultural sensibility that re-emerged after eight years of conservative governance.
Popularly dubbed “Bamelot” by the media, the Obamas appeal recalls the style, energy and optimism of the Kennedy years (Noveck). Bamelot is defined by its cool hipness: this is a First couple that twitters; they have Facebook accounts and are never without their Blackberries. More than just technologically savvy, they are the face of a new, more forward thinking America. An America, that is more self-reflexive and benevolent and less bombastic. An America capable of exercising restraint and self-regulation, a leaner, more disciplined America.

In his inaugural address, Barack Obama spoke of ushering in a “new era of responsibility.” He said,

What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task (“President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Speech”).

In his words, I locate the ethic of liberal governmentality, which seeks to regulate events, conduct and actions within the private and public spheres of its citizenry whilst simultaneously maintaining a distance by promoting autonomy and the practice of self-regulation and self-responsibility. I use the term liberal governmentality in the Foucauldian sense that refers to “liberal arts of government which operate in large part through a ‘bio-politics of the population’” (Nadesan 9). According to Foucault, bio-politics are “focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health…their supervision effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls” (139). These interventions function as largely indirect mechanisms that diffuse knowledge and technologies not at the individual level but at the level
of the entire population. At stake, of course, is the biological vitality of the body politic.

Processes that nourish or hinder the production of an ideal, optimally productive population are integral to the bio-political realm. As such, bio-politics is concerned with the social, economic, cultural, environmental, geographic conditions under which people live and this includes family, housing, living and working conditions, issues of lifestyle, public health and standards of living (Dean 19). Thus, discourses on nutritional, healthful and ecological living are bio-political expressions and aim to establish normative modes of behavior.

In his speech, Obama invokes the tropes of responsibility and duty. I read these as an unambiguous manifestation of a modality of liberal governance where responsibilization is inherent in the constitution of subjects that are supposed to self-regulate and self-discipline. Note that this notion of individual responsibility is the most pronounced and central tenet of neo-liberal modes of governance that emphasize unrestrained markets and deregulation and stress self care as a form of utility maximizing behavior (Nadesan 32-33). For example, this mentality was evident during the eight years of the Bush administration, which championed an “ownership society” which emphasized large scale privatization and systematically repealed regulations in favor of market-driven policies (Karabell). It is my contention that Obama’s electoral victory, which came at a time of perilous economic uncertainty, represents a public mandate to push back against neo-liberal technologies. Obama’s accession to power marks the resurgence of the liberal welfare state, which relocates market and social techniques back within the frame of the state where the government is a site of authority and expertise. That is, the notions of self-governance and responsibility in this case are largely circulated by government-sponsored strategies and not driven purely by the logic of the marketplace. In his first year in office, this re-location is evident in his push for health-care reform, banking regulation and insurance reform. If he succeeds,
Obama will have “done more to rebuild the American welfare state in one year than his two
democratic predecessors, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton did in a combined twelve” (Beinart).

It is perhaps useful to foreground in what sense I am using the term “government” here. While Obama represents the executive head of state and is the public face of American governance, I am not concerned with his legislative decision making. Instead, my project here seeks to examine how he and wife function as sites of expertise that guide and direct the thinking and actions of the public without the use of coercive regulation or the threat of discipline. Thus, there is a distinction to be made between governance and government, at least in the Foucauldian sense. Here, I turn to Dean Mitchell, who explicates Foucault’s definition of government as the “conduct of conduct,” as “any more or less calculated activity and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge that seek to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definitive but shifting ends…” (17). Within this formulation, government does not simply imply direct regulation but connotes any and all rational, often multivalent, attempts at shaping the conditions of the population’s daily life by giving direction and offering guidance in the service of economic, social or cultural agendas.

It is my assertion that the White House garden is just such a rational enterprise that seeks to influence and recalibrate the eating habits of the American public. It is promulgated through the use of bio-political knowledge by the Obamas, who, by virtue of their political stature, are rendered as exemplary sites of authority in the public sphere. As aforementioned, modes of governmentality are multi-nodal and exert themselves from what can be referred to as globalized positions. Here, I am interested in situating the Obamas as sites of authority that exist beyond their prescribed roles within the established state apparatus, that is, beyond their legal and
legislative functions. By this, I am referring to the role the Obamas play in shaping the culture of the nation by virtue of their unique spatio-temporal location at the White House.

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is an architectural icon that is discursively constructed as a utopic ideal, symbolic of the American nation and American democracy. The site is so encrusted with meaning that it is a metonymic referent for the president and his administration, the presidential residence and a historic site of national and international import. Built 1792 -1800, this 132 room mansion has served as the home and office of every president since John Adams (“White House History”). The West Wing of the House is where the Oval Office is located. The East Wing of the House serves as the First Lady’s office. The First Family’s private home is located on the second and third floor of the historic part of the mansion (“White House History”).

In 1988, the American Museums Association accredited the White House as a museum.1 “It is the most historic ‘historic’ house in the nation and the third oldest federal building in Washington” (Delehanty). An estimated one million people visit the White House each year (“Let’s Tour the White House”). Curious about the day to day functioning of government, visitors are also motivated by eagerness to know more about the private lives of the people who occupy the house. Functioning as the President’s home, the White house represents an ideal homestead. Every decision, renovation, decorative choice—even choices made about serving china—is covered in the press, giving the public insight about how the First Family lives, entertains and celebrates. Within this context, the White House is a living history museum (Delehanty). It is an exhibitionary space that displays the lives of the First Family on a national stage.

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1 The association grants accreditation when a museum meets guidelines in conservation, interpretation and management (Farnsworth and Binder “A Habitable Museum.”)
This museological framework forms the backbone of the analysis presented here. Viewed within this scheme the White House functions as a cultural institution that manufactures national identities and congeals social values. It is a barometer of American tastes, of cultural realities and political sensibilities. It is an institution that shapes and defines what it means to be American, live American and act American. According to museologist David Carr, cultural institutions have the following things in common: they have collections; they have a systematic, organized knowledge structure; and they must display information based on empirical observation and experience (xiv-xv). Functioning within this modality, the White House is unequivocally such an institution. As a history museum the White House has a world class collection of art and artifacts of national significance. As a living museum, I contend that the Obamas performances of self are an integral part of the circuit of display within this space. Note that I am taking a constructivist approach here, one that I will explore in greater detail later in the chapter. My central argument is that the Obamas everyday lives are deployed as rational attempts at organizing the public’s imagination of an ideal. This brings me to Carr’s second point that cultural institutions have organized structures of knowledge. These can be in the form of “a taxonomy, a series of relationships, a historical narrative or the story of a life” (xv). Clearly, the White House in its metonymy signifies a constructed narrative of the nation’s past and present. It also symbolically projects the life narratives of its famous occupants, in this case the Obamas. Finally, in the context of Carr’s third point, that cultural institutions display “deep and significant content…inviting people to enter, to linger and to reflect on what they see and do there,” it is evident that the White House functions as a space of pedagogic diffusion (ibid).

This pedagogic objective of the White House as a cultural institution is a point that needs further delineation. Writing from a Foucauldian perspective, Tony Bennett defines culture as “a
historically specific set of institutionally embedded relations of government in which forms of thought and conduct of extended populations are targeted for transformation—in part via the extension through the social body of the forms, techniques and regimens of aesthetic and intellectual culture” (26). Here, Bennett expands on Raymond Williams’ conception of culture as a “particular way of life” by situating it within the complex of governmentality (25). For Bennett, culture invariably functions in a regulatory manner. It is “sympathetic with how power, under regimes of governmentality, is dispersed, in which the subject comes to govern him/her self in a manner coincident with but not coerced by multiple sites of governance” (Bérubé 65).

Viewed as a cultural institution, the White House is a rational instrument that is reflective of the ‘conduct of conduct’ mentality.

It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the institution of the public museum rose as a regulatory body that acted in service of the state. In his seminal essay “The Exhibitionary Complex,” Tony Bennett uses Foucault and Gramsci to suggest that the modern museum was an institution that was principally conceived of as an instrument of normalization and thus, education (84). As such, it serves to maintain and reproduce hegemonic constructions not just by working to “improve the populace as a whole but by [encouraging] citizens to regulate and police themselves” (Mason 24). The primary medium by which museums articulate their knowledge is through the use of exhibitionary displays. These displays are conscious and calculated forms of representation.

By positioning the Obamas within the museological frame of the White House, I read their actions to effect the discourse around food through the lens of a cultural display that is largely pedagogic in rationality but performative in methodology. It is important to remember

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2 See Eileen Hooper Greenhill who uses Foucault’s concepts of the Renaissance, the Classical and the Modern epistemes to map the rise of the institution of the museum in her book, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge.*
that the Obamas determine the agenda of the White House as a cultural institution. Additionally, functioning within the logic of governmentality, the Obamas employ technologies of display that enable them to shape cultural mores by acting “at a distance.” According to Nikolas Rose, such action at a distance is made possible by the dissemination of vocabularies for understanding one’s life and one’s actions, vocabularies that are authoritative because they derive from the rational discourse…[and] operate not through coercion but through persuasion… through the tensions generated in the discrepancy in how life is and how much better it could be (73).

Thus the Obamas’ dissemination of knowledge, in this case bio-political knowledge, is successful in shaping the culture of food primarily because they are seen as representatives of a cultural ideal, an ideal that if emulated guides the public in collapsing the distance between their existent selves and their ideal selves. In the Obamas the public finds an embodiment of national ideals, moralities and cultural mythos. They are the first citizens. The way in which they live implicates the public’s imagination of Americanness. To unpack this point further, we must consider how the Obamas render their ideal selves, more specifically their everyday ideal selves, in the public sphere. I see this display of self as a structured performance evocative of the theatrical.

Here, the work of sociologist Erving Goffman provides a valuable framework for understanding the constructed nature of presidential performance. He offers a dramaturgical model that uses the metaphor of theatre to explicate the ways in which individuals in social interactions communicate who they are to the world. Goffman distinguishes between two types of “sign vehicles”; these are expressions that an individual “gives” and expressions that an individual “gives off” while creating impressions and defining situations of the everyday (97).
Here, the former refers to impressions created through verbal communication and speech whilst the latter refers to non-verbal cues that “involve a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor…” (98). According to Goffman, these symptomatic expressions represent a desire to project a certain impression or identity to the world. As such, they are representative of immensely constructed performances much akin to the ways in which an actor performs a role on stage. While Goffman is particularly interested in how individuals construct themselves in micro-encounters of the everyday, his work has especially useful applications in understanding the ways in which the power and position of Presidential tastemakers are utilized in presenting “evidence for others to contemplate, evaluate and respond” (Schlenker 27). Self presentation in this case is a site where an idealized self is deployed within the public sphere in the form of what Alexander and Knight refer to as a “situated identity,” an identity that is staged within a particular moment in time and space (Swann and Bosson 460).

Within this context, the First Family, in this case the Obamas, fashion themselves as ideal subjects within the discourse of the everyday living by virtue of their occupation of the White House. By everyday living, I am specifically referring to their performance within the realm of the quotidian: the spatio-temporal domain of mundane ritual and routine, what Malinowski refers to as the “imponderabilia of actual life” (57). This is the sphere within which “such things as the routine of a man’s working day, the details of the care of his body, the manner of taking food and preparing it, the tone of conversational and social life…” belong (Malinowski 57). It is my assertion here that the Obamas use their performances of self within the realm of the everyday as a pedagogic tool. Food and drink are integral parts of everyday life. There is, of course, nothing more everyday than the act of eating. Situated in this scheme, the kitchen garden on the South

3 Issues like character, competence, integrity, loyalty, patriotism, family, food habits, etc., are all part of the discursive practices attendant to the electoral process. To be picked as nominee, candidates are heavily vetted for their likability and for their suitability to the position.
Lawn of the White House is an object of display that symbolizes an ethic of eating well. This is, after all, how the First Family eats.

Thus situated, the presidential selves are powerful signifiers that shape public perceptions of the ‘good life.’ They are performative sites that demonstrate the hegemonic constitution of national bodies, sites that symbolically and tacitly invite emulation. They represent America while re-presenting to Americans (eating) regimes that create the ideal productive body politic. Their alimentary choices play a significant role in shaping the public discourse around the production and consumption of food. Such discourses are circulated by exhibitionary technologies like the garden.

