EAT DIRT: UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT THROUGH THE STORIES OF PHILOSOPHER FARMERS

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ABSTRACT

In her review of James McWilliams’ recent book, Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly, Stephanie Ogburn writes, “One imagines McWilliams, a historian at Texas State University could have written… an examination of the rise of the varied movements of local eating, organic growing, fair trade, and healthy food access.”¹ Although originally pursuing the question of how the local food movement reveals the culture of the Upland South, I discovered instead a profound lack of understanding of the local food movement, in both academic and popular literature. Through personal interviews with local farmers in Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina, I argue that “local food”, as understood through the personal stories of philosopher farmers, is a distinct movement with its own origin story, politics, tastes, and morality, separate from the traditional organic food movement.

To prove this argument, I first describe the transformation of American agriculture from small landowners to large industrial operations (Chapter 1), and how this transformation prompted modern food activism, most successfully that of organic agriculture. This sets the stage for defining the local food movement amidst the variety of possible food

¹ Ogburn, Stephanie. “James McWilliams’ Over-hyped and Undercooked Anti-locavore
paradigms that now exist in the public consciousness. Chapter 2, drawing on prolific farmer and writer Joel Salatin, argues that the local food movement has a specific stance toward government regulation through an examination of local farmer Mike Haigwood’s experience with regulation in Maryland. Using the works of Wendell Berry and an interview with farmer Richard Holcomb, I argue that the local food movement defines its origin story as part of a long history of American agrarians dating back to Thomas Jefferson (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 discusses the movement in the context of actual food choices using interview with a Seth Gross, owner of Bull City Burger, and argues that the values go beyond simply the distance of the ingredients but into the culture and preparation of food as well. The final chapter (5) reveals that the local movement describes spirituality in terms of the farmer's relationship with the soil, and infuses the act of growing food with a deeper morality beyond simple sustainability. By engaging deeply with farmer participants in the local food movement, and locating their philosophies in context of the broad conversation about food and farming in American culture, this thesis effectively brings the specific culture, politics and morality of the local food movement to light.
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**Introduction**

The mad farmer is a writer, teacher, naturalist, and family man.
—James Baker Hall, *The Total Light Process*

“**T**here should be about a pound of beets in each box,” Richard called out to us from across the shed. “**M**aybe five or six potatoes too. Leave the runty ones behind, y’all can bring those home when we’re done.”

We formed a haphazard assembly line, a gaggle of hipster college kids in ill-fitting flannel, packing farm-share boxes in a retrofitted barn and trying to understand where our food comes from. Meryl (my best friend and budding yoga instructor) checked egg cartons for cracks next to me. We had been invited by a friend to volunteer at Coon Rock—a sustainable farm about twenty minutes outside of my hometown, Durham, NC.

I’ve been involved in the food movement since I was eleven. One of the humanities teachers at my “new school” in California assigned *Fast Food Nation* as summer reading, and almost immediately, I told my parents proudly that I was becoming a vegetarian. ³ I like to think

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² Richard Holcomb, interview by author, 2010, Hillsboro, NC.

this proclamation sparked my entire family’s journey into the food movement—my mom probably wouldn’t have gone to Whole Foods were it not for my tofu needs.

Since then, the food movement has grown and changed dramatically. *Organic. All-Natural. Local.* These words have moved out of the fringe co-op and into the mainstream grocery shopping vocabulary. Michael Pollan, a prominent voice who (in some ways) defined the field with *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* that suggested the food movement is a political reality here to stay:

It’s easy to dismiss voting with your fork as merely a lifestyle choice, and an elite one at that. Yet there is a hopeful kind of soft politics at work here, as an afternoon at any of America’s 7,800-plus farmers’ markets will attest… The farmers’ market has become the country’s liveliest new public square, an outlet for our communitarian impulses and a means of escaping, or at least complicating, the narrow role that capitalism usually assigns to us as “consumers.” At the farmers’ market, we are consumers, yes, but at the same time also citizens, neighbors, parents and cooks. In voting with our food dollars, we enlarge our sense of our “interests” from the usual concern with a good value to, well, a concern with values. 

You might notice in his description of this “alternative food chain” that the more common arguments for buying local food—nutrition, environmental concerns, and freshness—are absent. Instead, what emerges instead is a redefinition of political action, of citizenry and community and family values. This development in the food movement struck me as odd; *family values* has been a buzz phrase for Republicans, not east coast vegetarians or hippie farmers. Upon reflection, however, I began to see that my original perception was too simple. The popular

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figures in the food movement, Pollan included, embody multiple perspectives, from writer-gardener Barbara Kingsolver to philosopher-farmer Wendell Berry and even lunatic-farmer Joel Salatin. Their food treatises embody more than just an environmental or health ethic, but span issues of class, religion and democracy. So I wondered; where do these themes come from?

This line of inquiry led me right back to my own backyard. Perhaps because of the beautiful rich soil, Salatin and Kingsolver’s farms are both in Virginia; Berry in neighboring Kentucky. Their regional specificity, along with the intersection of community, libertarian and environmental rhetoric give the impression of a movement that is more than a mere cultural fad; this movement has deep roots. But where did these principles originate? And how did they come together into the local movement we see today? This question requires an investigation of the people who are part of the movement itself; the farmers, consumers, and writers of the local food dialogue. Thus, my research question for the project is:

How does the local food movement in the Upland South, understood through Philosopher Farmers (or philosophies of farming), connect to and reveal the social, economic, religious and political aspects (culture) of the region?

Through this investigation, I hoped to uncover the connection between this new food movement and its roots in the culture of the Upland South. However, as I kept reading and researching I realized this question was too broad. I found a lack of clear delineation within the broad swath of alternative food movements and cultures, and thus the project now seeks to understand one subset of this broader, amorphous cultural soup. Thus my final research question is: What

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characteristics define the local food movement in the Upland South as understood through the stories of philosopher-farmers?

Methodology

In order to answer this question, I scouted farmers that were part of this movement in the greater Washington, DC area, including Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. There were no criteria for selecting interviewees except that they are in some way participating in the local food chain, and willing to participate in an interview.

The interviews occurred on their farms or over the phone, and focused on topics including, but not limited to: their farm or food operation, their connection to the region in which they live, and how food, farming and their identity are connected. I spent a few hours with each individual on their farm or with them in some other capacity (farmers market, CSA pickup) in order to combine their interview with some field observations. I use interview material as well as my own “field notes” about the farmers and their farm to gain a deeper understanding of “all natural” food culture in the Upland South. I then analyzed these interviews in the context of the autobiographical texts as well as the secondary sources I have collected, in an attempt to put these farmers in conversation with the academic writings about them.

To complement this process, I analyzed key works of the local food movement to contextualize the interview responses (these works are based on what my research into the movement suggests is key; see the literature review and footnote 6 for a fuller exploration). I chose Everything I Want to Do is Illegal by Joel Salatin, Animal Vegetable Miracle by Barbara
Kingsolver, *and Bringing it to the Table* by Wendell Berry not because they are exhaustive of the literature available—by no means—but rather as some of the most well known authors and illustrative examples of the dynamics present many other similar texts. I have also included interviews and other popular media articles about these figures to provide greater context for their work. I also surveyed the “anthropological” literature to draw out compelling ideas I could not find in the interviews. These biographical or autobiographical texts are parallel to the processes of self-definition that many small farmers engage in when they connect with their consumers. Marketing a local farm is essentially an act of defining the self.

To conclude this process, I reviewed the interview data from my participants and the defining anthropological literature in the context of academic food studies literature in order to contextualize my data. At the end of this process, I identified key characteristics of the local food movement. Understanding how farmers engage in the process of self-definition illuminates the roots and characteristics of the local food movement in the Upland South.
Literature Review

The main texts that relate to this research fall into three broad categories. The first are foundational texts of the food movement, including *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, *Everything I Want to do is Illegal*, and collected essays by Wendell Berry. Although some of these texts will be analyzed as part of my methodology, they also form an important body of literature within food studies. These texts create the foundational ideologies of the food movement, and they are an equally important non-fiction account of the importance of food and place and culture.

These texts are crucial in providing the “gap” I will seek to fill. Thus far, food studies have dealt mostly with an examination of the current industrial food system, or the role specific foods or cuisines have played in American history. Engagement with these texts has led many—from Alice Waters to Michelle Obama—to reassert the importance of food in our culture, and

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6 The texts I cite directly are included in the bibliography, but they are by no means an exhaustive list of all the literature that informs the local food movement. Some of the oldest works on sustainable farming are still read widely. The *Permaculture* series, by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren are classic texts, along with *The One Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka, *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, and *Farmers of Forty Centuries* by F.H. King.

Other notable books range in depth and scope, and include: *Diet for a Hot Planet* by Anna Lappé, *Eat Here* by Marion Nestle, *An Agricultural Testament* by Vandana Shiva, and countless articles by *New York Times Columnist* Mark Bittman. There are also a host of historical surveys of farming and agriculture that play a part, like *The Coming Famine, Empires of Food, Tomatoland, or Terra Madre*. In a slightly different vein, countless personal back-to-the-land narratives are becoming popular, examples include: *Growing a Farmer: How I Learned to Live Off the Land*, by Kurt Timmermeister, or *The Dirty Life* by Kristen Kimball. And of course there are many, many more. Perhaps another researcher can, in the future, examine the scope and complexity of the emerging “foodies” literature tradition.

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some have even returned to farming themselves. With this project I seek to turn the food studies lens inward and examine the roots and influence of sustainable farming itself.

The second group of texts that inform my thesis is the group of academic food scholars that deal with food studies anthropologically or critically. The food studies field is a relatively recent development within American Studies, pioneered by Warren J. Belasco with *Food; Key Concepts* and Sidney Mintz with *Sweetness and Power* in the late 1990s. Since these foundational texts were published, food studies literature has grown in many different directions. Many anthropological studies of food often focus on region or ethnicity, follow the history of a specific food, or analyze the role of food within a particular time period. Examples of this phenomenon include *Salt* by Mark Kurlansky, *Pumpkin* by Cindy Ott, *Republic of Barbecue* by Elizabeth Engelhardt, *White Bread* by Aaron Bobrow-Strain, and *Tomatoland*, by Barry Estabrook. Other scholars have written historical surveys or contemporary accounts of American eating as a whole, and these range from scholarly in tone to move overtly critical of industrial agriculture. They include *The End of Food* by Paul Roberts, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* by Harvey Levenstein and *Eating History: Thirty Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine* by Andrew F. Smith. However, few works analyze the culture of the sustainable food movement directly. I hope to contribute to this nascent field by turning the critical food studies lens inward on the food culture it has produced in a particular, defining region.

To narrow the focus of this thesis, I incorporated academic writing on Southern cultural difference to bracket the culture of the farmers I interviewed, because the project does focus on
the Upland South. Studies of southern culture are well established, and as such, I will not try to incorporate the entire field of Appalachian history and anthropology but instead focus solely on those works that deal specifically with environmental or culinary folkways. This focus will build on previous studies of Appalachian and Southern culture, specifically John B Rehder’s *Appalachian Folkways*. By connecting folk culture in the South with the modern food movement, my work will complement Elizabeth Engelhardt’s *A Mess of Greens*, which explores food and gender in the South specifically. It also speaks to paradigms of class, work, and virtue in food production.

There are a few select works situated between food studies and cultural anthropology; these are close contemporaries to my thesis. These works combine a historical or cultural perspective with the study of food generally to analyze some of these counter culture movements. Lisa Hamilton’s book, *Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness*, is one inspirational work; she follows three alternative farmers, each engaged in a different aspect of the food counter culture.⁷ Similarly, Sandor Ellix Katz, well-known fermentation revivalist, recently wrote *The Revolution Will Not Be Microwaved*, is another survey of alternative growing and eating practices that “resist the dominant system.”⁸ Rod Dreher’s *Crunchy Conservatives* argues that a variety of alternative gardeners, farmers, and food

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movement participants are actually the future of the Republican Party.9 These texts, while similar to my project, all give examples of activist behavior across different movements, rather than a deep examination of one specific subculture. My thesis engages with these texts by confirming or challenging their analyses of alternative food cultures, and adds to the conversation by providing a rich description of the local farming movement based on interviews with participants.

I envision my project drawing the connection between these main groups of literature, while adding an analysis of the subculture of local farmers and food participants. My paper will situate the local food philosophers within the broader context of cultural food studies. In this way, my thesis can create a bridge between these various fields, and add to the complexity of each. My thesis adds to the conversation by defining one specific segment of this subculture and revealing how participants in that culture define themselves in relation to the national conversation.

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9Rod Dreher, Crunchy Cons: how birkenstocked burkeans, gun-loving organic gardeners, evangelical free-range farmers, hip homeschooling mamas, right-wing nature lovers, and their diverse tribe of countercultural conservatives plan to save America (or at least the Republican Party). (New York: Crown Forum, 2006).; In addition, Dreher’s interview with Michael Pollan informs Chapter 3.; Michael Pollan, “Interview with Rod Dreher,” The American Conservative, June 20, 2008
Thesis Statement

The initial complexities of the rhetoric surrounding the local food movement are only deepened and complicated by my further research. During my research process, I read a recently published book by historian James McWilliams called *Just Food; Where Locavores Get it Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*. McWilliams, who’s earlier work, *A Revolution in Eating*, also informs this thesis, raises some real and profound challenges to the prescription to “eat local,” but does so without a thorough investigation of what local food really is. As Stephanie Ogburn reviewed, “McWilliams reduces the message of the food movement to a simple prescription—eat local—and proceeds to debunk it. Yet it’s hard to believe any thoughtful person could imagine that eating locally would address this multitude of issues…. What McWilliams seems to miss is that these purchasing choices don’t make people fundamentalist locavores or organic purists”¹⁰ I would argue however, that this oversimplification is hardly McWilliam’s fault; rather the smorgasbord of food treatises lining the shelves of Barnes and Noble’s leave many confused about what each food movement really advocates. Over the course of my research, I read many articles, books, and even took part in conversations where the words “local” and “organic” were joined, representing some hybrid, truncated mash up of food philosophies and cultures that are in reality quite distinct. If the farmers selling tomatoes at a farm stand are not “Organic purists,” or “local/organic” farmers, what are they? This question illustrates where the farmer stories from my interviews can provide real clarity. What this

reflects is a real need for a description of what is going on within these many food movements before authors like McWilliams can compare and analyze them. My thesis fills this gap by providing characterization of and context to one specific segment—local farming—of the varied food movement, and using the personal stories of farmers to gain deeper cultural insights.

Not only do local farmers engage with the political and philosophical dialogue happening on a national level, they do so by tapping into a foundation of longstanding agrarian political values held within southern culture. This blend of old and new, progressive and conservative, within farmer philosophies create a hybrid movement that resists classification as either politically left or right. In this thesis I will argue that “local food”, as understood through the personal stories of philosopher farmers, is a distinct movement with its own origin story, politics, tastes, and morality that separate it from the traditional organic food movement.

First, local farmers define their relationship to government differently than other groups—liberal or otherwise—within the American political sphere. Local farmers are distrustful of bureaucracy and federal farm policy, and prefer less regulation of food production; although these views vary from overtly libertarian to favoring more modest reform. Second, local farmers define the origin story of their movement differently than the broader organic movement, or environmentalism generally. Rather, local farmers see themselves as participating in a long history of American agrarianism dating all the way back to the “citizen farmer” of Thomas Jefferson, and they enact this origin story by emphasizing the specific history of the place where they farm. Third, local food culture enacts this history with a specific “taste” that prefers
culturally “American” or “wholesome” foods in contrast to a more globalized cuisine. While many local food purchasers overlap with “east coast urban/elite” culture, local farmers and their customers praise “populist” food and food preparation. Finally, local farming has its own morality separate from the typical environmental conservation ethic. While many tout the environmental and health benefits of local food, farming locally is a value statement about communion and intimacy with nature that goes beyond the basic carbon-footprint or health-benefits analysis. These four aspects of the movement combine to create a deep and complex movement that the word “local” has a difficult time encompassing.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Overview}

To prove this argument, I first describe the transformation of American agriculture from small landowners to large industrial operations (Chapter 1), and how this transformation prompted modern food activism, most successfully that of organic agriculture. The rising profile of food activism, however, created space for a flowering of other food paradigms in American society—from Fair Trade to Slow Food—and everything in between. This sets the stage for defining the local food movement amidst the variety of possible food paradigms that now exist in the public consciousness. In Chapter 2, drawing on the writings of popular farmer Joel Salatin, I argue that the local food movement has a specific stance toward government regulation, exemplified by an examination of local farmer Mike Haigwood’s experience with milk

\textsuperscript{11} One participant I interviewed, Mike Haigwood, suggested the word “resilient” as an alternative to “local,” to better encompass the fullness and dynamism of the movement.
regulation in Maryland. In Chapter 3, I compare my experience with Richard Holcomb to the author and farmer Wendell Berry in order to argue that the local food movement defines its origin story as part of a long history of American agrarianism, in contrast to organic food that locates its history in global environmentalism. I use Chapter 4 to discuss the food movement in the context of actual food choices based on an interview with a Seth Gross, owner of Bull City Burger and Brewery. I argue that the values of the local food movement go beyond simply the distance of the ingredients but into the culture and preparation of food as well. Finally, my discussions with vegetable farmer Zach Lester reveal that the local movement describes morality in terms of the farmer's relationship with the soil, and infuses the act of growing food with a deeper morality beyond simple sustainability (Chapter 5).

I conclude that, contrary to prevailing public opinion (which is muddled at best) the local food movement is an independent movement with its own origin story, political and moral values, and culture of taste, as relayed to me by a small subset of local food participants. By engaging deeply with farmer participants in the local food movement, and locating their philosophies in context of the broad discussion of alternative food, I aim to bring the specific culture, politics and morality of the local food movement to light.
Chapter I: New Normal

To be sane in a mad time is bad for the brain, worse for the heart.
—Wendell Berry, *The Mad Farmer Poems*

Before we can delve into the specifics of the local food movement, the genesis and growth of the broader food movement in American society requires some explanation. Like any cultural movement, the local food movement exists among other contemporary movements, and comes out of historically and culturally specific circumstances. Generally, this context could be characterized as a rapid and fundamental reorganization of the American (and to some extent, global) farm and diet in the twentieth century.

While the trend towards consolidation and commercialization of American farming was present since the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, these trends became more accelerated and pronounced in the aftermath of World War I. A USDA report explains,

Farms [before WWII] employed close to half of the U.S. workforce, along with 22 million work animals, and produced an average of five different commodities. The agricultural sector of the 21st century, on the other hand, is concentrated on a small number of large, specialized farms in rural areas where less than a fourth of the U.S. population lives.¹²

Mechanization of farm operations and growths in efficiency largely fueled this trend. In 1900, 41 percent of the workforce was engaged in agriculture, compared with only 1.9 percent in 2000.\textsuperscript{13} For many Americans, the word “farmer,” conjures up an image of a family or multifamily operation, where the farmer is engaged in the workings of his farm, producing multiple commodities and feeding his own family off their farm labors. As the census data show, this is a closer approximation of farming one hundred years ago that it is to today. The industrialization of agriculture in the twentieth century has largely been an invisible process (at least to the average consumer) driven by a combination of more efficient agricultural technology and government support.\textsuperscript{14}

Many modern food scholars use the transformation of the American farm landscape as part of an argument that we must “return to” some idyllic past. Part of this comes from a real perception that the years before World War I (1900-1914) were a “golden age” for American agriculture. At that time, farm incomes were high and rising, and commodity prices were stable.