In this way the garden is an artifact staged in the museum tradition where artifacts are displayed as signs of knowledge. By artifact I mean “phenomena produced, replicated, or otherwise brought wholly or partly into their present form through human means” (Shiffer, quoted in Allen 64). These include concepts, languages and material culture—anything that comes into existence as a result of human action or performance can be said to inhabit the realm of the artifactual. As a text on display, the White House garden is polysemic and represents a wide continuum of ideas. Here, my reading of the garden is tri-focal in scope. First, I examine its rationality as an instrument of bio-pedagogy that specifically targets children. Second, I explore it as an instrument of eco-literacy. And third, I examine its deployment in the construction of a new economy of taste that seeks to construct a particular terroir or taste of place situated in the local.

Before proceeding, I want to situate the White House garden within the matrix of contemporary food related discourse. A most perfunctory of acts, eating is a cardinal facet of everyday life. While biologically motivated, eating is deeply embedded in the social
infrastructure of society. In fact, the consumption of food is one of the most powerful ways in
which we encounter culture in our everyday lives. The ways in which we eat, what we eat, and
when, how and why we eat communicates our material and corporeal realities and are powerfully
revealed in the public discourse around food. In the United States today, this discourse is a
contestatory site with polyvocal articulations competing for influence. This is a nation obsessed
with both the consumption and the denial of food, a condition made transparent by examining the
present American marketplace which is congested with how-to eat literature, diet fads,
cookbooks, cooking shows, cooking blogs, television networks and celebrity chefs. There are
foodies, gastronomes and gurgitators (professional competitive eaters). There is fast food, slow
food, local food, organic food, macrobiotic food, natural food and a whole host of other eating
philosophies. There are government guidelines, nutritional recommendations, pyramids and
suggested serving labels. There is obesity, on one end of the disease spectrum, which is “the
fastest growing cause of disease and death in America” while on the other end, anorexia, bulimia
and binge-eating are becoming endemic (Carmona par. 5). With over 11 billion dollars spent on
alimentary advertising a year, the public sphere is saturated with food related information
(CPEHN and Consumers Union report 5).

Taken together, this snapshot reveals the chaotic and unstable state of the discourse
around food. This is an environment best described by Harvey Levenstein, who borrows the term
“dietary cacophony” from Claude Fischler, to characterize the competing and often contradictory
sources of information that are concurrently circulating the within the American public sphere
(212). The White House is one of the most powerful voices within the matrix of this chaotic and
noisy discourse. During the national election campaign in 2008, Barack Obama ran on the
Democratic ticket and on a liberal platform. In his policy paper on food and agriculture reform
(titled “Real Leadership for Rural America”) he enunciated that he would institute some of the following legislative changes once in office:

1) Encourage sustainable agriculture by “emphasizing the need for Americans to buy fresh and buy local” (3).

2) Expand organic farming by “increasing funding for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program to help farmers afford the costs of compliance with nation organic certification standards” (3).

3) Encourage the nation’s youth to become farmers by “establishing a new program to identify the next generation of farmers and ranchers and help them develop professional skills and find work that leads to farm ownership and management” (3).

4) Encourage the consumption of healthy food by “bringing the farm to school” and supporting programs that provide children at schools with locally grown, healthy foods (11). “This will both reduce childhood obesity and grow vibrant rural economies, supporting community-based food systems and strengthening family farms” (11).

5) Encourage food production that is ecologically efficient by promoting the use of renewable and efficient energy (4).

Here I am not concerned with the White House’s legislative impact on food discourse; I am focused on its use of soft policy initiatives that direct its agenda as a cultural institution. Thus, I include these commitments to policy change with a view to unpack not just the administration’s liberally progressive vision for the future of American food, but also to expose the philosophic rationalities of planting the kitchen garden on the White House Lawn. Clearly, the intentions illuminated in this policy paper find their physical embodiment in the symbol of
the garden, which is organic, sustainably grown and exemplifies the cultivation of a fundamental sense of place in the local.

Sitting on the South Lawn of the White House, the Obamas’ kitchen garden is the first vegetable garden on White House property since Eleanor Roosevelt’s victory garden. In a White House video that details the story of the garden, Michelle Obama said:

The garden was something that I had always thought about. I was probably like most busy mothers who were, you know, [sic] busy working,[and caring for my] family and I would find it difficult to feed my family in a healthy way quickly. So I decided to change our diet and this happened throughout the course of the campaign and it was really simple things: adding more fruits and vegetables, trying to sit down as a family and prepare a meal a couple of times a week, eating out a little bit less, eliminating processed and sugary foods as much as possible. And I saw some really immediate results with just those minor changes. And I thought, well, if I could help other families kind of learn these small changes in my role as first lady, that would be a good thing (Obama, Michelle. “Story of the White House garden”).

In her remarks, Mrs. Obama speaks of the struggles she faced when trying to feed her family in a healthful way. She positions herself as a mother and wife seeking to improve the well being of her family. As the First lady, she seeks to improve the well being of the nation, and she positions herself as a cultural role model and a site of authority that ought to be followed. Most important, we can parse from her words the rationale for the garden, which she couches in the discourse of nutrition and healthy eating. Healthy eating habits are those that do not lead to disordered outcomes like obesity and heart disease that implicate the vitality of the entire nation. The
American nation is in the throes of an obesity epidemic, one that the First Lady has taken a public vow to mitigate.

In February 2010, she launched the “Let’s Move” campaign to raise awareness about childhood obesity. In framing the campaign, she stated that obesity is not a disease that we are awaiting the cure for (“Michelle Obama Launches Obesity Campaign”). The garden signifies the opening salvo in an all out war against the overweight body politic. It is a form of bio-pedagogy that instructs the population in eating healthfully, i.e. eating a diet high in fruit and vegetables, and avoiding processed artificial foods are vital pathways to normative corporeal subjectivities.\(^4\)

In 2001, the Surgeon General, Dr David Satcher, warned that obesity was going to overtake tobacco as the main cause of preventable deaths in America. According to his research, about 60 percent of adults in the country are overweight or obese, as are nearly 13 percent of children. Additionally some 300,000 Americans die annually from illnesses caused or worsened by obesity (“U.S Warning of Death Toll”).

A decade later in April 2010, the situation has worsened to such an extent that a report released by retired American military leaders posited the obesity crisis as a national security crisis. So dire is the obesity epidemic that “at least nine million 17 to 24 year olds are too fat to serve in the military. That is 27% of all young adults” (“Too Fat to Fight”). Citing the latest data from Centers for Disease Control, the report reveals that during the past decade, “the number of states with 40 percent of young adults considered by the CDC to be overweight or obese has risen from one state to 39. In three states – Kentucky, Alabama and Mississippi – more than half of young adults are overweight” (ibid). The implications of this study are far-reaching, revealing not just that America’s addiction to food (especially processed foods) is now considered a threat

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\(^4\) Bio-pedagogy in this sense is “the art and practice of teaching life” (Harwood 21).
to the national security but also, that the effects of obesity are detrimental to the collective population including those who are not obese. The same is true with the economic externalities associated with obesity, specifically mortality rates and the cost of health insurance that have a direct bearing on the entire population, obese and non-obese alike. A study done by Bhattacharya and Sood explains that as medical costs for the obese are higher and as premiums do not depend on weight, non-obese citizens in the same insurance pool end up paying higher premiums (1).

Note that the population facing the greatest risk from obesity is children, with a study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* finding that this generation has a shorter life expectancy compared to the generations that came before it and that they will live between two to five years less as a result of early onset obesity related diseases. The economic repercussions of this are substantive, implicating the nation’s productivity and the welfare of its future labor force. It is thus in the interest of the public to act collectively to alleviate the situation, a sentiment that the First Lady expressed at a recent White House Obesity Summit (April 2010), when she stated: “What we have done is start a national conversation. But we need your help to propel that conversation into a national response” (Eschmeyer). Christine Halse notes that there is a rather shrill moralistic tenor that emerges from this type of discourse that has a tendency to afford virtue to citizens who maintain their weight by taking responsibility for their food and exercise choices, adding that personal responsibility metamorphoses into a type of social responsibility where taking care of one’s weight is seen as an obligation for the welfare of the community and the nation (53). Parents and teachers thus have a duty to teach children this moral and ethical obligation to keep their bodies fit, productive and healthy.

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5The study finds that type 2 diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure and cancer are all likely to strike people at younger and younger ages due to the obesity crisis (Belluck “Children’s Life Expectancy Being Cut Short”).
Thus, teaching children to grow their own food in home and school gardens is a way to improve their bio-political competencies. It is a pedagogic practice that imparts knowledge about healthful nutrition, diet and fitness. It empowers children with a connection to their food and their landscape and offers them a mode of control that extends from the spatial to the corporeal. In a recent study (2009) published by the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, researchers found a positive correlation between food gardening (at schools) and nutritional learning. They found that such gardening practices increased children’s consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as their knowledge of the foodscape and concluded that it is a very effective intervention in increasing children’s dietary knowledge (Parmer et. al 216).

What is particularly compelling here is that Michelle Obama has not once publically discussed the other cultural crisis to which the garden symbolically offers a palliative: the environmental crisis. As I have mentioned previously, the White House garden is organic and uses sustainable methods. This is a rather conspicuous and no doubt a calculated omission; one that allows Mrs. Obama to expediently sidestep the political ire of the Big-Ag/industrial food lobby. Michelle Obama hides behind the mask of food, which is traditionally part of the feminine domestic sphere. Rather than discussing food policy in conjunction with Big-Agriculture, she uses food to discuss the health of the nation’s children, avoiding divisive politics and instead positing herself as a nurturing national mother. In the official White House video on the history of the garden, it is Sam Kass, the assistant White House chef and Michelle Obama’s Food Initiative Coordinator, who takes on the mantle to discuss the ways in which the garden is ecologically sustainable and pesticide free. The First Lady’s silence on the matter is indicative of the power wielded by corporate agri-business in Washington, suggesting just how politicized

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6 The garden will be certified as organic after three years of using sustainable practices as mandated the USDA National Organic Program.
the issue of agriculture and food is. More importantly, it is indicative of a form of
governmentality that seeks to alter the food terrain by encouraging voluntary measures of change
rather than enforcing them via policy change.

Despite Mrs. Obama’s omission, the fact that the garden is pesticide, herbicide and
chemical free indicates a privileging of the organic and sustainability movements. It speaks to a
worldview informed by an ecological consciousness and, as such, is powerful in its symbolic
rejection of conventional agriculture’s reliance on chemical additives. In this way, it is also an
instrument that promotes ecological literacy aimed at constructing environmental subjectivities
that take responsibility for their part in the eco-system. I am using the term ecological literacy in
accordance with Fritjof Capra and David Orr’s definition. As such, it reflects a pedagogy of
ecological systems and a knowledge of our place in that system so that we are better able to
connect to the world in which we live. Capra explains being eco-literate as “understanding the
principals of organization of ecological communities (i.e. ecosystems) and using those principals
for creating sustainable human communities” (2). Garden based learning gives practitioners an
experiential appreciation for the environment and encourages environmental stewardship.
Through the garden, children are able to learn about how their food is connected to larger
ecological systems via natural “cycles like planting, growing, harvesting, composting and
recycling—food cycles intersect with larger cycles like the water cycle, the cycle of seasons and
so on, all of which are links in the web of life” (Capra 8). Food gardens like the one at the
White House are gateways that allow access to that kind of knowledge. The journey from seed to
plate is one that educates children about natural processes and demonstrates ways in which
systems of life are interconnected, explaining, for example, that the use of a particular fertilizer
that leaches into the water table can have generational impact on the output of the soil and the
health of those that eat from it. With its emphasis on sustainability, eco-literacy, enabled by techniques like food gardening, is now gaining popularity in public school curricula and is greatly aided by the high visibility of the White House garden.

The third and final issue that comes to bear in my reading of the White House garden is that in the emphasis on local food, there is an attempt at constructing a communal sense of place and, more specifically, a taste of place. Deeply embedded in the ecological literacy movement is an emphasis on place-based learning that creates a feeling of rootedness and attachment. Cultivating a sense of place means developing a sensitivity to the landscape’s geographical specificity, to its topography and all that is unique about it. According to James Lewicki, a pedagogy of place takes learning “outdoors and into the community, this community expands outward from local landscape and home, to regional realities, to international issues. In coming to know one’s place, one comes to know what is fundamental to all places. Respect and reverence for one’s immediate place, land stewardship, gives one respect and reverence for all places” (9). A shared narrative and experience of place allows people to situate themselves in relation to the landscape. This is a teaching strategy that embodies Aldo Leopold’s notion of the land ethic that “enlarges the boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants, animals” (408). In this type of place-centered environmentalism, the relationship between individual and community is mediated by their relationship to the local.