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\textsuperscript{14} Since 1900, the number of farms has fallen by 63 percent, while the average farm size has risen 67 percent. Farm operations have become increasingly specialized as well (fig. 4)—from an average of about five commodities per farm in 1900 to about one per farm in 2000—reflecting the production and marketing efficiencies gained by concentration on fewer commodities, as well as the effects of farm price and income policies that have reduced the risk of depending on returns from only one or a few crops.
Since then, the average size of the American Farm has increased dramatically, and the percentage of labor engaged in agriculture has dropped off as significantly. The recognition of the dramatic centralization and industrialization of American farming is generally the backbone of the modern food movements. However, it is not just the consolidation of farms and movement away from agricultural labor that food activists identify as problematic. The growth in farm size was part of, and in some ways a direct result, of the total application of the paradigm of the industrial revolution to agriculture.

Industrial scale farms, exemplified by Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) but also including grain and vegetable production, emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea was to streamline and mechanize food production by separating each species into its own production line—separating animal from plant and then growing both on a mass scale, this line of thinking essentially transformed the American farm into an automated food factory. Food activists, including Wendell Berry, Eric Schlosser, and Jonathan Safran Foer, identify this separation of plant and animal as the illogical step that required the now widely publicized horrors of the meat industry. It is not easy to raise cattle, or chickens or hogs, in confined industrial warehouses, and doing so while turning a profit requires a steady supply of hormones, steroids, and antibiotics to do so. These conditions, along with the massive amounts of waste


16 Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation.*
created from feeding operations have been a rallying cry for environmentalists and animal rights activists for decades. The plight of industrialized vegetables is less popular, although their method of production has been similarly transformed.

Removing animals from farms means plants lack the nutrients they previously received from livestock manure and this had to be replaced (although only partly) through industrial fertilizer. Application of manure, like all nutrients, can be too sparse, in excess, or just right. The argument of many in the alternative farming community argue that removing animal waste from the cycle of growing vegetables is the cause of its perceived toxicity.\(^{17}\) Thus, as meat production moved off the pasture and into the CAFO, fruit and vegetable farmers had to purchase more and more chemical fertilizer. The forces of commoditization, centralization and mechanization increase the pressure to consolidate farmland, decrease variety, and increase chemical use in a self-perpetuating cycle. The illogic of this system is poignantly expressed by none other than Wendell Berry, who wrote, “Once plants and animals were raised together on the same farm—which therefore neither produced unmanageable surpluses of manure, nor depended on such quantities of commercial fertilizer. The genius of American farm experts is very well demonstrated here: they can take a solution and neatly divide it into two problems.”\(^{18}\)

Prominent writer and farmer Joel Salatin echoes this sentiment, revealing the way that both local and organic farmers have reacted to the rise of industrial agriculture with their farming

\(^{17}\) Rudy, “Locavores”, 27.

techniques. “…Joel Salatin, hero of the new local food movement, [is] feted for his ingenious chemical free farming methods and admired for his outspoken articulacy on the horrors of industrial food.” In interview with the Guardian in 2010, Salatin said, “In the 1970’s the top five beef packers controlled 25% of the market; now the top four control more than 80%--meaning that if ever meat is tainted by bacteria or chemicals it has the potential to reach vast numbers of people.”

Like Salatin, many in the local food movement view this centralized system more than just undesirable, but fundamentally dangerous, as evidenced by bacteria outbreaks that result in meat recalls across the country.

Aside from the CAFO, the most prominent example of the complete revolution in American agriculture is a specific product foodies love to hate—Roundup Ready Soybeans. I will try not to engage in excessive proselytizing; but even a committed industrialist could not deny that Roundup represents a culmination of many trends in industrial American agriculture. Roundup Ready Soybeans are genetically modified seeds produced by the corporation Monsanto. These soybeans (soybeans have become a dominant agricultural commodity in the United States due in part to increased demand for animal feed for CAFOs) are hugely popular for large soya farmers, particularly in the middle of the country, because they have been genetically modified to

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resist Monsanto’s own pesticide, Roundup. This means fields planted with Roundup Ready seeds can be sprayed indiscriminately and without abandon without harming the soy crop. Depending on whom you ask, this is either a revolutionary breakthrough for agricultural production or a hellish anathema to the laws of Mother Nature. Less charged however, many environmental advocates identify seeds like roundup as exacerbating problems of fertilizer runoff, soil erosion, and escalating pesticide resistance.\(^{21}\)

Monsanto is not an anomaly in this market however; it is the pinnacle of a long move toward the scientific ‘enhancement’ of agricultural processes, dating back to the mid twentieth century.\(^{22}\) Pioneered by the bioengineer Norman Borlaug (famously known for his Nobel Peace Prize for major contributions to the Green Revolution), agriculture—and seed breeding specifically—became increasingly scientific. The “Green Revolution” as we know it was actually a series of genetic breeding advancements that created a variety of wheat and corn crops that increased yields, had a shorter germination time, and devoted less energy to unneeded stalks, all allowing for more production per acre or farm, although often with the necessary addition of fertilizers, irrigation, plowing and pesticides. Concurrently, the problem of fixing nitrogen—one of the main nutrients plants require—became unchained to its natural limits with the application of the energy-intensive Haber Bosch process to agricultural uses. This technology was, with

\(^{21}\) This was most popularly seen with Robert Kenner’s documentary *Food Inc.* (2008), featuring Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser.

\(^{22}\) Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 1996
ironic symbolism, developed for weaponry during World War 1. Haber and Bosch were both later awarded Nobel Prizes.  

The Green Revolution varieties of rice and wheat, used widely in the United States, Mexico, India and Sub Saharan Africa, caused high increases in agricultural productivity—but as Pollan and others would argue—these technologies came with a price. Many critics of the industrial agriculture system argue the doctrine of the Green Revolution, wholly adopted by American farmers, is the cause of our cultural shallow connection with food, and the physical destruction of the environment, pollution of rivers and loss of topsoil.

It is no surprise then that in the cultural upheaval of the 1960s industrial agriculture also came under direct critique. Rising awareness of environmental pollution, spurred by the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, combined with knowledge of global hunger and inequality and the role of food in perpetuating these harms led to early food movement books like Francis Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971). The tales told in these food surveys now sound familiar. They argued: “the industrialization of food production, the continuing emphasis on livestock farming, corporate greed, capitalist consumerism, colonialism, world debt—which add together to create parallel situations of overabundance and life-threatening

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scarcity.”

Overabundance at home was not free from review; many food activists and scientists connect the health crisis in America with a similar food criticism. An overabundance of highly processed, simple carbohydrates, sugars and fats is fueling America’s obesity epidemic on the consumer side and exacerbating environmental destruction on the producer end.

The American organic movement grew out of these critiques, and succeeded in 1990 to pass the Organic Foods Production Act, which provides for the National Organic Program to be administered by the USDA. This act sets up the minimum standards for organic production and accreditation. However, the origin story of organic agriculture is especially interesting because it can illuminate some of the tensions between the local movement and the organic movement. Sir Albert Howard, an early 20th century English botanist, is claimed as a primogenitor by both the organic movement and local food pioneers like Wendell Berry. Howard is widely regarded as the founder of organic agriculture in the western world; his most seminal works, *An Agricultural Testament* (1940) and *The Soil and Health* (1947) pioneered the organic movement, first in

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24 David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming geographies: We Are Where We Eat*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 195.


England and then later in the United States. Based off his travels in India and observation of their farming techniques, Howard developed many organic composting and fertilizing practices. His work spawned multiple organic farming organizations, notably the Soil Association in the UK and The Rodale Institute (named after J.I. Rodale, author and proponent of sustainable agriculture) in the United States.

However, shared praise for An Agricultural Testament does not necessarily unite the local and organic food movements—quite the contrary. Wendell Berry, despite calling himself a lifelong scholar of Sir Albert Howard thinks his work has been “seriously oversimplified” in modern incarnations of organic agriculture. Berry writes (in couched terms): “As it was prescribed, organic agriculture improved the health of crops by building humus in the soil, and it abstained from the use of toxic chemicals… but it does not go far enough. It does not conceive of farms in terms of their biological and economic structure, because it does not connect farming with its ecological and social contexts.” The subtext of this critique is, naturally, that Berry’s conception of farming is richer than the current understanding of organic, and he is therefore a


29 Berry, Bringing It to the Table, 163..

30 Ibid., 162-163.
better steward of Howard’s fundamental ideals. And furthermore, Berry argues that the way organic is implemented currently distorts these principles. He continues, “Under the current and now official definition of organic farming, it is possible to have huge ‘organic’ farms that grow only one or two crops, has no animals or pastures, is entirely dependent on industrial technology and economics, and imports all its fertility and energy. It was precisely this sort of specialization and oversimplification that Sir Albert Howard worked and wrote against all his life.”31

Few things exemplify this transition from principle to practice than the current state of organic farming in America. From the perspective of local food participants, there is a breakdown between what the organic label actually signifies and what consumers might believe it signifies. Organic farms do not have to be "small" by industry standards nor do they have to be family owned, humane, low-carbon, environmentally sustainable, or produce more healthful food. Organic standards limit chemical inputs; they do not regulate farm size or diversification, labor standards, or transportation distance.

Similar to the evolution of conventional agriculture, as the industry has grown organic farming has become increasingly consolidated. Large “conventional” food corporations own most of the biggest organic brands in America. Horizon Organic is owned by Dean Foods, General Mills owns Muir Glen and Cascadian Farms and Larabar, Coca-Cola owns Odwalla and Honest Tea.32 Few local food participants—farmers or eaters—would identify Dean Foods as a

31 Ibid., 163
small farmer that embodies the values of the original push for more sustainable food, yet the
success of the “organic” label has allowed for a proliferation organic brands, and the industry
capitalization on those brands as well.

The cultural acceptance and success of organic has allowed for the proliferation of more,
and more diverse, food movements. Emphasizing the “local” aspect of food is one of those
iterations—but not the only one. Alongside the rise of organic farming, Free Trade certification
has also become widespread, the Slow Food movement (originating in Italy) has grown
substantially in the United States, and a variety of nutritional activisms based on natural food
principles have all taken root in American culture.33 The local food movement exists within this
broad swath of food philosophies, and thus begs definition and characterization in relation to the
broader national conversation about food and farming.

32 Stephanie Strom, “Uneasy Allies is the Grocery Aisle”, New York Times, September
13, 2012

33 “The Food Movement Rising” provides a good sense of this diversity and growth, as
well as the piece in Time Magazine by Bryan Walsh that explores what the dynamism of food
groups means for environmentalism; Bryan Walsh, “Foodies Can Eclipse (and Save) the Green Movement” Time Magazine, February
15, 2011 http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,2049255,00.html#ixzz2RhT3PVdL
Chapter 2: Local Politics

Not only is there not government support for what we do, there is a profound antagonism at every level for what we do.

—Joel Salatin, Interview

Early one morning in February, I drove out the southeastern side of the Washington, and found myself on an open Maryland highway, blasting my country music. When we spoke on the phone, Mike Haigwood told me that his farm is the “big red barn on the right” which is, surprisingly, correct. When I arrive I walk through what appears to be a back door with a sign that says “farm store; open 24/7!” and find myself, alone, in a combination meat freezer and bookstand. They have a collection of holistic farming and cooking books, jars of local honey, alpaca blankets from the farm next door and a variety of cow-themed artwork for sale. A young woman in sturdy work boots is at the cash register helping an older gentleman purchase some bacon. When Mike comes out of the back, he sports a thick graying mustache and wide brimmed hat, jeans and, to my surprise, bright blue crocs (these, I learn, are worn during cheese processing because they are easy to sanitize). He changes shoes, and starts explaining to me how the farm we’re standing on came to be.

Mike runs a small farm called PA Bowen Farmstead, owned by Sally Fallon Morel, the co-founder and director of the Weston A. Price foundation, a non-profit dedicated to “restoring
nutrient-dense foods to the American diet through education, research and activism.” The farm primarily produces pasture-raised beef, pork and chicken, cheese and some eggs and vegetables. Mike manages the farm for Sally, and follows a model of rotational grazing, what Mike calls “working with the natural systems, not against them.” He believes in taking old ideas and making them work for a modern situation, but also takes account of the practices of his Amish neighbors.

The first place we walk through on my tour of the farm is the cow pen—where the cows are milked. Mike explains that unlike most farms, they are a “seasonal dairy”, meaning they do not always have cows continuously being milked but rather they keep them all on the same cycle of giving milk, having calves, and grazing in the winter. They also have slightly different milking machinery, he explained, in order not to break up chains of fats in the milk that can be disturbed by vigorous churning. Everything they do on this farm is based on or inspired by the Weston A. Price Foundation’s research.

What does this have to do with politics, one might ask? The answer is in the cheese Mike produces. In Maryland, it is illegal to sell raw or unpasteurized dairy products, and PA Bowen Farmstead is one of only a few producers that are allowed to sell it off the farm as part of a special pilot program. Almost half of all states in the U.S. ban the sale of raw milk outright;

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others have a variety of permits and regulations regarding the sale of raw milk. The Weston A. Price foundation is committed to educating consumers about the health benefits of raw milk, spreading awareness through an outreach program called the “campaign for real milk.” Because of its contraband status in Maryland however, Mike turns one hundred percent of their milk into cheese because the “liquid gold” is still banned. He said, “Sally would rather sell the farm than sell pasteurized milk. It goes against everything we believe in.”

Raw milk is one of many food safety regulations with which local farmers take issue. In contrast to the general perception of “foodies” many participants in the local food movement are not traditional liberals. For a variety of reasons, including the move away from environmentalism by the Republican Party, the entire food movement has been seen as aligned with the left side of American politics. And while the mainstream perception of the movement is that it belongs—politically and culturally—on the left, this is largely a misconception. With the growing acceptance of organic and other “sustainable foods” a distinction between the different food paradigms within this subculture has been largely lost. Political misappropriation is part of that. Although both local and Organic farms are committed to producing food that is


37 Mike Haigwood, interview with author, February 2, 2013, Brandywine, MD.

better (both for your health and the environment, from their individual perspectives), the local farming community has a very different relationship to government regulation than that of the Organic food movement. Local farmers, in general, are more suspicious of government regulation, specifically in the case of dairy and meat processing. Farmers think that agricultural subsidies, sanitation laws, and regulation work against their values and way of life in almost every possible way. Conservative writers are now discovering the aspects of the food movement that are more libertarian in nature, and are encouraging the American right to reconnect with local farmers.

Rod Dreher, a columnist for the *Dallas Morning News* and the *American Conservative*, has written extensively on what he calls “granola conservatives” and may be one of the first authors to take a serious look at this group from the perspective of conservative politics, although others have since followed suit. His book, *Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, Gun-Loving Organic Gardeners, Evangelical Free-Range Farmers, Hip Homeschooling Mamas, Right-Wing Nature Lovers, and Their Diverse Tribe of Countercultural Conservatives Plan to Save America (or At Least the Republican Party)*, has a title that says it all. But the book goes on to describe the cultural contradictions in ‘local food’, and shows how it occupies both left and right. The publisher description of the book states:

When a colleague teased writer Dreher about his visit to the "lefty" local food co-op, he started thinking about the ways he and his conservative family lived that put them outside the bounds of conventional Republican politics. Shortly thereafter, Dreher wrote an essay

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about "crunchy cons," people whose "Small Is Beautiful" style of conservative politics often put them at odds with GOP orthodoxy. Dreher was deluged by e-mails from conservatives across America saying "Hey, me too!" At a time when the Republican party, and the conservative movement in general, is bitterly divided over what it means to be a conservative, Dreher introduces us to people who are pioneering a way back to the future by reclaiming what they feel is best in conservatism.40

The Republican identity crisis of the last four years has opened up the possibility of recognizing the conservative elements of the food movement by Republican or overtly libertarian writers.41 In some cases, conservative voices are using the local food movement as a vehicle to return their party to a “simpler,” “smaller” government party.

A new conservative digital magazine, The Front Porch Republic, also takes the local food group as a serious participant in the definition of the conservative polity. With former Georgetown University professor Patrick Deneen as one of the founders, the magazine’s “about page” states,

The economic crisis that emerged in late 2008 and the predictable responses it elicited from those in power has served to highlight the extent to which concepts such as human scale, the distribution of power, and our responsibility to the future have been eliminated from the public conversation. It also threatens to worsen the political and economic centralization and atomization that have accompanied the century-long unholy marriage between consumer capitalism and the modern bureaucratic state.42


The Front Porch Republic often uses Wendell Berry as an exemplary figure of the move away from capitalism. This critique of the ‘power’ structure coming from the right, rather than the left, is not new. Libertarian strains have always found a home on both sides of the political spectrum. The difference now is that food activists—and local farmers—are being adopted by the right wing where they previously were viewed as part of the “lefty” culture. Writing in the *Wilson Quarterly*, farmer and author Blake Hurst explained, "Once the province of Birkenstock-wearing '60s Berkeley burnouts, organic food has now hit the big time, and even a subset of political conservatives has staked out a position as "crunchy-cons," emphasizing the traditional over the modern in food production as well as social and economic policy."

This supports Dreher’s view that the values represented by local farmers are deeply, and more truly conservative, and yet they have been left out of the national conversation. He writes, "The midcentury conservative theorists who advanced a more family-oriented, communitarian politics, T.S Eliot, Russell Kirk, Eric Voegelin, the Southern Agrarians—have been given little or no voice in the contemporary Republican Party."44

Of course, this is never the whole story. It would be too simple to classify every local farmer as a Republican. However, there is overlap between conservative and not so conservative elements. Local farmers often identify with a combination of left leaning (community centered, anti-business) and right-wing (anti government, rural) political values exemplified by their

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44 Dreher, *Crunchy Conservatives*, 191.
relationship to food regulation. Barbara Kingsolver, food writer who has moved from and between urban and rural communities, describes how our narrow political thinking obscures the complexities of this kind of viewpoint:

Symptomatic of this rural-urban identity crisis is our eager embrace of a recently imposed divide: the red states and the blue states. That color map comes to us with the suggestion that both coasts are populated by educated civil libertarians, while the vast middle and south are crisscrossed with the studded tracks of ATVs leaving a trail of flying beer cans and rebel yells. Okay, I'm exaggerating a little. But I certainly sense that when urban friends ask me how I can stand living here, "so far from everything."  

Like Kingsolver, Dreher understands that cultural signifiers are often combined with, and inform political persuasions. He identifies his brand of crunchy conservatism as one that goes deeper than our current red-blue divide, but rather connects authors like Berry to the philosophical tradition of “orthodox conservatism.” He conjectures, “G.K Chesterton wrote that we come from the earth and we return to the earth, and when we forget this, we are lost; but do you think he would be voting for Democrats if he were alive today?”

One of the most prominent philosopher farmers—Joel Salatin—is expressly against government regulation. Salatin argues that government regulation of agriculture is akin to asking the fox to guard the sheep. The same system that created the industrial agriculture problem to begin with is now in charge of producing good food. Organic labeling just regulates pesticides to

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46 Dreher, *Crunchy Cons*, 176.
the lowest common denominator, but does not challenge the broader distribution networks, the intertwining of food and energy industries, or the bureaucratic over centralization of government that is stifling life in America. Rather, the organic label allows consumers to feel better about their participation in such a system, without really knowing anything about their food. This is why Joel Salatin prefers to describe his methods as “beyond organic,” because they challenge the system of agriculture more fundamentally. As journalist Todd Purdum described, “Salatin’s approach is deceptively simple, relying on age-old precepts of organic agriculture, up-to-the-minute technology and, most of all, ingenuity. He eschews the government’s seal of approval, because he distrusts the bureaucracy and distains the large-scale officially ‘organic’ farms that he said have compromised the movement’s values in favor of mass production.”