This emphasis on the local foodscape leads to a cultivation of a taste of place or what the French have termed ‘terroir.’ This is a term described as “the specificity of place that stems from its traditions, its local food cultures and regional produce that resides in the landscape, soil and climate as well as the types of food grown, the farming techniques and the cultural contexts that inform food preparation and consumption” (Parkins and Craig 76). This understanding of terroir
has been an established part of French food tradition and a source of national and regional pride. In the last two decades, especially with the rise of the California wine industry and California cuisine (under the aegis of people like Alice Waters), there is a palpable move towards uncovering and developing the distinctiveness of the American foodview and foodscape\(^7\). Every region has its own terroir, and food gardening is a practice that encourages the development of such a taste of place. Eating locally intimately connects consumers to seasonal food cycles, to the particularities of the climate, to the character and makeup of the soil which leads to a powerful appreciation for the taste of locally grown food. Highlighting this sentiment, Mrs. Obama said: “When you grow something yourself and it’s close and it’s local… it tastes really good” (Swarns). While the taste and quality of local foodscape are aesthetically important, eating local food has a huge economic impact on the food economy in the form of enabling food sovereignty.

The concept of food sovereignty advocates that local communities have the right to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable food. To ensure this, it is imperative that local communities have authority over the food production, consumption and distribution circuits instead of ceding this control to corporate agricultural conglomerates and to the forces of the free market. As Gwendolyn Blue suggests, “food sovereignty… aims to reconfigure power relations so that access to agricultural land as well as fresh, healthy and locally produced food products become a right rather than a luxury” (“Politics and Possibilities”). Thus, an investment in the local leads to greater self-reliance and greater agency and, as Michelle Obama has asserted, leads to the elimination of food deserts and increases access to food.\(^8\) Note again, that the onus of taking

\(^{7}\) According to Pauline Adema, “foodscape implicates the multiple informative historic and contemporary personal, social, political, cultural and economic forces that inform how people think and use (or eschew) food in various spaces they inhabit” (5).

\(^{8}\) Many communities… are leading the way and taking matters into their own hands and tackling this lack of access on their own by growing and caring for a whole lot of community gardens…. there are more than one million community gardens that are flourishing all around the country. And many of them are in underserved urban communities that are providing greater access to fresh produce for their neighbors…The benefit is not just the availability of fresh produce but also it gives the community an
control of the issue of food access is placed on the individual and recalls the President’s emphasis on individual responsibility.

Ironically this impetus on local food production and local sovereignty expresses a rather conservative tendency towards rolling back state involvement in local policy, channels of production and regulation. Of course, the question of access to good and healthy food is neither a liberal nor a conservative issue. However, it is important to realize while Mr. Obama’s administration is presently overseeing a massive resurgence of the welfare state, it is paradoxically utilizing technologies of neo-liberalism governance. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I view Obama’s victory as a form of resistance to the neo-liberal governmentality of the Bush years. Yet, in the President’s emphasis on individual governance and self-subsistence (notions evoked in the symbolism of the garden), there is a reinforcement of neo-liberalism rather than a challenge. Here, I agree with Julie Guthman’s scathing critique of local food activism in her charge that “projects in opposition to neoliberalizations of the food and agricultural sectors seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms, spaces of governance, and mentalities” (1171). Guthman believes that food reform discourses (like that of the garden) have uncritically taken up ideas of localism, consumer choice, entrepreneurialism and self-improvement. These are themes that are informed by neo-liberal genetics and work to shift the burden of responsibility for change from the state to the individual (1173).

The individual citizen is charged with making conscious production and consumption choices and is made to believe that the onus of responsibility—in the form of corporeal and environmental improvement—is theirs alone. Far from the vigorous political change that is required to overhaul the food system, the bio-political subject constituted via the garden display

opportunity to come together around gardening and growing their own food and working together towards a healthier community and a better future for their kids. (Obama, Michelle. “Remarks by the First Lady at the White House Garden Harvest Party”)
is told not to rely on the state for political transformation of the foodscape, but to rely on their own provisioning capacity. Such neo-liberal tendencies absolve the state from improving infrastructural deficiencies that lead to issues like food deserts, poverty related obesity and environmental catastrophes in the first place. Thus, in the absence of substantive food and environmental policy changes that enhance citizens’ abilities to engage in the food economy on a level playing field, the gesture presented by the garden may prove to be a vacant one.
CHAPTER II.
AGRARIAN MYTHOS: A HISTORY OF THE GARDEN AS ARTIFACT

“…the whole land is a garden, and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“There seem to be but three ways for a nation to acquire wealth. The first is by war, as the Romans did, in plundering their neighbors. This is robbery. The second by commerce, which is generally cheating. The third is by agriculture, the only honest way, wherein a man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, in a kind of continual miracle, wrought by the hand of God in his favor as a regard for his innocent life and his virtuous industry”

Benjamin Franklin

What is a Garden?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “a garden is an enclosed piece of ground devoted to the cultivation of flowers, fruits or vegetables; often preceded by some defining word as flower -, fruit-, kitchen-, market-, strawberry-garden, etc.” Gardening can be traced as far back as the Neolithic period, and historians ascribe two sources from which the garden arose. The first are sacred groves and nymphaea that were devoted to pagan gods and the second, functional kitchen and medicinal gardens (Ross xi; Ross 1). Thus, as a form of material culture, the garden has long been an entrenched part of human life. It is a form deeply embedded in human imagination and represents man’s control and triumph over nature. The notion of the garden appears in religious texts, literary iconographies, transcendental philosophies and politico-national symbology. The garden is thus a powerful collector of meanings and a site rich with metaphor.
In the previous chapter, I examined the White House garden as a museum artifact on display in the service of bio-pedagogy, eco-governmentality and taste construction. Artifacts in the museum setting utilize a variety of interpretative contexts to speak to their audiences. These include, but are not limited to, historical, cultural, functional, folkloric and anthropological frames. To understand the efficacy of displaying the White House kitchen garden as a museum object, it is imperative that we examine the garden using a historiographic framework. Thus, in this chapter, I examine the historic construction of the garden in American discourse with a view to situate the Obama garden within an agrarian mythos. As an artifact, the Obama garden has a story to tell, a story that implicates the legacy of gardens and gardening in American imagination. In the research that follows, I examine the constitution of the White House garden as a site of memory that recalls the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer and builds on an unyielding and powerful set of myths that constructs the notion of the authentic American experience. Here, I explore the symbolic and material functions that the idea of the garden has fulfilled in American history and politics so as to delineate the ways in which the image of the White House garden is reminiscent of the same. Specifically my aim is twofold: first, to examine the ways in which Americans relate to the idea of the food garden, and second, to enunciate the ways in which the act of gardening has featured strongly as a form of political action.

To do this, I trace how the notion of the garden has featured centrally in the constitution of a utopic vision for America’s future. I explore the ways in which the garden, as an ideal, figures in the organic, sustainability, and local food movements, all of which find their embodiment in the White House garden. I contend that the Obama garden summons back a nostalgic, even romantic, vision of agrarian subsistence and does so to counter hegemonic eating standards that are deeply rooted in an industrial food system. This nostalgia represents a
yearning for a simpler time, a time gone by, where people were more connected to nature and to their food, a yearning represented in the pastoral ideal. This ideal prevails alongside a countervailing technocratic impulse that is embodied in the American love affair with industrial progress. There is a dialectic tension that exists between these two inclinations: a tension that is evident in the food and environmental politics of today. The White House kitchen garden sits at the nexus of numerous contestory binaries that emanate from the pastoral versus industrial dichotomy. These include the tensions inherent in the notions of the individual versus the community, materialism versus morality, and sustainability versus exploitation. In each case, I argue that the Obama garden privileges the pastoral over the industrial. In his seminal work, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx maps the ways in which these contradictory impulses have impacted the American imagination. According to Marx, Americans deify nature whilst simultaneously celebrating technological progress as a means to achieving access to the pastoral dream, even though the pastoral sphere is degraded by the intrusion of the machine.

Nowhere, of course, is this paradox felt more immediately than in the food system which stands at the crossroads of the pastoral and the industrial; for while technology ushered in an age of economic security and food security, it also resulted in the radical transmogrification of nature which has been enslaved by scientific advances that moved from laboratory to fields across the nation. The resulting commoditization of food has had grave consequences. Some of these include: the shift from the consumption of local, indigenous and homemade foods to mass produced, processed manufactured foods; large-scale delocalization where “an increasing portion of the daily diet comes from distant places usually through commercial channels”; an epidemic of what Marion Nestle has defined as “overnutrition,” where the public is under increasing pressure from the manipulative marketing machinations of food companies to eat more to
generate sales and increase income in a highly competitive market; and widespread ecological degradation as a result of unceasing exploitation of natural resources (Pelto & Pelto 502; 4).

Planting a kitchen garden at the White House is a conscientious attempt to symbolically mitigate the impact of these very issues. Using Leo Marx’s formulation, the White House garden is in a sense an enterprise that seeks to exclude the machine from the garden. As a metaphor, this is indicative of defining progress in a way that “subordinates economic considerations to a concern for the quality of life and to political priorities such as justice and egalitarianism” (Marx, quoted in Cannavò 86). This is a vision of national progress that directly quotes the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal that sought to bring balance to the relationship between man and nature. This re-conceptualization of progress regards environmental and human collateral damage in the name of economic development as deeply irresponsible and, in a sense, even immoral. To be responsible is to recognize the consequences of one’s actions, a notion that is a central tenet for the Obama administration that sees itself rebuilding the nation in an era of responsibility (“President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Speech”). As I have discussed in the previous chapter, I see the garden as a rhetorical strategy that teaches responsibilization—that is, it recommends a degree of accountability for one’s self and one’s environmental impact. It is important to note that this is not the first time that the idea of the garden has been utilized in this way. In fact, the notion of the garden has deep-rooted symbolic and mythogenic resonance in the American imagination; a resonance that the Obama garden mobilizes in the present while offering the public a recourse into a past uncorrupted by the hand of commerce and ecological adulteration.

America as Garden and Gardening in America: A Brief History

The image and symbolism of the garden has long held a powerful appeal for Americans. This appeal can be traced right back to the discovery of the American nation that was peppered
with rhetoric that mythologized it as an Edenesque paradise, it was the land of plenty, the “land [where] milk and honey continually doth flow.”¹ According to Charles Sanford, “the Edenic myth has been the most powerful and comprehensive organizing force in American culture” (6).

In his Second Treatise of Government, famed political philosopher John Locke bombastically wrote: “in the beginning all the world was America” (29). Within this biblical frame, America as the “New World” came to represent a pre-lapsarian moment, where the colonial settlers could transcend the sins of the Old World and begin anew (Pâtea 30). In its abundant, fertile and untouched pastoral landscape they saw innocence regained. America came to exemplify the Promised Land, and its wilderness God’s divine dispensation to Christian settlers. As Leo Marx notes, America’s “scenic splendor was a sign of divine blessing” (quoted in Pâtea 30). The genealogy of this sensibility can be located in Genesis 1:28: “God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it” (The Bible: Authorized King James Version).

This divine mandate to subdue the earth, to create a garden out of the wilderness, is a sentiment that was shared by the Puritans that settled New England, as well as the early pioneers that went west.

In his seminal work titled Wilderness and the American Mind, Roderick Nash gives an account of how nature, especially in its uncultivated, unmanaged form, was conceived of in American intellectual traditions. Westward bound pioneers, for example, regarded the wilderness as a hindrance to the construction of civilization. Nash informs us that frontier narratives of the time are replete with militaristic metaphors that fabricated the American wilderness as an “enemy that needed to be “conquered,” “subdued” and “vanquished” by a “pioneer army”” (27).

¹An early American ballad, printed in the Massachusetts Quarterly Review in 1848.

“ Their land with milk and honey continually doth flow,
  The want of food or money they seldom know,
  They heap up golden treasure, they have no debts to pay,
  They spend their time in pleasure, in North America (247).
In a similar vein, Nash observes that for the Puritans the wilderness was not a paradise but a “dismal, howling and terrible” place that needed to be transcended on the way to the Promised Land (26). As Perry Miller shows, the Puritans vehemently believed they had a divine ordination to carry out this “errand into the wilderness,” to advance the doctrines of Calvinism and to replace the wilderness with small hold farms and shining cities on hills (quoted in Callicott 368). The divine providence of westward settlement is most acutely expressed in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that was born from this Puritan tradition, and it underpins the ideological substructure of American expansionism.