This is why, as Mike explains, the words we use to talk about this are so important—he thinks the word “local” has outpaced “organic.” “Organic was wonderful at the beginning,” he says, “but it represents a microcosm of the larger issue.” He thinks that issue is that third parties distort our values and allows for disconnect between the sources and consumers of food. So that the consumer doesn’t “experience the scratching of a cow’s ear,” like I did, and like the many people who purchase cheese from Mike are able to do. “That experience has influence,” he says, “but the USDA has hijacked that experience, sabotaged organic standards,” meaning that a regulator can sign off on a method of organic production without being any closer to the


48 Mike Haigwood, interview with author.
land or the process than your average consumer—or industrial producer. He continues, “Certification is only as good as the person who signs off on it.” Mike thinks you can tell a lot by how the farmer himself eats. If they believe in their project, he believes, they’ll eat what they produce. This, to Mike, is the representation of those who are in it for marketing over the philosophy. “If they buy groceries like everyone else, there’s no philosophy. He thinks the Organic movement hits a threshold of growth; it was exponential in the beginning, but not anymore. He says in the beginning, organic was a “fad term”—and it used to “separate people into classes.”

Mike likes to answer my questions with “a for-instance.” He says, “Let me give you another for-instance. There was a study published recently by Stanford claiming ‘Organic Food Not Healthier than Conventional’ that everyone went crazy over, but “why be divisive?” Mike asks. “Why defend conventional agriculture? The average age of farmers is over fifty-five. If your average age is over fifty-five, you’re a dying industry. Local farming is the only one that is attracting young farmers.” And this kind of farming is appealing to a variety of people within the broader food subculture. He says that many vegetarians and vegans have come to their farm, and having seen their practices and decide to eat the meat Mike produces. “Wow, they say. This farm equals: wow.” Mike doesn’t see why they don’t find common ground and unite against the forces of conventional agriculture. He shrugs and says, “I think it’s a forest for the trees thing.”

49 Mike Haigwood, interview with author.
“Do the people at Whole Foods really care? Are they connected?” Mike thinks it’s better that “city people” are at least beginning to question where their food comes from, and books like Michael Pollan’s help by bringing broader awareness to the issues. Wendell Berry’s writings provide insight on this political breakdown between organic and local. He writes,

If, for instance, one is aware of the abuses and extortions to which one is subjected as a modern consumer, then one may join an organization of consumers to lobby for consumer protection legislation. But in joining a consumer organization, one defines oneself as a consumer *merely*, and a mere consumer is by definition dependent on the manufacturer and the salesman. If the organization secures the legislation, then the consumer becomes dependent not only on the manufacturer and salesman, but of the agency that enforces the law, and is at its mercy as well. 50

This consumer-advocate mentality is precisely the model under which USDA Organic certification operates. The local food movement’s view this as a small band-aid over a much more pervasive issue, and ignores the fundamental problem with the organization of American agriculture broadly. Berry writes, with serious distrust of government regulators, “How are consumers protected by a system that puts more and more miles, middlemen and agencies between them and the producers? Does the concentration of production in the hands of fewer and fewer big operators really serve the ends of cleanliness and health? Or does it make it easier and more lucrative the possibility of collusion between irresponsible producers and corrupt inspectors?” 51

50 Berry, *Bringing it to the Table*, 23.

51 Ibid., 84-5.
This distrust of government regulation is not just small-government radicalism, but comes from a lifetime of experience running a small farm that continually clashes with administrators and government officials, irrespective of the overt distaste the government has for the farm operations of these small producers.\(^{52}\) Berry writes, “The concept of food as a weapon is not surprisingly the doctrine of a Department of Agriculture …This militarizing of food is the greatest threat so far raised against the farmland and the farm communities of this country.”\(^{53}\) Local farmers, like Berry and Salatin, view themselves as part of something much larger and more important than partisan divides. Salatin says, “If everybody started doing the kind of farming we do, it would completely invert and realign all of the food-system power economic structure in the world. We’re looking at a cultural revolution—that’s what this is.”\(^{54}\)

Part of this antagonism comes from a serious disagreement between the local food movement and government agencies over what precisely needs to be regulated. Washing eggs, pasteurizing milk, or processing animals indoors are requirements that seem, so a city-person like myself—reasonable, or at least harmless requirements. But where I might see a harmless provision, writers like Berry see a lack of common sense, or experience on a small farm. He writes, “The greatest destroyer of the small economies of small farms has been the doctrine of


\(^{53}\) Berry, The Unsettling of America, 9.

\(^{54}\) Wood, “Interview: Salatin”.

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Similarly, Joel Salatin has argued that processing chickens inside would require a huge expense, while making it more difficult to sanitize their workspace. As a result, something he has cared and attended to for the whole process gets sent off-farm for processing because of an illogical food regulation.

Salatin himself makes no secret of his feelings about the agribusiness bureaucracy: he hates it. He bemoans the fact that federal meat-processing regulations force him to send his cattle and hogs to commercial locker-plants and thus surrender control over the final stage of a process throughout which he has tended them with such care. At a time when homeland-security experts are warning about the vulnerabilities of a food-supply system based on large-scale production, centralized processing and long-distance transportation, he complains that politicians on both sides call only for ‘more centralization.’

Barbara Kingsolver also describes the illogical nature of the farm bill. She writes, “a government policy that advises us to eat more fruits and vegetables, while doling out subsidies not to fruit and vegetable farmers, but to commodity crops destined to become soda pop and cheap burgers. The Farm Bill…could aptly be called the Farm Kill, both for its effects on small farmers and for what it does to us.” These writers acutely capture the sentiment of the local food movement. Barbara Kingsolver continues, explaining that our doctrine of sanitation, from the perspective of those who work on small farms, is upside down:


56 Wood, “Interview: Salatin.”

We may not like thinking about it, but germs crawl eternally over every speck of our planet. …What keeps us healthy is an informed coexistence with microbes, rather than the micro-genocide that seems to be the rage lately. Germophobic parents can now buy kids’ dinnerware, placemats, even clothing imbedded with antimicrobial chemicals. Anything that will stand still, if we mean to eat it, we shoot full of antibiotics. And yet, more than 5,000 people in the United States die each year from pathogens in our food. Sterility is obviously the wrong goal, especially as a substitute for careful work.\textsuperscript{58}

This sentiment is widely shared in the local food movement. Richard Holcomb, another participant in this project, recently opened a new business, Bella Bean Organics, a home delivery service for both organic and local groceries. He says his customers prefer local first, because they trust his judgment. Then if they can’t get something locally customers will buy organic as a second-level means of certification (for example, bananas). He sees a demand from people for better food that is also based in the local community. But despite this demand, there still isn’t a lot of support from the government for this type of production. Richard sees a combination of support for industrial agriculture through subsidies, and federal food safety regulation that discourages local farmers like him. He explains how the Food Safety Modernization Act (2011) proposed regulation of vegetables under FDA, which would not be as big of a burden for Dole or Delmote, but $300 in regulatory costs is a lot of money for a small vegetable farmer. He says, for example, raw milk is outlawed, but there is a huge demand for it. There are stupid rules about eggs—and there is a growing illegal supply. Richard says people still buy “conventional,”—feed lots and sick cows—but not out of preference. He said, “It’s a bad product because there is no competition; it is often the only product available. All of these rules make no sense except from

\textsuperscript{58} Kingsolver, \textit{Animal Vegetable Miracle}, 136.
the perspective of preventing competition in the food supply.” He talks about government food regulation with a level of distrust that echoes Salatin, “These are the same people that promoted DDT. The government says its “good for you,” so that makes it okay?”

Like Richard, Mike grew up on a farm. He and his wife had a farm in Iowa before moving to Maryland, but it was a smaller scale, more of a homestead. And Mike said they were basically bootlegging raw milk off the back of their truck. But at that time there just weren’t enough people in Iowa to demand the kind of products they were making. He just observes more interest in this on the east coast, perhaps because the Midwest is still “too entrenched” in industrial agriculture. When they came to the east coast in 1996, Mike says, there were still a lot of challenges. He views his practice as not as forward thinking as someone like Weston Price or Sir Albert Howard, but when they started ten or fifteen years ago, their method of rotational grazing was still “very new,” especially in this region. He said they adopted technologies from farmers doing rotational grazing in New Zealand, because “no one was doing it here.” Mike thinks Organic is done growing, but “local” is expanding quickly—and this is where things get tricky. Part of the tension underlying this project, and entire line of inquiry, requires identifying a real movement beneath the “local” fad. It is still entirely unclear if one truly exists, although Mike certainly thinks there is.