This powerful attachment to the image of America as a Promised Land continues till today and is a recurring theme in contemporary political rhetoric. Recall, for example, John F. Kennedy’s famous inauguration address where he spoke of “conquering the deserts” and “new frontiers” or Lyndon Johnson who spoke of how his family renovated arid lands in Texas and replaced them with areas “abundant with fruit, cattle, goats and sheep” (Peterson 12). Barack Obama, who is known for his own eloquent oratorical style, has also utilized these themes in his speeches, often positioning the American nation within the frame of the Promised Land and its citizens as pioneering frontiersmen. For example, in a recent speech at MIT University the President stated: “this is the nation that pushed westward and looked skyward. We have always sought out new frontiers.”

Thus, wilderness and its domestication were and remain dominant tropes in the constitution of the American nation. The centrality of this potent association is what Frederick Jackson Turner explored in 1893 in his influential work on the frontier. Jackson’s frontier thesis contends that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of

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3 The full transcript of the President’s speech is available online at wickedlocal.com
American settlement Westward explain American development” (31). For Turner, the notion of the frontier was “determined…by the reactions between wilderness and the edge of expanding settlement” (591). Correspondingly he asserts that this encounter between a savage wilderness and the attempts to manage it powerfully shaped the American character and its notions of democracy and individualism.

Building on Turner’s frontier thesis, Henry Nash Smith’s influential study, *Virgin Land*, traces the mythic construction of the garden as an agrarian ideal in the American imagination. Smith argues that “the master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labor in the earth all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow” (123). Civilizing the wilderness meant cultivating it. Thus, the myth of the garden positioned American virginal lands as a potent agricultural paradise from which its citizens could achieve wealth, material prosperity and economic security. Therefore, the image of the garden became synonymous with agricultural opportunity, American self reliance and self sufficiency. As Nash asserts, the figure at the center of this image was the hard toiling farmer whose labor colonized nature’s wilderness and brought agricultural abundance and bounty forth. This is the figure of the yeoman farmer, a symbol of integrity, a paragon of moral fortitude, a virtuous ideal who farmed not for commercial gain but for the fulfillment to be found from the incorruptibility of the pastoral sphere (Appleby 834). Note that this pastoral sphere is envisioned as a kind of “middle landscape” that is located between a savage wilderness and a profane civilization (Marx 71). Marx notes that the pastoral represented a reprieve from the repressive and brutal machinations of urban civilization while at the same time symbolizing a form of “improved nature, a landscape that is a made thing” (117; 112).
Yeomanry was a way of life that saw pastoral and rural farm living as exemplary. This view found its most powerful proponent in the philosophy and writings of Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God” (quoted in Conlogue 11). Jefferson saw farmers as heroic figures that represented the bedrock of the American nation. He wrote that “small land holders are the most precious part of the state” (quoted in Jacobson 82). Accordingly, for Jefferson, the archetypical American citizen was not the hired hand or the slave that worked the land, but the land owning farmer who epitomized values of self governance and republicanism. It is important to note that integral to the mythology associated with the yeoman is the notion that his self sufficiency belies the need for contact with the manufacturing world, which by its entanglement with commerce is posited as a corrupting and debasing way to earn a living. Thus, for Jefferson, the self-sufficient husbandman was “free from the casualties and caprice of customers” and thus secure from the uncertainties of market driven economics (quoted in Conlogue 11).

There are two salient points that need further exposition here. First, farming and the agrarian ideal were mythologized as morally superior forms of work. According to Jean Retzinger, Jefferson constructs land as the “vital link between humans and God… where cultivating the soil is synonymous with cultivating good works” (48). Note that this cultivation is ethically righteous because the relationship between production and consumption is unmediated by commercial interest. The second point that needs to be teased out here is that, in Jefferson’s construction of what is now colloquially referred to as the agrarian myth, agriculture reflected “a belief in individual freedom and in private property as its means” (Griswold quoted in Retzinger 48). In this sense, the quintessential American citizen is a self-reliant yeoman who provides for
his family’s needs by cultivating land that he has title to and in so doing emblematizes republican values of self-determination and individual responsibility.

It is significant to note that there is a distinct utilitarian ethic that underpins the ways in which Americans then came to relate to nature and land. Vacant or uncultivated land is wasted opportunity and neglectful of the economic security that may be tapped for the betterment of the individual citizen and consequently the nation as a whole. As a philosophy, utilitarianism “holds that normative ethics can be defined from the utility or usefulness of an action” (Addison 311). This implies that all action is morally constituted in relation to the utility it provides. In the American context this formulation is deeply enmeshed with the notion of self interest—that is, if individuals are truly allowed the freedom to maximize their own welfare, it will result in both private and public prosperity. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, utilitarianism tends to concentrate on a rationalization of means and eventually this rationalization becomes a means to an end in itself. Bellah explains this logic using the story of a farmer who was asked why he worked so hard. “To raise more corn was his reply. But why do you do that? To make more money. What for? To buy more land. Why? To raise more corn” (336).

This type of utilitarian individualism has had great influence in shaping American culture and national identity. Its consequences have been both benign and malignant. On the one hand, this ethic is reflected in the American belief in the forward march of progress: agricultural, industrial and technological. Here, individual progress is emblematized in the democratization of the American dream, which in its mythic construction ensures success to those who work hard and make themselves useful. This is the archetype embodied by Benjamin Franklin, “the poor boy who made good” by emphasizing his self-reliance and calculated resourcefulness (Bellah 32). On the other hand, the same utilitarian ethic has also contributed to the large scale
exploitation of natural resources as it is based on an attitude that privileges human interests at the
cost of all others. Note that this utilitarian strain has undermined the present generation’s ability
to assess the impact of its actions on future generations (Brown 56). As the agrarian model gave
way to the industrial model, civilization rapidly encroached on the wilderness in the name of
material prosperity. Economic expediency resulted in the wholesale industrialization of
agriculture, the consequences of which have been largely environmentally detrimental. From
large scale monocultures that have depleted the nation of its bio-diversity leading to greater and
greater reliance on chemical pesticides and fertilizer usage to deforestation and its endangerment
of animal and plant species, the utilitarian focus on “maximizing human happiness ignores and
undermines the value of non-human entities” (Brown 55).

Significantly, this ethic is reflected in the ways in which both men and women came to
view nature’s role in the development of the American nation. Here the work of Annette
Kolodny provides excellent direction and gives us a counterpoint to the scholarship of Henry
Nash Smith. On the one hand, the myth of the garden symbolizes a virginal wilderness that is
conquered by masculine capacity. This masculine power is animated by the utilitarian ethic and
promotes self interest. On the other hand, Kolodny points out that while the feminine conception
of the frontier was also motivated by economics, its emphasis was less exploitative and that in
the land, frontierswomen saw a “potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity” (Introduction).
Thus the feminine desire was to “provide a home and a familial human community within a
cultivated garden” (Introduction). I include this dichotomy to draw attention to one of the many
tensions that are inherent in the ways in which the American garden has been conceived. This is
a point that I shall return to momentarily.
Before going further however, it is perhaps worthwhile to enunciate the place of myth in
the construction of national identity. According to Henry Nash Smith, myth and symbol
represent “intellectual construction[s] that fuse concept and emotion into an image… [They are]
collective representations rather than the work of a single mind” (xi). Here, myth refers to
commonly disseminated notions and ideas about what a nation collectively signifies; its origin
story, its values, its ideals and aspirations. As Mark Schorer writes, “a myth is a large controlling
image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life. That is, which has
organizing value for experience” (354). Over time national mythologies are naturalized and
internalized by the population. In public discourse they are rendered in the form of overarching
metanarratives that engineer a collective past, annotate the present moment and project an
imagined trajectory into the future.

Keep in mind that the mythogenic construction of American society is not linear but is
expressed by a conglomerate of contradictory binaries that problematize the vision of the ideal
nation. These cultural oppositions exist in dialectic tension and reveal the fault lines of
ideological cleavage in the national imagination. As the brief historical overview given here
suggests, the image of the garden is founded on contested ground that posits wilderness against
civilization, masculine against feminine, materialist against moralist, progress against pastoral,
individualism against community and anomie against connectedness. Myths like that of Eden
and the frontier have been and continue to be powerful forces in shaping the ways in which
Americans conceive of themselves and in their contemplation of a coherent national identity.
This is an identity discursively circulated as characteristically individualistic and self made, self-
reliant, responsible, hardworking, fearless, curious, inventive and pioneering. It is important to
register that there is a dominant trope that emerges here and is shared by the mythologies
enunciated in this chapter – that is, the trope of American abundance. The American nation offers its citizens unfettered access to natural resources, vast expanses of agrarian plenitude and the promise of unbridled material prosperity. Both Turner and Nash (and subsequently Marx) relate how Americans looked to land (and later technology) as instruments that ensured the continued access to what was perceived as inexhaustible opportunity. This enduring image of America as the land of plenty, according to historian David M. Potter, has been the primary factor in the shaping of American character. He argues that the uniqueness of the American experience is the result of a “politics of abundance…a politics, which smiled both on those who valued abundance as a means to safeguard freedom and those who valued freedom as an aid in securing abundance” (126). He notes that as a result Americans tend to conflate the notion of freedom with that of abundance and that this in turn has implicated their imagination of the ideal democracy (127). The consequences of this mindset have been significant and have ensured Americans some of the highest standards of living in the world, including access to excellent nutrition (the average American consumes 3855 kcal of food per day)\(^4\) and food security as a result of high yielding agricultural output. At the same time, unfettered access to the abundance of the nation has led to widespread ecological degradation.

**The Obama Garden: The Rise of New Agrarianism**

It is within this mythic framework that the Obama kitchen garden must be situated and understood. It is my assertion that, set in this historic frame, the White House garden gives contemporary continuity to the idea of America as garden. It functions as a site of memory where the mythic tropes associated with the garden, in the form of abundance, fertility and self-reliance, aggregate in collective memory. I contend that the White House is utilizing the symbolism evoked by this collective memory to re-allocate privilege to a socially progressive agenda that

\(^4\) Statistic from 2005 UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Food Balance sheet report.
esteems environment over industry, self reliance over consumerism and sustainability over exploitation. To this end, I shall delineate the numerous ways in which the White House garden calls upon the myths of the pastoral, agrarian and abundant but also projects a utopic future that is less mediated by the hand of commercial interest and is reflective of the contemporary zeitgeist.

In 1811, Thomas Jefferson wrote the following in a letter to Charles Willson Peal:

No occupation is as delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden…but though I am an old man, I am but a young gardener…I have often thought that if heaven had given me a choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered and near a good market for the production of a garden. (78-79)

And garden he did. In fact, Thomas Jefferson’s estate at Monticello in Virginia is one of the most significant horticultural sites of the nation. Jefferson was the third president of the United States, author of the Declaration of Independence and founder of the University of Virginia. He was a historian, philosopher, inventor and one of the most impassioned proponents of American agriculture. At Monticello, his vision for America’s future found material existence in its lush gardens and landscaping. In his 1000 foot long kitchen terrace garden, Jefferson cultivated 70 species and 330 varieties of vegetables (Hatch 55). According to Damon Fowler, Jefferson planted wheat from Ireland, grapes from Italy, tarragon from France next to peppers from Texas and cucumbers from Ohio. So eclectic was the variety found in his plantings that Charles Peal wrote to him, “Your gardens must be a museum to you” (quoted in Fowler 4). Monticello reflected Jefferson’s agrarian ideal in practice. Being in balance with nature was at the heart of Monticello’s ethic. Fowler reminds us that Jefferson was acutely conscious of the relationship
between garden and table and sought to grow and eat fruit and vegetables based on the season. Additionally, while Jefferson keenly preserved his own food roots, he was also very adventurous about foreign foods and chose to integrate them in his garden scheme (9). Culinary historian Karen Hess refers to Jefferson as the nation’s most illustrious epicure, stating that his devotion to fresh produce and sustainable gardening have made him an iconic figure in the organic and local movements of today (Hatch “Thomas Jefferson’s Legacy”).

While my brief description of Monticello does it little justice, it bears inclusion here because it is the template for the Obama garden and even recalls Peal’s characterization of garden as museum. In fact, many of the heirloom vegetables grown at the White House are from heritage seeds from Monticello. These include the seeds for brown Dutch and Tennis Ball lettuces, Choux de Milan Savoy cabbage and Prickly Seed spinach (“Monticello Has Place”). Marseilles fig, arugula, Florence fennel, Scarlet Runner beans, Case Knife Pole beans, and Whippoorwill cowpeas (also known as Crowder peas) and mint from Monticello were also planted (“FAQ”). Peter Hatch, the director of the gardens and grounds at Monticello, commented on the White House’s use of the seeds: “There's this really profound Jefferson legacy for not only gardening but also the promotion of local food…in the president's house” (quoted in “Monticello Has Place”).

As noted in the first chapter, one of the Obama administration’s central goals in agricultural reform seeks to “encourage the nation’s youth to become farmers” (“Real Leadership for Rural America” 3). This is a goal that also directly quotes Jefferson’s vision of America as a nation of yeoman farmers. It is important to remember that although Jefferson celebrated rural life, it is not that he didn’t believe in the promise of technology. This sentiment reflects a particularly American incarnation of the pastoral ideal that Leo Marx articulates in The Machine
According to Marx, “Americans had little difficulty in reconciling their passion for machine power with the immensely popular Jeffersonian ideal of rural peace, simplicity and contentment” (208). In fact, technology was seen as a means for preserving the purity and wholesomeness of rural life. Machines would stave off the wilderness and shore up the dominance of the agrarian sector while remaining contained in the middle landscape (Marx 150; 220). In Jefferson’s imagination, the vastness of the land would prove formidable for full scale commercialism to take foot as it would incentivize more people to farm and disincentivize the construction of a “market for manufactures” (Marx 149). Unfortunately, Jefferson’s vision of a pastoral future where there was an interest in restraining commercialism and economic advancement did not come true. Instead, Marx contends that the American pastoral ideal “lent itself to the illusion” that technology would sustain a utopian garden on earth when in reality it sanctioned the whole scale industrialization and pillaging of the wilderness in the name of progress (226).

In the Obama garden, I see a memorialization of the pastoral ideal advocated by Jefferson, one that privileges human advancement as long as it is in step with nature. It pays homage to the Jeffersonian notion of land-based participatory democracy. Jefferson’s celebration of the independent yeoman farmer sought to balance the needs of human practice with the “imperatives of --- the opportunities and constraints inherent in --- the natural world” (Marx, quoted in Cannavò 86). According to Marx, Jefferson’s pastoral ideal anticipated the contemporary environmental movement, which seeks (much like Jefferson did) to find sustained and long term balance between ecology and human endeavor (Cannavò 86). This is a view that stands in sharp opposition to the neo-liberal ethic of the Bush years, which saw economic growth
as the only means to alleviate the growing environmental crisis. Of course, if the symbolism of the White House garden is not buttressed by public policy changes, little will have changed.

Still, the White House garden is organic (although it has not been certified yet) and sustainable and symbolically staves off the hand of technology and industry from its parameters. To garden and to eat organic food represents a rejection of the rampant consumerism that has come to dictate our everyday lives and our wellness. The organic movement seeks to attenuate the links between the individual and the industrial food system, a system that has come to rely extensively on indefensible practices that exploit natural resources, heavily dependent on fossil fuels, pesticides and artificial processing. To display this organic ethic, the White House amended the garden soil with rock dust of lime, green sand and crab meal from the Chesapeake Bay. It utilizes compost to add micro and macro nutrients to the ground. Organic fertilizers and insect repellents like lady bugs and praying mantises are being used to control the pest population and a honey hive is also on ground to aid in pollination (White House Kitchen Garden Fact Sheet).

Glancing at the wide variety of vegetables, fruit and herbs that are being grown at the White House rouses the legacy of American abundance. It symbolically expresses the promise offered by American soil and toil. In an era marked by the worst recession since the great depression of the 30’s, the myth of American abundance is under challenge. As food prices have skyrocketed and with unemployment at an all time high (hovering between 9 and 10%), the nation is dealing with the acute realization that its material security can no longer be bankrolled by its belief in unfettered progress (Debusmann “Paradox”). Michelle Obama’s decision to plant a garden at the White House comes at a time when food access and food security are becoming national concerns. In 2008, one in six Americans struggled to feed themselves—that amounts to

5 The price of food went up 5.5% in 2008, the largest increase since 1990 – data from National Research Council.
about 50 million people (Debusmann). Simultaneously, there has been a substantive rise in food deserts that contribute to an obesogenic environment. Unhealthy fast foods are often the only options available for people struggling with poverty, which has been exacerbated by the present economic conditions. Note that at the same time, the average American household wastes approximately 14% of their food purchases (Debusmann). This situation brings to mind Harvey Levenstein’s prescient formulation of the “paradox of plenty” where the land of ample promise is also the land of scarcity and hunger. Within this frame, the image of the garden works to symbolically rehabilitate these contradictory and adverse tendencies by renewing a belief in American abundance. It offers a resolution to the issue of food access by enabling citizens to grow their own food while at the same time mitigating the issue of the obesity crisis by illustrating a pathway to healthful eating. Concomitantly, it speaks to the notion of responsibilization that has become a potent theme in the discourse of the recent financial meltdown. There is widespread loss of confidence in industrial, corporate and most specifically banking institutions that is contributing to a populist desire for regulation and control. There is an urgent need to reign in the bloated deficit and the excessive spending that precipitated the recession in the first place. The most immediate way for citizens to take action has been in cutting back and tightening their belts—a call to action many have taken to their own backyards. Note that the agrarian tradition has had a long standing suspicion of the banking and commercial world; a return to the land, then, represents a critique of the rampant and degrading materialism of the market place.

The White House garden cost $200 and in tight economic times this relatively low cost to access good and healthy food has proved to be a huge incentive. In a recent survey of gardeners conducted by the National Gardening Association, 54% of new gardeners claimed that they were
engaged in “growing their own groceries” to save on the rising cost of food. 58% of those surveyed said they chose the garden alternative for better tasting food. 51% stated that they believed it gave them access to better quality, while 48% claimed they gardened for safer food. In 2009, 43 million American households were engaged in food gardening, up almost 19% from the previous year (“The Impact of Home and Community Gardening Survey”).

In its critique of modern living, the return to the garden is, in the words of Eric Freyfogle, reflective of the rise of New Agrarianism. According to Freyfogle, New Agrarianism is powerful and evident in the contemporary moment and is visible in the rise of rural, urban and suburban individuals who get their food from gardens and orchards on their own land, believe in ecologically sound land practices, promote sustainable practices and advocate relationships between food buyers and food growers while encouraging a reduction in consumerism (xv). All of these trends find their embodiment in the Obama garden. In fact, the garden demonstrates an attempt by the White House to reorganize the American utilitarian ethic in a way that advocates ecological stewardship as much as it does human gratification.

The act of growing one’s own food is a political and economic stand that begs for a more mindful connection not just between man and landscape but also man and community. The notion of community has been an integral part of the Obama political worldview. Part of the garden’s harvest is donated to a non-profit organization named Miriam’s Kitchen that feeds the homeless. This notion of community also figures centrally in the First Lady’s war on childhood obesity. The nation’s future is dependent on the health and wellbeing of its children and, as I have described in the first chapter, even issues of national security are implicated in the discourse of obesity. It is therefore in the interest of the national community that children be taught to the value of eating healthfully. For Michelle Obama, the garden is a quintessential teachable
moment—one that teaches the value of fresh food as well as fitness. Notably, on the day of the
ground breaking and the planting ceremony, the First Lady was accompanied by a class of fifth
grade students from Washington DC’s Bancroft elementary school. Cheering the children on
with “yay for fruits, yay for vegetables,” Mrs. Obama said:

One of the main reasons we're doing this, is that what I've learned as a mom, in trying to
feed my girls, is that it is so important for them to get regular fruits and vegetables in
their diets, because it does have nutrients, it does make you strong, it is all brain food.
And when you go to school, it is so important for you to have a good breakfast, to make
sure in your lunches that you have an apple or an orange or a banana, that you have
something green when you eat any meal, lunch or dinner. And we're looking to you guys
to help educate the country, not just in your own homes, but other people as they think
about how to plan their meals for their kids, to think about the importance of making sure
that we have enough fruits and vegetables. And doing this garden is a really inexpensive
way of making that happen. (Obama, Michelle, “Remarks by the First Lady”)

Teaching children how to grow their own food helps to demystify nature and ingrains a sense of
rootedness to the land. It constructs a taste of place.

As a tool of bio- and eco-pedagogy, the garden space has long been used to educate
children. This is a function of the garden that Americans are very familiar with. It was through
the spatial device of the home garden that agrarian ideals were transmitted from generation to
generation. In fact, during the 19th century, the home garden was seen as agriculture on a small
scale (Tice 19). According to Patricia Tice, the home garden was a space where children were
taught the moral and civic virtues that come from working the land. By the late nineteenth
century, gardening was viewed as a valuable part of the public school curriculum. Success in the
world was attributed to morality learned in the yard, which was based on experiential learning, a sentiment noted in this teacher’s journal:

Children need training in hard work to develop resourcefulness. Life must not be all play. Dr C.F Hodge says ‘To have every child of ten years own and care for a garden…would do more than anything to empty our prisons.’ Separate the child and the garden and we have a man-made body with vagaries that we call backwardness, ill-health, juvenile delinquency, vulgarity, crime and sin. (Stacy 510)

Between 1890 and 1920 school gardens were used to teach a variety of subjects ranging from the natural sciences and agriculture to the cultivation of an aesthetic appreciation for nature and natural processes. They were used to teach modes of self expression as well as civic virtue (Kohlstedt 60).

The image of the child in the garden is one that recalls the pastoral ideal. The garden represents a landscape where the child remains within the boundaries of the home, yet can experience wilderness beyond it. Philosophically, there exists a long tradition of mythologizing the figure of the child as innocent and closer to nature and thus pure. This romantic vision of childhood finds a counterpoint in the view that nature is wild and uncivilized and needs to be controlled. Children are to be cultivated in the same way that nature is: they are to be nurtured. Education is a way of controlling and nurturing a child’s development and staving off their wilder instincts. According to Kohlstedt, the use of the garden as a pedagogic tool reveals how profoundly these tropes associated with nature are implicated in the educational processes (61). This view resonates in the Obama garden which seeks to teach children to discipline their appetites for bad foods and, in a sense, reign in their primitive corporeal desires that are uncivilized and in need of regulation. In its symbolic rejection of the degrading world of
industry, the White House garden can be read as a space that keeps the innocence and purity of
children safe from its corrupting influence and anchors them in the value system of new
agrarianism.

School gardening came to the national stage during the First World War when over one
million children contributed to the production of food following a proclamation by the President
Woodrow Wilson in 1916 (Subramaniam 3). Following this period, school gardens saw a decline
in popularity and regained only slight momentum during World War II, when Eleanor Roosevelt
planted her victory garden on the grounds of the White House (3). Michelle Obama’s garden is
the first garden to be planted at the White House since Roosevelt’s, and the symbolism of this
call to action is not lost on the American public. During the Second World War, the American
government called upon its public to grow food to mitigate the impact of immense labor and
transportation scarcities. Alongside food rationing programs, the government asked the
American public to plant “Victory Gardens” to ensure that the nation had access to an adequate
food supply6. Not only did victory gardening rally the public with a sense of common purpose in
aiding the nation’s war effort; Amy Bentley explains that while they inspired hard work, these
gardens also gave citizens the opportunity to connect with a pre-industrial national past and as
such performed an almost spiritual and cleansing function (116).

There is a similar apparent yearning for a pre-industrial past that is signified by the rise of
new agrarianism and given material form by the White House garden, which also represents a
call to action. Mrs. Obama clearly wants the American public to respond to this ‘new victory
garden’ with the same enthusiasm as shown in the past. While the challenge faced by the nation
is not that of a war (although the nation currently is mired in two wars), it is one that asks

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6 1943 is considered the high point for the victory gardening movement at which time nearly three fifths of the
population planted gardens that collectively produced more than eight million tons of food; this accounted for nearly
40% of all the fresh produce consumed that year (Bentley 117).
Americans to recalibrate their taste in food. It asks Americans to feed their children better and to teach their children healthy and ecologically reflexive behaviors.
CHAPTER III.
FRENCH FRIES VERSUS FRENCH ARTICHOKEs: THE POLITICS OF EATING WELL
AND THE GARDEN AS A CLASS INSTRUMENT

In this chapter, I want to problematize the pedagogic project represented by the White House garden. To do this, I use the category of class to examine the ways in which the counter-hegemonic foodview enunciated by the garden (as signifier) is being contested in public discourse. My aim here is not to disqualify the enterprise but to complicate its function by interrogating the power structure implicit in its display. When examining the effectiveness of a museological display it is essential to unearth whose voice is represented in the narrative constructed by the exhibit; that is, how well does the kitchen garden represent its contemporary public? Furthermore, how are the ideological assertions made by the exhibit characterized by existing power differentials? Finally, I want to analyze how the authority of the White House as a cultural taste maker is implicated by the politics of class and privilege.