59 Richard Holcomb, interview with author, March 4, 2013, Durham, NC.

60 Mike Haigwood, interview with author, February 2, 2013, Brandywine, MD.

61 Ibid.
Now Mike’s daughter Alisha pipes into our discussion from where she was sitting at the computer next to us. She thinks “there needs to be an integration of the relationship [between city and country] so there isn’t conflict,” she says. “Regulation is a pain in the butt!” Mike interjects. “Regulation causes disconnect, because it assumes a lack of common sense. We need to not regulate to the lowest common denominator; there are places where minimal regulation makes much more sense.” This word—sense—is a common trope for local farmers. Echoing Wendell Berry’s sentiments, local farmers perceive the current system of food regulation as an illogical construction only possible when so many people are disconnected from the land.
Chapter 3: Origin Stories

Cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens.
—Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia

Wendell Berry is difficult to categorize. A prolific author of over fifteen novels along with countless works of non-fiction, essays, and poems, Berry is also a farmer, political activist, and one-time writing professor. His works have become staples of the food counter culture. But Berry’s own family has farmed his homestead in Kentucky for five generations. His decision to purchase that land and return to farm it is central to many of his works.62

Berry’s work argues that there is inherent virtue in people who are close to the land, and those virtues are central to the core of American society. Local farmers see themselves as a continuation of this history. Berry views his lifelong dedication to farming as part of keeping a long tradition of agrarianism alive in the face of industrialization. He says explicitly, “the class of independent farmers who fought the war of independence has been exploited by, and recruited into, the industrial society until by now it is almost extinct.”63


63 Berry, Unsettling of America, 5.
In this same vein, the local food movement tells its history differently from the broader organic or environmental food culture by emphasizing the culturally significant role of the small farmer in American democracy, in contrast to the perceived “newness” of food movements. Specifically, local farmers see themselves as participating in the long-standing history of American agrarianism dating all the way back to the ideal of the “citizen-farmer” espoused by Thomas Jefferson.\(^\text{64}\)

Farmers enact this origin story by emphasizing the specific history of the place they farm, focusing on the “old” and “traditional” use of the land, even if they have just moved there. As scholar James McWilliams explains, food and food production define the values of American political life; defining food values is a definition of political values is key to republican life.\(^\text{65}\) The revolutionary experience imbued American food with its own sense of virtue. McWilliams expands on the “roots” of virtue in food in the American past, saying, “there was... nothing more virtuous than making a living from tilling the soil and sowing it and reaping its rewards. "It was from the act of farming that colonial Americans elevated virtue to something of a secular creed, a national slogan, or a myth to idealize."\(^\text{66}\) The origin story of the local food movement is very


\(^{66}\) Ibid., 304-305.
heavily cognizant of this distinctly American conception of virtue. Wendell Berry draws heavily on the Jeffersonian ideal of American agriculture in his writings:

I believe the answers are to be found in our history: in its until now subordinate tendency of settlement, of domestic permanence. This was the ambition of thousands of immigrant; it is formulated eloquently in some of the letters of Thomas Jefferson... The old idea is still full of promise... It proposes the independent, freestanding citizenry that Jefferson thought to be the surest safeguard of democratic liberty. And perhaps most important of all, it proposes an agriculture based upon intensive work, local energies, care, and long-living communities—that is, to state the matter from a consumer's point of view: a dependable, long-term food supply.\(^67\)

In many ways, Joel Salatin enacts Berry’s ideal in both in the contemporary and historical sense. “In fact, the man who owns and runs this farm may well be Virginia’s most multi-faced agrarian since Thomas Jefferson.”\(^68\) But the importance of small farmers to the fabric of American democracy is not, by any means, a new argument. Periodically, it resurfaces in the form of a group reemphasizing the place of small farmers as the bedrock of American culture. A group of southern agrarians in the 1930s, in response to industrialization of the American economy, penned this manifesto:

The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers. For this much is clear: If a community... is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it must find the way to throw it off. And if the whole community thinks it cannot be done, then it has simply lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence.\(^69\)

\(^{67}\) Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, 45.


These southern agrarians view farming and democracy as hand in hand; farming supports the core of American democracy. Local farmers see themselves as a continuation of this process—of reasserting the primacy of agrarianism in American history.

Richard and I sit down inside his restaurant, Piedmont, just after lunchtime. The restaurant won’t open until five o’clock, so we have the place to ourselves, while a few cooks and wait staff mill around the tables, talking about that day’s shipment of rutabaga and pork loin. Richard’s wife and business partner Jamie DeMent is typing furiously in the small office in the back of the restaurant. Jamie and Richard manage this restaurant, but also the over twenty-acre farm that supplies Piedmont, another restaurant called Zely and Ritz in downtown Raleigh, a farmers’ market stand, and a sustainable food distribution business called Bella Bean Organics. Needless to say, they are a busy pair of farmers.

In many ways, Coon Rock Farm is the birthplace of this thesis—meeting Richard and Jamie and learning about their farm was one of the experiences that reignited my quest to understand local food almost five years ago. Many of my friends have lived and worked on their farm, volunteered at their farm stand or restaurants. A jar of their creamy lard is always on hand in my mother’s kitchen. If there is a heart of the local food community in Durham, Coon Rock Farm might be it.

Richard grew up on a farm in what he calls the “Jimmy Carter age of agriculture,” meaning you had to either “get big, or get out.” So instead of going the route of many other American farmers, Richard left farming to start and work on several successful tech companies before returning to North Carolina to buy the farm—something he said he had always wanted to
do. He and Jamie met (or so the story goes) when she visited his farm-to-table restaurant. Their operation is almost a seamless example of the local paradigm. Now Coon Rock (named lovingly after a bend in the river on their property) is considered one of the “big farms” in the Durham/Raleigh sustainable food market. They grow fifteen acres of vegetables all year round for their CSA community, and process 250 hogs, 1,000 chickens, one hundred sheep and twenty to thirty cows, plus milk and eggs galore.

While Coon Rock is not certified organic, it’s not for lack of environmental consciousness. Richard raises only heritage breed birds and hogs, not industrial or factory breed species. This means the animals are more naturally attuned to grazing outdoors, and do better on the grass diet Richard feeds them. They don’t use chemical pesticides or herbicides, and use artisan and heirloom varieties of what they grow. Their pork is not the “other white meat” and their cows are not “engineered to do better on a feedlot.” But these are not just buzzwords for Jamie and Richard; the purpose of all these distinctions is to make the entire farm operation a “closed loop.” This means all the fertility in the farm comes from the animals and plants, and while Coon Rock isn’t there totally, the goal is sustainability—to have the farm support itself creates not only environmental but also business sustainability. Their goal is to do farming in a way that is “healthy, positive or the environment, and provide a good working conditions and lifestyle, as well as philosophical interests.”

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70 Richard Holcomb, interview with author.

71 Christine Muhlke, “Fresh Direction: A Farm-to-Table Restaurant” New York Times, April 21, 2010
But the word local signifies more than just proximity of food to consumer. Instead, by locating their own history in a specific place, local farmers connect to and create a specific origin story of local farming. In this way, local farmers often tell their story in long generational lines, and therefore see themselves as one in a long chain of small farmers that came before them. Seeing oneself in historical context is a huge part of the local food movement. Being connected to generations (even centuries, in some cases) of farmers, either through the land itself or the techniques and seeds and heritage breeds, there is a sense of continuity that pervades the entire discussion. I once saw a farm selling apples at a market that were the same variety that George Washington made cider from, grown right in Virginia.

Although Richard only bought the farm in 2004, they connect their story to the original character of the farm. Their own website advertises,

Coon Rock Farm has been a continually operating farm for over 120 years. The four-room farmhouse was built around 1880 and you can still see the hand-hewn log timbers that serve as the house foundation. The name Coon Rock is an old one that comes from a very large rock formation at the property’s edge that juts out into the Eno River. It’s a landmark that all the ‘old-timers’ in Hillsborough know as many of them grew up swimming and fishing at the Coon Rock.72

Telling the story of the farm Richard runs serves as a means to assert the historical significance of his farming operation—and the role of small farmers in general. In this way, local farmers locate their origin stories in the past history of place, and in an older sense of an American class of small farmers, as well as a more pastoral American history and culture. Like Richard, Barbara

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Kingsolver “returned” to her ancestral home in order to bring her family closer to the food they consume, in her year of living locally that became the bestselling book, Animal Vegetable Miracle. This move was both literal and metaphorical; moving back to the east coast is closer to the origin of American democracy, in contrast to Arizona and the “west” as an emblem of progress, and in the case of agriculture, vast and profound technological changes.

Similarly, Virginian farmer Zach Lester, who recently purchased his own land for the first time, told me the particular story of his plot, even before it was farmland. He loves the forested half; he told me the neighborhood has been covered in forestry a lot of logging right on the edge of Spottsylvania and Orange counties. There was a thriving logging industry on one side of the county line and English, pastoral grazing (a totally different industry) on the other side, and their plot sits right on the old county line. Apparently the previous proprietor owned a sawmill, and used the pasture as a landing strip for his private jet. Zach views this eclectic history as a benefit; having the 25-acre field next to 25 acres of forest is a great dynamic for them.

Sitting next to the dairy, Mike asked me if I think local farming can make it economically. I said that I did, but, finishing my sentence, Mike says, “It depends on your definition of success.” You have to be able to triangulate between the three legs of the stool—economic, social, and environmental—and the spiritual of course. “I’ve had some success in each of the categories,” Mike said. The focus on the local community is not coincidental. Mike’s

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73 Kingsolver, Animal Vegetable Miracle, 2-4.
alertness to how his farm is perceived by his neighbors—his desire to contribute to the success of the place he lives in—is a sentiment echoed by the writers of the local food dialogue. Joel Salatin’s farm, Polyface, although economically profitable, is committed to keeping participating in the fabric of their local economy. Individual profitability is equally important as community and environmental health. Purdum explains,

For some years, [Polyface] has been classified as a commercial farm under the USDA’s definition, meaning its gross annual sales exceed $250,000 (Polyface grosses $350,000). The average net income for such farms nationwide is $156,324, and Salatin said Polyface’s runs about that, which he said is proof positive that sustainable farming is not some rarefied niche business serving elite consumers but a viable way to keep family farms together while producing healthy food in harmony with the environment. The Salatins ship nothing by mail, both because it would be too complicated and because they want customers elsewhere to patronize their local farmers.74

The best part of our farm tour is the cows. About thirty or forty beautiful brown cows are milling about lazily in the cold January sun, chewing on grass and hardly taking notice of my arrival. This is where Mike really gets into talking about his philosophy. They have a lot of experiments focused around developing the soil. Cover crops, legumes, and rotations are used to build up topsoil and a nutritional community underneath our feet. Mike likes to think of these not as new technologies, but repurposing and reinventing old ideas to their present situation. Everything he does he tries to blend with the natural rhythms of the world, rather than against them; and use technologies to help, rather than control or subvert nature.