Before proceeding then, I want to return to the issue of cultural institutions as devices of inculcation, a theme I touched upon in the first chapter. Historically, such institutions were created to edify the masses, to elevate, educate and improve the masses by acting upon them. Of course, this implies that the public was acted upon by those who were already civilized, elevated, and educated, and these were the privileged classes, who used such institutions to reproduce and maintain their dominance. In their articulations of the knowable world, these institutions were constituted as sites of objective authority, an authority that also allowed the dominant classes to control the representation of the ‘other’ which led to the silencing of marginal identities who were at times completely written out of the historic/national/civic narrative. Their pedagogic agendas powerfully worked to shape collective and national identities by rendering them ‘always already’ subjects. Seemingly this institutional authority is derived first and foremost from its
collection; for it is in the particular spatial, temporal and rational ordering and interpretation of
the collection that the public finds itself regulated, ordered and interpellated. This is the point
made by Tony Bennett in his essay “Exhibitionary Complex” where he critically assesses how
the public is constituted by the collection it comes to view. Following Foucault’s work on the
“carceral archipelago,” Bennett equates the exhibitionary institution to “an instrument of moral
and cultural regulation of the working classes” that exercises its control on the public by
“rendering the forces and principals of order visible to [it]” (86; 76). In other words, technologies
of display construct a populace that voluntarily self regulates. Think, for example, of the way in
which one behaves upon entering the exhibition space of a museum. The public mechanically
responds by demonstrating a quiet veneration while in the presence of the collection, aware that
they are viewing the objects on display as much as they are themselves being viewed in the act of
viewing. Here, the ‘do not touch’ signs work to interpellate the public, cueing them to assign the
artifactual object (on display) with a degree of reverential deference. This brings the issue of the
instrumentality of museological displays to the fore as they are part of a circuitry of governance,
albeit (as I articulated in the first chapter) governance enacted from a distance. As such, exhibits
are instruments of politicized social agendas that work on the public collectivity.

Note that cultural instrumentality emanating from the collections of an institution like the
White House are especially powerful because its displays and exhibits are deeply bound up with
the national narrative and impact the formulation of national identity. It is therefore imperative
that we probe how the narrative is constructed and who has the power to shape it. In other words,
we must explore the ways in which meaning is mediated via the museum collection because
objects do not have inherent meaning; meaning is ascribed to them in the way that they are
interpreted, represented and displayed (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 3). Of course, my primary concern
is an examination of how the White House garden impacts the nation’s food narrative: what impact it has on American tastes and what it means to eat American. As delineated, I view the Obama garden as an exhibitionary technology that is on display at the White House in a museological setting. It is a living collection that represents a systematic ordering of historic, biological and ecological epistemologies, a living collection that was planted with an instructive objective in mind.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical because it is how museums perform meaning (3). She distinguishes between two approaches of display, one being “in situ” and the other “in context.” The former refers to the mimetic and metonymic recreation of cultural and historic environments while the latter refers to exhibits that are contextually situated with the use of devices like labels, tours, guides, educational programs and performances (21). These approaches are often used complimentarily and work to affirm the institution’s narrative imperative. In my view the White House garden utilizes both these display techniques. It is an ‘in-situ’ display because it recalls the historic pastoral legacy represented by the agrarian myth. In this sense, it can be read as mimetic of the Jeffersonian ideal, a virtual recreation of the bygone era that represents an ideological palliative to contemporaneous predicament (that being the obesity and environmental crises). It is also metonymic in that it represents a fragment of an ideal, where the idea signified by the garden is evocative of an entire way of life—a life view that speaks to the rise of the new agrarian movement. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, such displays are immersive and environmental, and, as I have discussed in the last chapter, the kitchen garden is definitely an experiential space.

Simultaneously, I contend the White House garden is displayed using an “in-context” approach because of its spatial location at the First Residence. Here, it is contextualized as a part
of the Presidential home and is an integral facet of the living history of the institution. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that “in-context” exhibits require concrete frameworks (in this case, the framework of the White House) to turn the display into an object lesson (23). In this case the garden functions as a pedagogic instrument and is therefore unequivocally an object lesson that works by interpellating its viewing public to self-survey and self-regulate its own eating habits. However, it is the particularity of the objects on display within the garden with which my analysis is concerned. The kitchen garden is itself a collection of botanical objects that have been planted with a deliberate rationality in mind. As in any exhibit design, each object speaks to a certain worldview. In this case, a certain food and ecological value system has been encoded into the exhibit narrative by its creators at the White House. Note that a living collection like that represented by the garden is received by the public in terms of multiple scales: on the national scale as an idea and symbol, and on a ‘nested scale’ where each object (in this case, each individual plant) is viewed as signifying meaning in its own right. The inclusion of a certain plant in the exhibit makes it a canonical object worthy of display. Janet Marstine reminds us that the canonical object “represent[s] a universal standard of excellence that ought to be emulated” (25). Again, it is the institution that constructs the object’s value by collecting, organizing and displaying it. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues “objects are made, not found” (3). Thus, the cultural institution produces authoritative knowledge in its ordering and arrangement of the object display.

At the White House garden, it is the varieties of vegetables, herbs, fruit and honey that represent the individual objects of display. I intend here to read the curatorial choices made by the White House. Through their selection of particular plants, I am going to excavate the politics

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1 According to Michener and Schultz, arboreta and botanical gardens displayed in the museum setting are interpreted at varying scales by the visitors. Some may observe the entire landscape while others are more interested in specific plants which represent the canonical object. Meaning is derived from all levels of the exhibit (97).
of power implicit in the exhibit. As aforementioned, the production of cultural knowledge in the museum setting has long represented the class interests of a narrow and privileged set. I want to demonstrate the ways in which the White House garden represents the voice of this privileged class while also exploring the ways in which the garden display represents a contested terrain. Since the rise of postcolonialism and globalism (both in academia and popular culture), cultural institutions have found their interpretative and representative authorities challenged in the public sphere. In fact, exhibition spaces have become ideological battlegrounds where depictions of the past and visions of the future find themselves discursively disputed by those in the minority whose contributions, agency and voices are often mutilated and marginalized by the narrative of the display.

The garden’s mise-en-scene is likewise a structured representation of the White House’s vision for the American foodscape. It includes vegetables like Tennis Ball lettuce, Savoy cabbage and arugula; herbs like sorrel, chervil, cilantro, Thai basil and marjoram; fruit like Marseille figs and blueberries; and two bee hives (that have produced over 134 pounds of honey so far). I view this fantastic array of plant objects as counter-hegemonic to the mainstream American foodscape, which is replete with processed and industrially produced foods. At the same time, I view the rhetoric of the display as soundly hegemonic because, in its assertion of what “good food” is, it utilizes a paternalistic mode of pedagogy that posits the Obamas as sites of authority by virtue of their occupation of the White House. Furthermore, I view their authority as emanating from a position of class privilege.

Before proceeding here, it will be useful to examine common American attitudes towards food and eating as refracted through the lens of class distinction². In his research on American food habits, Sidney Mintz finds that American eating regimes are exceptionally bound up with

² For further reading, see works by Jack Goody and Richard Pillsbury.
the issue of convenience. The time associated with food production and consumption seems to be one of the prime determinants of the food economy. The busyness of the average American day, the constant pressure to stay on the move and to attend to multiple chores at once, has led to a rather dysfunctional relationship with food. Mintz writes that Americans tend to eat out frequently, often choosing fast food and takeout meals over cooking food at home. They tend to eat large amounts of prepared, packaged and microwavable foods with the overall diet relying heavily on animal protein (beef, pork and poultry), foods with high sugar, salt and fat content and low in fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead of drinking water, Americans tend to prefer sodas while also “consuming substantial quantities of labeled (low fat, low cholesterol, fat free, high fiber…) foods, packaged to make the consumer feel less guilty about what he is really choosing to eat” (118). These foods rely on processing and artificial ingredients to bolster taste, consistency and shelf stability.

While I completely agree with Mintz’s contention that the issue of convenience drives mainstream American relationships to food, I would like to complicate this assertion by adding to it the issue of cost. Convenient food is cheap food and cheap food is abundantly available. Of course, cheap food is also the unhealthiest and most ecologically degrading for humans and the environment; this ironically makes its consumption a rather costly affair. In a 2007 study done by the University of Washington (originally published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*), researchers revealed that the prices of high calorie, energy dense processed foods stay relatively stable and are less affected by inflationary pressures than low energy, high nutrient fresh foods. In fact, energy dense foods (high fat, high sugar foods) cost an average of $1.76 per 1000 calories compared to the $18.16 per 1000 calories for the nutritious foods. The high cost of eating healthfully and nutritionally essentially prices out lower socio-economic
groups of the population that consequently also happen to be the most obese and unhealthy. The study’s author, Dr. Adam Drewnowsk, stated that the average American tends to spend $7 a day on food, with people belonging to lower income classes spending $4 a day on food. Accordingly, he finds that “a 2,000-calorie diet would cost just $3.52 a day if it consisted of processed foods compared with $36.32 a day for a diet of low-energy dense foods” (Parker-Hope).

What I hope is significantly revealed by my inclusion of this study is that food choices are tremendously shaped by one’s social class. That is, economic determinants such as income and wealth confer upon individuals what Max Weber has referred to as “life chances.” These are the differences in opportunities and lifestyles that result from differentiated levels of access to scarce and valuable resources and services in society. These resources include food, consumer commodities, and services like healthcare and education (O’Sullivan 41). For Weber, access to such resources has a direct correlation with power; that is, individuals that have such access increase their chances of obtaining higher status and of maintaining their societal power (Weir 459). In practical terms, this means that individuals who have higher incomes are more likely to be well-educated, well-fed, well-traveled and well-connected. The same is not true for the lower and working classes whose lack of access to such amenities results in lower levels of education, deficiencies in health and nutrition, and poverty.

It is important to understand that such structural economic and social deficiencies work to hinder mobility between classes and reinforce the lines of class distinction. Thus within the context of food choice and food access, “life chances” work to construct and shape food desires, tastes and nutritional knowledge. In her seminal work “Feeding the Family,” Marjorie DeVault chronicles the food cultures associated with the working and upper/middle classes in America. In her assessment, the working classes tend to privilege foods that are sustaining, recognizable and
heavily reliant on familial tradition for their modes of preparation. Lacking access to capital, working-class women tend not to experiment with food but instead base their food practices on conventional customs and habits (203). In contrast, the upper and middle classes tend to have a more abstract approach towards food and cooking that allows them to augment, even question, conventional food practices. Daniel Miller explains this disposition towards food: “a person who has been brought up with the abstractions of education and capital, and who is certain of obtaining daily necessities, cultivates a distance from these needs and effects a taste based in the respect and desire for the abstract, distanced and formal” (quoted in Ashley 65). The upper and middle classes then are more disposed to alimentary practices that value ‘quality over quantity’ and ‘newness over tradition.’ Consequently, DeVault finds that upper and middle class American women tend to rely heavily on ‘textual guidelines’ like cookbooks and magazines and follow food trends much more closely (204, 221).