Mike wants to build a silo much like Salatin’s famous composting shed, where cows stay warm in the winter, and layers of corn, hay and manure get mixed around by pigs in the spring and then spread back over the farm as manure. The purpose of this system is to return as many nutrients to the pasture as possible, to keep farm operations as self-reliant and dependable as is possible. “You know,” he says as we lazily swap gazes with the cows, “120 years ago they didn’t have electric fences. They had wood ones, but I bet they would have seen the value and used them, like I do.”

This is when we start to talk about how Mike views the entire operation as a balance between the information coming back to you from the community, the economy, and the environment. He says it’s the job of every farmer to listen to his animals, to adjust based on the feedback you receive, to adapt, even if farmers traditionally adapt slowly. He is often inspired by his Amish neighbors, although he makes it clear that he doesn’t view technology in the same way the Amish do. Many of his farm operations would be impossible without some pretty cool gadgets (electric fences for chicken rotating, for instance, or high pressure, but low-heat sanitation for the cheese making). However, he thinks they have something going for them in terms of resilience. Mike says “sustainability” is a word that gets thrown around a lot, and he’s not entirely sure what it means, or the meaning gets skewed. He likes to think about “resilience”—resilient technologies, resilient places. And the Amish have that. One time his tire

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75 Mike Haigwood, interview with the author, 2013.
popped a few miles up the road, and while he was jacking the spare his Amish neighbors rode right by, iron wheels totally un-phased by the bumps in the road.

Like Mike, local farmers express their historical lineage through their emphasis on small community economics. Their admiration for Amish communities, small-scale technology and local communities reflect an enacted connection to a historical vision of farming.
Many of us who aren't farmers or gardeners still have some element of farm nostalgia in our family past, real or imagined: a secret longing for some connection to a life where a rooster crows in the yard.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Vegetable Miracle*

Nostalgia for earlier periods of American farming is present beyond the history of the farmland, it also informs the food that local farmers sell and eat. Heirloom vegetables and animal breeds are not only “more suited to sustainable grazing”\(^76\) but also allow farmers to connect their enterprise with the origin story of the movement.

Food theorists have long held that we infuse our food with cultural meaning through the act of choosing what and how we eat.\(^77\) Local farmers choose to emphasize their place in American culture by growing and eating specifically “American” “normal” or “wholesome” foods, in contrast to the more global (perceived or actual) organic cuisine that includes things like “tempeh” and “quinoa.”\(^78\) In a recent interview, Michael Pollan explained how class signifiers inform the tastes of organic and local food:

To get past these class signifiers—words like ‘arugula’ that in our culture signify a social formation characterized by the sort of East Coast, Ivy League cultural baggage…

\(^76\) Richard Holcomb, interview with the author, 2013.

\(^77\) McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

\(^78\) Walsh, “Foodies,” 2011; Bell and Valentine, *Consuming Geographies*. 
‘Arugula,’ we should remember, is a marketing term invented by somebody who thought that this very common green, known by farmers all over the Midwest for many years as “rocket,” needed to be tuned up and given new appeal. It’s a complete marketing creation, and it’s completely ruined a very healthy green—at least from a political point of view.79

The perception of “healthy,” “local” or “sustainable” food as a preoccupation of east coast elite creates a mode for local farmers to differentiate themselves from the global organic food movement, and instead enact their American history through a specific cuisine. Cultural theorist Elizabeth Engelhardt argues the south is a good place for overcoming the cultural misunderstanding over who and what “local means” because there is a long history of the expression of the local in southern food.80

The local movement is not, however, just limited to farming and farmers markets. It was “it was only a matter of time before the farmers’ market evolved into the farmers’ restaurant.”81 Barbara Kingsolver’s husband and partner in the Animal Vegetable Miracle experiment, Steve Hopp, has tried to start a diner in their Appalachian town based on only locally sourced vegetables, but a New York Times article explained why this is “not an easy sell.”82 Part of the


problem is that local food is still perceived by many as a niche, urban preoccupation, not an affordable option for working families.

The problems Hopp faces are chronicled in a *New York Times* article explaining why local food is such a hard sell in rural Appalachia. However difficult, the goal of many of these farmers is to eat and provide the foods of the culture of the region, in order to bring this food back to the communities from which it came. In her book, Barbara Kingsolver explains how food is culturally appropriated—yet how it can also be a vehicle for changing those perceptions.

I kept thinking of people I know who can hardly even stand to hear that word, because of how "organic" is personified for them. "I'm always afraid I'm going to get the Mr. Natural lecture," one friend confessed to me. "You know, from the slow-moving person with ugly hair, doing back and leg stretches while they talk to you." I know the guy too: standing at the checkout with his bottle of Intestinal-Joy brand wheatgrass juice, edging closer as if to peer into my cart to save me from some food-karma horror.  

Steve Hopp’s story—of trying to win over rural Americans with local food—is not uncommon. “Over the past several years, [the restaurant] has struggled to build a fan base among the area’s predominantly blue-collar residents for whom the average annual income is $15,750, and many of whom view local and organic food as out of reach.” Many of the residents of the town report not eating there because it is “too expensive,” although none who said this had reportedly bought anything. This is part of where the Local food movement can differ from Organic, both in principle and practice.

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83 Kingsolver, *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, 204.

Bull City Burger and Brewery, or BCBB as it’s known to Durhamites, is a recent addition to the local food scene in Durham. Unlike Richard Holcomb, Seth has always been a chef, and then morphed into a local, sustainable restaurateur. Being a fan of both burgers and beer, I’ve eaten there many times, and my favorite item is (without a doubt) their French fries served in duck fat. But beyond a delicious meal, Seth is working to create a local food community.

Seth likes working with his hands, brewing beer and making burgers, and loves that he can create change through food in his community and the environment. He calls his restaurant not only “farm-to-fork” but also “back to scratch.” They make everything (except the ketchup!) in house. And if they can’t make it, they don’t serve it. They value quality over quantity in everything, and use entirely pasture-raised local beef, as well as vegetables from nearby.

Seth describes ‘Back to Scratch” as an artisanal ethic—the idea is knowing more about where the food comes from, and what’s in the meal. He argues that our food products have been compromised; we’ve learned to value uniformity in the grocery store (or McDonald’s) over quality. He views variation in his product—a slight char on a bun, different colored pickles—as positive because it means the burger has been handcrafted. Cows have different seasons, and their meat will taste slightly different based on the time they are slaughtered, and this is totally natural (he says he has developed a taste for these things over years on working in restaurants). He thinks we have come to believe artisanal creativity is unreliable, and therefore removed the creativity from food production. And looking through the photos of BCBB burgers on (their very well-populated) Facebook page attests to the variability and delectability of their burger.
creations.\textsuperscript{85} Seth says he could cut costs, but he doesn’t mind paying more for labor because he gets a higher quality product. Seth describes the process of opening a restaurant like theirs with some humor. He says the first week they were open they had customers from all walks of life—all of them. People would come in expecting what he calls a “McDonald’s” Burger, or confused about why they didn’t have tomatoes in the middle of winter.

Interestingly, tomatoes are one of the iconic vegetables local farm literature uses to illustrate the move back to a “seasonal” cuisine. Barbara Kingsolver writes,

In Charlottesville, Asheville, Roanoke, and Knoxville, supermarket shoppers had no way of knowing how much heartache and betrayal was wrapped up in those cellophane two-packs of California tomatoes. Maybe they noticed the other tomatoes were missing that week, the ones with the "Healthy Farms, Close to Home" label. Or maybe they just saw "organic tomatoes," and dropped them into their carts on top of the cereal boxes and paper towels. Eaters must understand, how we eat determines how the world is used. They either will or they won't.\textsuperscript{86}

Seth says they needed to go through that exact process in order to find their target market. He views the tomato discussion as a moment to affect change and educate people. He says it’s not normal to have tomatoes in January—they don’t grow here year round. Foods have \textit{seasons}. So when burgers come out without fresh tomatoes and people ask why, he can explain the mission of the restaurant (but only after they have already tried the delicious food). On the other side, however, he says they have lettuce, onion, pickles, some that are less garden-variety (like pickled

\textsuperscript{85}“Ten Things You Need to Know about BCBB,” \textit{Bull City Burger and Brewery Website}, accessed April 27, 2013, \url{http://www.bullcityburgerandbrewery.com/Bull_City_Burger_and_Brewery/Home.html}

\textsuperscript{86} Kingsolver, \textit{Animal Vegetable Miracle}, 211. and; “Seeing Red”, 2007.
peach compote and triple-fermented sauerkraut). He says the benefit of burgers is they are customizable; they’re candidates for many levels of dining, and this allows each customer to customize his or her burger experience. This is not a one-size-fits-all kind of place.

When I ask him what his target market is, he chuckles again (you get the sense Seth is one of those adults that refused to grow up. He gets to make cheeseburgers all day, and I’m totally jealous). He says that, of the people who eat burgers, they appeal to people for a variety of reasons. One is the niche market of those who eat because of food ethics, related to them are the “conflicted omnivores/vegetarians” that typically don’t eat meat but do because of his message and practice solely. The next group is the enthusiastic meat eaters, who come because they know (and taste) the value of pasture-raised beef. And others come just because it’s delicious, and they couldn’t care less about the source of the meat. (Even though we’re over the phone, I can tell Seth smiles when he says this last one).