These assessments are corroborated by Sidney Mintz, who writes that members of the literate middle class (individuals he defines as having some college education, travel experience and an awareness of ethnic cuisine) have the ability (or, I might add, the luxury) to access a vast cross section of fresh foods and foods that come from all over the world (116). While regional and ethnic foods have a rich tradition in this nation of immigrants, under the aegis of globalization Americans are now able to access a vast and diverse variety of foods in their grocery stories. Lauding the “cornucopia” of foods that can now be found in American grocery stores, Mintz writes that “literate Americans…tend to try new foods seeking novelty in eating as we do in many aspects of life. We are inclined to identify that novelty with knowingness, with sophistication; and certainly being open to new experience is a good value most of the time” (116). DeVault would agree with this inclination towards novelty as her study found that people
in the upper and middle classes “stressed the importance of “trying new things” and often [talk] about experimenting in terms that reveal their conscious effort to do so….children in professional households learn that food should be different and interesting and that eating should be an adventure” (212). These attitudes towards food also influence the ways in which such classes approach ethnic foods. DeVault argues that the upper and middle classes tend not to relate to ethnic foods in terms of the heritage or traditional values associated with them. Instead they feel that the “novelty” offered by these foods makes meals more “entertaining.” These meals tend to reflect a global pastiche of flavors with ingredients and elements borrowed from various cultures (212). Moreover while both the working class and the upper and middle classes use food as a social vehicle, entertaining with food has different meanings for different classes. The working class hosts tend to focus on promoting kinship and familial ties, whereas those in the upper class tend to see food as a ‘class code’ and use it to shore up class based alliances (DeVault 223). Thus, as Bob Ashley reminds us, while “food consumption is related to economic and cultural capital it can also used to demonstrate and generate social capital” (66).

The notions of novelty, sophistication, knowingness and entertainment that Mintz and DeVault refer to are indices of social differentiation that reveal the ways in which class identities are articulated based on patterns of consumption. That is, there is a powerful cultural logic behind the class based food dispositions. Here, as the upper and middle classes are removed from the contingencies of having to live ‘paycheck to paycheck,’ their food choices are motivated by a greater variety of factors than just that of caloric sustenance. “Thus eating habits like calorie counting, bread avoidance, attention to weight management, label reading, sympathy towards vegetarianism and giving ‘respect’ to foreign foods are all markers of upper and middle class taste preferences” (Mintz 117). Other markers of class privilege include being able to afford and
having access to organic fresh foods, boutique and artisanal foods, and alcohols such as microbrews and imported wines.

These markers are conspicuously evident in the food preferences represented by the Obamas. According to media reports, President Obama loves to snack on MET-Rx chocolate roasted peanut protein bars, while his favorite tea is an organic Black Forest Berry Honest tea, and he does not drink soft drinks. The Obamas love artisanal chocolates, particularly Seattle-based Fran’s Chocolates which makes their favorites, a smoked sea salt caramel in milk chocolate (that the President loves) and a dark chocolate version (that the First Lady prefers). A 16-piece box costs $24. The Obamas enjoy eating out and are especially fond of authentic and gourmet Mexican food. Their favorite Chicago restaurant is the four star, Topolobampo, which serves up “genuine Mexican cooking as sophisticated as French and Italian…the dishes you might find on the menu on a typical night—perhaps lobster napped with a sauce of arbol and chipotle chilies, or seared, line-caught marlin in a toasted ancho chili crust” (Zwerdling). I include this brief overview of the Obamas alimentary predilections to show that their taste preferences are decidedly upper class and not working class.

It is no wonder then that from the early days of the campaign, the issue of social class became political fodder in public discourse as the Obamas fielded charges of elitism and of “being out of touch” with mainstream America. Of course, this discourse was part of a calculated strategy used by Obama’s political opponents to discredit his office-worthiness even though, ironically, most American Presidents have come from the moneyed classes. During the

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3 The Obamas have Ivy League educations and were successful lawyers before joining politics. They are members of the professional upper class. For the year 2009, President Obama declared an annual gross income of $5,505,409 (“President Obama and Vice President Biden’s Tax Returns”).

4 The Telegraph, New York Times and USA Today

5 In an article for Forbes, Dan Ackman writes that “many, if not most, U.S. presidents were born well-to-do, and nearly all were quite well off by the time they sought the nation's highest office.”
campaign, every food-related decision made by the Obamas was parsed for its Americanness. In an effort to collapse what *Newsweek* termed as his “Bubba Gap,” candidate Obama was repeatedly photographed and filmed eating at diners, consuming all-American high carbohydrate foods like hamburgers and fries (Thomas). In a *New York Times* editorial piece, Maureen Dowd described Obama’s predicament of having to appeal to the ‘Joe six pack’ demographic via the stomach:

In the final days in Pennsylvania, he [Obama] dutifully logged time at diners and force-fed himself waffles, pancakes, sausage and a Philly cheese steak. He split the pancakes with Michelle, left some of the waffle and sausage behind, and gave away the French fries that came with the cheese steak. But this is clearly a man who can’t wait to get back to his organic scrambled egg whites.

This “Bubba gap” was acutely felt when Obama made a campaign pit stop in the Midwestern town of Adel, Iowa. Speaking at a Rural Issues Forum before a crowd of farmers, the candidate fielded questions about his food and agriculture policy stands. Sympathizing with their plight, Obama told the farmers that he too was distressed by the fact that they had not seen the prices of their crop yields increase even though supermarket prices had seen substantive inflation.

“Anybody gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula?” the senator said. “I mean, they’re charging a lot of money for this stuff” (Zileny). Unfortunately, the candidate was unaware that there is no Whole Foods Store in the entire state of Iowa and that arugula is not an Iowan staple, so the remark left the crowd somewhat puzzled. This incident colloquially remembered as “arugula-gate” reveals the class problematics associated with food. While Obama’s remarks were meant as a show of solidarity and were entirely unselfconscious, they expose his class privilege. According to demographic analyses, the average Whole Foods
shopper has an income of $50,000 or more, is well educated and “generally in better physical shape than the rest of the population” (“Channel Blurring”; “Whole Foods Market Inc”). As this shopper profile shows, members of the working class are not shopping at the Whole Foods market.

As for arugula, it is a salad leaf that is native to the Mediterranean region (where it has been popular for centuries) and is known in Europe as rocket. In recent years, arugula has gained popularity in America and has become a staple in premium salad mixes. It has a strong peppery flavor, yet one that is milder than mustard greens or horseradish. The plant resembles dandelion greens and has small flat leaves on long stems. As a darker green vegetable, it is exceptionally nutritious and has high amounts of calcium and folic acid. It is a member of the cruciferous family of plants and is a powerful antioxidant. Of course, this infamous leafy salad green is an object of display in the White House garden collection. Arugula is clearly a vegetable that is symbolically laden with certain class connotations and is indicative of a particular taste profile. It is a taste profile that reflects the upper and middle class preference for dark salad greens in opposition to the less nutritious, less complex tasting and less expensive iceberg lettuce.

An examination of the other botanical objects represented in the garden similarly reveal a spectrum of taste preferences that could be described as cultivated, adventurous and gastronomically sophisticated. The breadth and diversity of the plants that have been picked for cultivation exemplify a pastiche of what Elizabeth Rozin has defined as “flavor principles,” which are culturally and ethnically specific flavor combinations (Symons 113). That is, the plants represent an eclectic and cosmopolitan mix of flavors and ingredients drawn from globally diverse regions and cultures. These include essential flavor principles that are to be found in
Mexican, Mediterranean, French, Cajun, South American and Asian cuisines. Take, for example, the collection’s inclusion of herbs like Thai basil and mint which are essential markers of Vietnamese and Thai cuisines. The president’s fondness for Mexican food is reflected in the collection’s inclusion of hot and sweet chili peppers and cilantro. French flavor principles are represented in the collection with the incorporation of “fine herbs” like parsley, tarragon, chervil and chives. Italian flavors in the form of sweet basil, marjoram, oregano, sage, rosemary and garlic are also on display. Even sorrel, which as an herb used in Nigerian and Caribbean foods, has been planted. Anise hyssop and marigolds have been planted for the bees to harvest and pollinate, revealing how the garden’s objects signify an inter-dependent eco-system.

Vegetables include regional southern staples like sweet potato, okra, red and green chard, and mustard and collard greens as well as purple and white kohlrabi. These vegetables are also commonly used in African American cooking. Tomatillos, a Mexican staple, and bok choy (or Chinese cabbage), a Chinese staple, are also being cultivated alongside the more conventional American fare like cauliflower, broccoli, snap peas and carrots. As discussed in the last chapter, the garden collection includes many heirloom varieties of vegetables that have been drawn from Thomas Jefferson’s estate at Monticello. These include Marseille figs, French artichokes, Arrow peas, Prickly Seeded spinach, Savoy red Choux di Milan cabbage, Tennis Ball cabbage, Brown Dutch lettuce, Bath Cos lettuce and Spotted Aleppo lettuce. Some of the Jeffersonian vegetables are threatened and endangered varieties, and their inclusion speaks to the agricultural conservation project that is represented by the garden.

6 The following analysis is based on Barbara Gollman’s TMGA conference handout titled “World Cuisine Flavor Principles.”

7 Specked lettuce and tennis ball lettuce are on the United States Ark of Taste catalogue. “The ark is an international catalogue of foods that are threatened by industrial standardization, the regulations of large-scale distribution and environmental damage” (“US Arc of Taste” Slow Food.org).
The garden’s collection viewed as a whole speaks to a nutritionally, ecologically and gastronomically informed sensibility. As I have delineated, this sensibility is the result of “life chances” that cultivate a taste for a wide variety of nutritionally beneficial foods and a palate for ‘novel’ flavors. Here, I must state emphatically that although some of the vegetable objects displayed in this collection are part of the traditional repertoire of working-class foodways (especially the regional American varieties) the central point of my analysis is that the diversity and eclecticism represented in the garden speaks to an urbane foodview that is the product of education and capital. Suffice it to say that the foods exhibited in the garden represent upper and middle class tastes more than they do lower or working class tastes. At the same time they represent a vision for the future of American food and American food values. As such, the garden’s circulation in the cultural economy powerfully illustrates what foods Americans must cultivate a taste for in order to better their health and environmental outcomes.

Returning then to the museological frame, cultural institutions that use technologies of display are instrumental in manufacturing notions of ‘good taste’ (an appreciation of high cultural forms). In his seminal work on the critique of taste, Pierre Bourdieu argues that “the dual meaning of the word, ‘taste’…must serve…to remind us that taste in the sense of the ‘faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values’ is inseparable from taste in the sense of the capacity to discern the flavors of foods which implies a preference for some of them” (quoted in Korsmeyer 64). Undeniably, the White House functions as a taste maker. Its selection of particular botanical objects implies a specific profile of taste preference that I have asserted is upper and middle class. While Tony Bennett argues that the pedagogic functions of museal enterprises work to discipline the public, especially the working classes, Bourdieu adds another element to the critique by arguing that these institutions also tend to exclude working class
culture. Therefore, they tend to reproduce upper and middle class hegemony and reinforce class distinctions (Goldfarb 145).

As aforementioned, museal institutions construct canonical culture via the use of exhibitionary displays. Canonical culture is presented as universal culture because it is believed to represent legitimate truths, ideals and inviolable authenticity. However, this claim to universality makes the project of the White House garden one that can be contested on the basis of class difference. Note that the foodview characterized by the White House garden project represents the taste and class interest of a narrow set of Americans yet it is displayed as a universal standard, as something that the entire national body politic should emulate, regardless of their diverse cultural and socio-economic frames. To illustrate my point, I want to discuss the ways in which the worldview represented by the White House garden fails to take into account the lived reality of the demographic group that it most aims to serve.

In my previous chapter, I discussed the White House’s emphasis on the cost of the garden as being only $200 to plant, thereby suggesting a means of ensuring access to good food and mitigating the pervasiveness of food deserts in low income areas. However, there are two premises that the White House assumes as a priori: one is the issue of access to usable land and agricultural resources, and the second is the issue of access to time and labor. These assumptions destabilize the kitchen garden project as they infer a unified public, erasing the vast social and economic distinctions that make up the population.

Let me start with the issue of access to gardening resources (land, water, knowledge). According to the Census Bureau, the national poverty rate in 2008 was 13.2 percent, which translates into 39.8 million people living on incomes below or equal to $22,025 for a family of four (“Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage”). Note that the areas that are facing the
most dire hunger and health issues tend to be concentrated in urban metropolitan spaces (“SNAP access in Urban America”). In fact, in 2007, 13.7 percent of households in the nation’s largest metropolitan cities experienced severe food insecurity\(^8\) (“Snap Access in Urban America”). To grow your own food, one needs access to land, and people living in low income urban spaces have limited access to safe and tillable land. While participating in a community garden project is one way to grow your own food, community gardens face their own existential crises in the form of mutable lease tenures and a constant threat of takeover under the aegis of ‘economic development’ (Jolly)\(^9\). While the politics of community gardening is worthy of academic consideration, it is beyond the scope of the analysis here. For the purposes of this chapter, my concern here is with food gardening at home (presumably by citizens that have access to or own a yard, lawn or garden space) as that is what is most directly implied by the image presented by the White House.

The greatest challenge to low income urban food gardeners is access to good, safe and usable soil which is more likely to be contaminated by environmental pollutants like lead, cadmium and arsenic\(^10\). Testing, amending and maintaining soil quality can be expensive. Additional resources in the form of water, fertilizers, seeds, gardening implements and fencing (to ward off theft and vandalism) add to the initial startup costs associated with food gardening. There is also the risk that the garden will not produce food, and the investment will be lost, which is a problem if there are limited funds available to feed the family. Note that the White House did have the south lawn’s soil tested for nutrients and contamination and found lead levels

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\(^8\) Food insecurity is defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson, quoted in Holben, 1).

\(^9\) According to research cited by Desmond Jolly, a paltry 1.5% of community gardens are sited on owned land.

\(^10\) Soil contamination in urban spaces is a common fact due to prior land use. Risks of such contamination include plants absorbing the pollutants, groundwater contamination and the risk of bioaccumulation when livestock or humans ingest contaminants from vegetation growing in compromised soil (Rosen 2002).
at 93 parts per million, which, while not considered dangerous, still mandated soil amendment (Burros). The soil quality was amended using organic matter, and the space was deemed safe for use. My point here is that low income individuals who have $4 a day to spend on food can and probably will find the cost of starting the garden prohibitive. Ironically, improving access to healthy food and altering the eating habits of this particular constituency are Michelle Obama’s central goals with the garden.

A further dissonance associated with asking poor people to grow their own food is that it presumes that people have the time and labor and knowledge to devote to this activity. One of Max Weber’s central contentions is that class, as a form of social stratification, must be seen not only as a result of property ownership as Marx asserts, but also a product of occupational skill divisions (Bottero 38). That is, one’s occupational class has significant impact on one’s “life chances.” When thinking about issues of food access and food choice, one’s occupation impacts the amount of labor and time that can be designated for the procurement and preparation of food. The middle and professional classes have more time to attend to matters of nutrition, and consequently health, than the lower or working classes.

Gardening is extraordinarily hard work. In this dismal economic climate, the number of working poor in America has dramatically increased. 28 percent of American families with one or both parents working now live in poverty (“Still Working Hard”)\(^\text{11}\). 21 million children live in low-income working homes. These households struggle to make ends meet despite the long hours worked by the parents. The “Still Working Hard, Still Falling Short” report done by the Working Poor Families Project report states that “the average annual work effort for adults in

\(^{11}\) The report by WPFP shows that “working poor families lack the earnings necessary to meet their basic needs – a struggle exacerbated by soaring prices for food, gas, health and education.” 60 percent of low-income working families spend more than one-third of their income on housing and have no post secondary education and nearly 40 percent lack health insurance for one or both parents.
low income working families is 2,552 hours, roughly one and a quarter full time jobs” (3). These are exceedingly grim statistics and require that we ask how under these circumstances the working poor could be expected to grow their own food? Additionally, if American food habits are driven by the issue of convenience, growing one’s own food is hardly expedient. Not to mention, that the project assumes access to gardening knowledge and this comes with its own learning curve. Notably Michelle Obama claimed that the entire First Family would be tending to the garden and weeding every week, yet there is little public evidence showing that she, the children or the President have been toiling under the hot summer sun keeping up with the vegetable beds.

It is in these seemingly conspicuous dissonances that I locate the ethic of moral and cultural regulation of the working classes that Tony Bennett refers to. Returning once again to the museal framework in which the garden is situated reveals a politics of class at play. This is especially evident in the exhibit’s discursive circulation of self-reliance and self-improvement— notions that are implicitly and explicitly stated without much concern for the socio-economic and structural conditions that directly bear on the quality of life conditions of the working class families that are part of the exhibit’s viewing public. While the goal of self-sufficiency is a worthy one, I concur with Desmond Jolly who astutely asks whether food sovereignty via urban agriculture is attainable in large metropolitan areas. Will the push towards urban and home food production “develop a two-tiered food system — a market-based system for the upper-middle and upper classes and a subsistence, self-sufficiency-based system for the poor and the lower-middle class?” Here, what I find particularly insidious is that the rhetoric of personal and moral wellbeing is placed solely on the shoulders of the individual and represents a shift in accountability from the state to the citizen. Within this context, being a good bio-political citizen
means being accountable for the production of ‘good food,’ for one’s weight management and one’s ecological imprint. What about the role of the state? What responsibility does the state have to ensure that the foodview it is presenting via the symbolism of the garden can be actualized?

This is not to say that I view the garden as a futile exercise; only that I view the absence of policy changes in conjunction with the symbolism proffered by the garden with a degree of suspicion. That is, for the gesture made by the White House to make palpable inroads into the crises that it is rhetorically assuaging, there has to be substantive hard policy support in the form of agricultural reform, education reform and environmental reform. Failing this, the garden becomes an empty gesture, winning praise from parts of the population that have luxury of the growing their own food and not those feeling the economic and health pressures to do so out of necessity.
CONCLUSIONS

The Obama kitchen garden is now a year old. In the past year, the garden has yielded over 1000 pounds of vegetables and herbs and 134 pounds of honey. In the public sphere, the garden has been widely praised for drawing attention to the importance of healthy fresh food, fitness and sustainability. Michael Pollan effusively noted that the garden was the most important event in sustainable agriculture in 2009 (quoted in Kohan “My Fare Lady”). The garden even received international acclaim as, following in Michelle Obama’s stead, Sarah Brown (wife of British premier, Gordon Brown) planted her own organic garden at No. 10 Downing Street (Kohan ibid). Domestically, the number of first-time gardeners has seen a dramatic increase, partly because of the recession and partly because the anti-obesity and alternative food movements embodied by the garden display are gaining momentum.

During the last month of campaigning for the presidency, Mr. Obama said in an interview with Time that he read Michael Pollan’s open letter and understood the urgency for food reform. He stated:

I was just reading an article in The New York Times by Michael Poll[an] about food and the fact that our entire agricultural system is built on cheap oil. As a consequence, our agriculture sector actually is contributing more greenhouse gases than our transportation sector. And in the meantime, it's creating monocultures that are vulnerable to national security threats, are now vulnerable to sky-high food prices or crashes in food prices, huge swings in commodity prices, and are partly responsible for the explosion in our healthcare costs because they're contributing to type 2 diabetes, stroke and heart disease, obesity…(Obama, Barack. “Interview with Time”)
For food activists this was a very heartening indication that change was on its way and that the issue of food reform finally would get the long awaited attention it needs. Yet, when Obama took office, the issue of food was legislatively marginalized and relegated to the sphere of soft policy. Granted, President Obama does have the worst recession in history on his plate along with two wars to deal with, but aren’t presidencies always about managing crises? It seems that food reform is just not enough of a crisis, at least not yet. This is not to say that a soft policy instrument like the garden doesn’t send a positive cultural message. It absolutely does. As my analysis has shown, it functions as a pedagogic tool that teaches the population the significance of good nutrition and good ecology and the value of the specificity of place. It enhances the biopolitical competencies of the national body and constitutes normative modes of eating and ecological behavior. At the same time, the nature of the display as viewed through the museal framework destabilizes the innocence of the garden’s symbolism. That is to say, the garden display is not an innocent pedagogic text but is symptomatic of a particular class voice and is characterized by a neo-liberal sensibility. In this thesis, I have sought to diagnose the nature, rationale, rhetoric and politics of the foodview symbolized by the White House garden.

In the first chapter, I locate the Obamas’ decision to use a soft policy mechanism like the garden within the matrix of liberal governmentality. This is a mode of governance that regulates the actions and conduct of its citizenry by promoting self-discipline and self-governance. Such governance extends itself in a multimodal way and utilizes cultural institutions like museums to put forward its agenda. In this context, the White House, as a living history institution with a collection on display, functions as a mechanism of regulation—albeit one that seeks voluntary acceptance. Within the confines of this spatio-temporal location, the garden is displayed in an artifactual mode that reveals it as a conscious and calculated form of representation. Explicitly,
its rationale is to bolster the First Lady’s anti-obesity campaign, to alleviate the issue of inequitable food access and to promote food sovereignty by investing in local food economies, while more implicitly it speaks to the importance of sustainable ecologies of production. However, what I conclude to be deeply problematic in the symbolism implied by the display and what is evident in the Obamas’ reliance on discourses of individual responsibility and self-improvement is a notable absence of the state’s role in constructing and enforcing policy change. Instead, by organizing the garden display around issues of moral accountability and collective risk, it is the individual who is left with the responsibility to animate change.

Michelle Obama has repeatedly said that government cannot do it all (quoted in Kohan “Yay for Vegetables”). This is a sentiment that I whole-heartedly agree with because the government cannot and should not interfere with an individual’s legal and inalienable agential capacities (especially when it comes to something as personal as food choice). However, there are some things that only the government can do. Substantive food reform will require an infrastructural overhaul of the food system that goes far beyond the capacities of the private citizen or the private sector. As things stand today, the administration is looking to elicit voluntary changes from the food sector. For example, instead of instituting a soda tax to disincentivize the consumption of sugary drinks, the Obama administration is asking beverage companies to voluntarily reformulate the caloric value of their products via non-binding third party initiatives like the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (Kohan “My Fare Lady”). This sensibility towards privatizing public and corporate responsibility is a characteristically neo-liberal technology that seems very out of place in the hands of a center left administration that is overseeing the greatest resurgence of the welfare state since the New Deal. This is especially confounding and a huge disappointment to democratic progressives who voted Obama
into office as a reaction against the excessive privatization and flabby regulatory practices of the previous administration and represents one of the central paradoxes associated with the garden display.

So how does this display of soft policy garner public support? The second chapter of this thesis argues that the White House creates a ‘site of memory’ out of the garden that recalls the mythic associations that Americans collectively share about the idea of the garden. The image of the White House garden is tied to tropes of abundance, fertility, self-reliance, democracy, egalitarianism, utilitarianism and moral accountability. One of the central tendencies that emerges from my examination of the literature on American attitudes on nature is that while there is a deep connection to the pastoral ideal, Americans are equally in love with industrial progress, and the garden is a space where these dialectic opposites collide. My assertion here is that the Obama garden represents a symbolic valuation of the pastoral over the industrial although, as I have shown, this symbolism has no teeth without the backing of public policy.

Notions of responsibility (knowing where your food is coming from), of self-reliance (being able to grow your own food), of making use of the resources that you have available to you: these are the ideas embodied in Jefferson’s agrarian model. Using Monticello as a template, the garden’s narrative takes a page from Jefferson’s philosophic legacy that centers on the figure of the independent yeoman. For Jefferson, the yeoman farmer was the quintessential symbol of American moral fortitude and self-sufficient responsibility, ideals that the White House is championing via the exhibitionary technology of the garden. Additionally, as I have documented, there is a long American tradition of using the garden space not only to teach values and conduct to the young but also to encourage political action. The White House garden is both a pedagogic instrument and a call to action.
It is this pedagogic project that I complicate in my examination of the class politics associated with the garden. In the final chapter of this work, my analysis reveals the garden’s collection to be a product of upper and middle class food values. The food preferences reflected in the variety of vegetables and herbs planted in the garden speak to a cultivated, adventurous and cosmopolitan taste profile that is the product of education and money. So while the garden offers an abstractly egalitarian path to accessing good food it also discounts the fact that not all Americans have the means or the knowhow to grow their own food. This presents yet another contradiction in the White House’s project to reform American food values. While the upper and middle classes can afford the risks of a failed garden investment, those living paycheck to paycheck, cannot. This is especially true for urban poor who face the direst issues of food access and live in food deserts. Of course, if the state were to incentivize gardening (with tax credits and micro loans) the symbolism of the garden would have more significant impact.

In the research and analysis presented here, I hope to have shed light on the some of the political and ideological implications of the White House garden. I would like to close this work by making one final comment about the nature of symbolism, especially political symbolism. Political symbols are powerful signs. They give the public hope, offer guidance, manufacture values and mobilize action. So the symbolism of this garden is not lost on me. As a food studies scholar and more important, as a concerned citizen, I was very encouraged when Mrs. Obama planted the garden because it is a step in the right direction. However, symbols wane over time and lose their luster if they are not buttressed by policies that concretize the values they represent. It is my hope that the Obamas will take advantage of the political capital they have been given to enforce rigorous reform that goes beyond the theoretical.
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“Too Fat To Fight: Retired Military Leaders want junk food out of America’s schools.”