Then we start talking about sustainability realistically. For those who eat at his restaurant for the ethics of it, he explains how he became dedicated to pasture-raised, local meat. Seth says he was always interested in health, cooking for himself at home, and working with ingredients – he has a master’s degree in microbiology. He apprenticed at many “fine dining” places, not for prestige, but because the food tasted better. The big difference came when he changed his own diet in order to better his own health. He thinks the difference between the United States and Europe is the role of processed food, hydrogenated fats and oils, and factory-farmed meats. He says the biggest change came when he and his wife had children, because the abundance of over-processed food for kids overwhelmed him, and they felt the need to remove processed food from
their diet, and their kids’ diet. He felt the need to create change in our generation, and it became even more personal when he became a professional that works with meat; all of a sudden he had control over all the aspects of this food creation. He wanted to get back to better quality, less quantity. The feedlots, the antibiotics, hormones; Seth wonders how we can get away from all of this? And he thinks BCBB might be a small part of the solution. But sometimes he feels like when he launches into this topic with customers—which he calls the “pasture sermon,” it can be a little much. In his view, there isn’t any real reason that pasture-raised beef should cost so much (with the exception of subsidies for feed), except for the current supply and demand. If we eat more of this, he says, we can change the tide.

Seth argues we need a whole paradigm shift about what “better means”—people aren’t used to this kind of beef, even though Seth thinks it is objectively better, and it can be cheaper, and corn fed beef is less healthy anyways. This also has to do with what Seth calls the “economics of food purchasing”, saying that giving up meat every day, at every meal, is also part of the paradigm shift. As for his experience buying local, it has been a challenge at times. He uses multiple farmers to share the burden of producing all the ingredients for BCBB. But he also recognizes there is a difference between your ideals and real life—and creating that balance is the biggest challenge he faces running BCBB.

It took a whole year for Seth to convince farmers the restaurant would be around long enough to grow crops specifically for them, even though this system is better for farmers because they get a guaranteed price and amount from a restaurant, as opposed to the farmers market. Seth is always moving to buy more things locally, working with farmers in the area to make it
possible. He says this creates confidence in local relationships. Even though the beef takes longer
to mature, Seth says they won’t compromise on the beef, and this purchasing power is “saving
the family farm.” Raising beef this way is, in his view, a livelihood, and purchasing local beef is
supporting that way of life, and keeping local dollars in the local economy.

Where organic is based on the idea of paying a higher price for premium product
guaranteed by certification, local (while it can be more expensive, depending on food, season
and region) does not necessarily have to be. Part of the local food movement is insistence on
keeping local dollars in the economy, that creating a local, homemade and artisanal culture is
valuable in and of itself—not as a means to better environmental health outcomes (although
many local farmers, as we’ve seen in earlier chapters, believe this to be the case as well.) By
choosing to emphasize foods with culturally American meaning, the local food movement
emphasizes its role in the broader American culture. As some scholars note, this cultural space
may be the most difficult to bridge. Hurst writes, "Everyone decries the disappearance of the
family farm, yet many hold the simultaneous and contradictory view that the present-day
residents of rural America are the last remaining repositories of bigotry and ignorance—armed
and angry white males, standing in the way of progress, diversity, and sensitivity." 87

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87 Hurst, “Up on the Farm,” 42.
Chapter 5: Spirituality of Place

We come from the earth and return to it, and so we live in agriculture as we live in flesh.

—Wendell Berry, The Art of the Common Place

The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature

It is fitting that the last chapter of this thesis is focused on the morality of local farming, as this is possibly the most complex aspect of the subculture, and most difficult to pin down. Part of this complexity comes from the terminology itself; morality, spirituality and religion are overlapping terms that mean different things to different people. To add to this complexity, spirituality in America is itself a mixture of religious and secular, of civil morality and spiritual traditions that overlap and influence each other.\(^ {88} \) Rather than try to clarify these terms, the upcoming chapter acknowledges that these definitions are fluid, and given this, attempts to characterize the spiritual essence of the local food movement.

Local farmers do what they do because of a specific moral value they see in their work, not because “local” food is better for the environment, or healthier, or more sustainable (even though it can be of those things). Instead, local farmers believe their work is better in those ways because a local system is inherently more respectful of creation. Local farmers view themselves

as stewards of the land, and emphasize listening and learning from the land in order to have an intimate communion with nature (God) and to create balance and harmony on the farm (in the world). They act with profound humility before nature (secular) or creation (religious). In viewing their work this way, local farmers create a specific morality that is central to the culture of their movement.

Farmers enact their spirituality through local farming that emphasizes respect for nature and humility before nature’s process. While farmers can practice their farming in either spiritual or overtly Christian terms, they all emphasize listening to and learning from the land, and they view themselves as stewards in a moral and/or religious sense of the term. This chapter draws on multiple interviews to show the complexity of the morality enacted by local farming. This morality, while not completely absent from the writing of early pioneers of organic farming, is a pronounced and defining characteristic of the local food movement’s philosophy.

This religious sensibility is not unknown to American authors—or farmers. Nature Religion, a term coined by religious studies scholar Catherine Albanese, is a feature of American spirituality that crosses religious sects. The primacy of a connection with nature in American culture is no better exemplified than with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*. While neither entirely secular nor conforming to Christianity, Emerson’s writings on spirituality offer a useful paradigm with which to view the value infused in local farming. Albanese explains the impact of

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90 As Albanese calls it, the “gospel of Transcendentalism”; Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 80
Emerson’s writings: “Harmony with nature became the broad highway to virtuous living, and, more, to union with divinity.”\footnote{Albanese, \textit{Nature Religion}, 82.} As Emerson wrote in \textit{Nature}, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable.”\footnote{Ralph Waldo Emerson, \textit{Nature}, ed. Joel Porte, (New York: Viking Press, 1989), 11.} This relationship with nature is enacted literally in the local food movement; the farmer’s participation in the lifecycle of the vegetables he grows is key to his spirituality.

The key to this kind of nature religion is balance—the balance of a natural system. Local farmers describe their spirituality as existing to work with, and in reverence of, Mother Nature’s systems. As Mike said, “Mother Nature always wins.” In this way, Mike embodied Emerson’s ideal of spiritual knowledge through balance; “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other”\footnote{Emerson, \textit{Nature}, 10.} “Everything in balance,” Mike repeated, but he added a spiritual aspect, calling it the fourth leg of a stool made from the balance between community, environment, and economy. “The fourth leg stabilizes the other three.”\footnote{Mike Haigwood, interview with author, 2013.}

Dreher explains in \textit{Crunchy Conservatives}, this kind of morality is sorely lacking in (what he views as) our overly consumerist and indulgent society. “Wendell Berry's conservatism is of the sensible kind you would expect from a thoughtful and pious man who lives on and
works the land, and who understands the need for harmony.”95 He goes on to argue that an understanding of our connection to nature is a prerequisite for this kind of sensibility: “The dualist view pitting man against nature, one that partisans of the left and right share, is an illusion.”96

This highlights the second crucial element of the local food spirituality—not only is balance with nature key, but the soul of all natural things must be respected. As the well known passage of Emerson’s reads, “Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into space,—all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all... I am part and particle of God.”97 Becoming a transparent eyeball requires not only viewing nature as external to yourself, but becoming intertwined with it. This is why listening to the land, nurturing the soil, and caring meticulously for all aspects of the farm becomes such a spiritually laden act for local farmers. Knowing one’s food—really knowing it—is part of placing oneself, as a farmer or local food participant, within the natural rhythms of everything around you. As Mike told me, “I believe my cows have spirits, believe my chickens have spirits, I have to respect them. Soil and sun nurtures you, chemical food shortens and degrades your life.” Mike wants to get “people to connect to their food—does your food touch you, as a

95 Dreher, Crunchy Conservatives, 171-172.

96 Ibid.

97 Emerson, Nature, 10
person? Knowing where food comes from nourishes you, physically and spiritually, and mentally.”

This interconnected spirit is part of the moral sensibility that authors and farmers alike use to define their relationship to the land and imbue it with spiritual value. Mike feels that he is “standing on the shoulders of so many thinkers bigger than I am. Pollan, Berry, Albrecht, but I try to balance them all.” He believes farm techniques should try and nurture the soil, to create balance. He believes it is your farming techniques that set you apart. Dreher characterizes this morality perfectly, saying, “It is impossible to thrive in a culture that does not honor and nurture things of the human spirit over and above material concerns.” Interconnectedness is the key to farming spirituality. Berry writes,

> All the convergences and dependencies of Creation are surely implied. Our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, on which they depend in a complexity of ways from biological to spiritual. They are not distinct from the bodies of plants and animals, with which we are involved in cycles of feeding and in the intricate companionships of ecological systems and of the spirit. They are not distinct from the earth, the sun and moon, and the other heavenly bodies.

As a younger man, Mike kept feeling himself drawn back to nature. He spoke about all the green lawns around him—killing weeds, “you can only make a lawn so green” he says, chucking to himself, and then says, “It’s vanity. Green lawns don’t make sense.” He was trying

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98 Mike Haigwood, interview with author.

99 Dreher, Crunchy Conservatives, 15.

100 Berry, Unsettling of America, 103.
to identify his purpose in life, and found that doing things just for money, looking around at some of his peers, was not enough. And then, he said, “I read a little book called the bible. And I thought, there are a lot of ranchers in this book.” Christianity, he said, has influenced his farming, and farming has evolved his Christian thinking. He thinks his views of being a steward of resources, learning from nature are all principles present in and derived from his spirituality.

Those authors that define the movement effectively articulate this spiritual balance. Wendell Berry, the most spiritual writer of them all, expressed, “to treat every field, or every part of every field, with the same consideration is not farming but industry. Kindly use depends upon intimate knowledge, the most sensitive responsiveness and responsibility. As knowledge (hence, use) is generalized, essential values are destroyed. The householder evolves into a consumer, the farm into a factory.”

Dreher explained how farm stewardship is inherently a religious sensibility. He writes, “As the Bible says, man was given dominion over the things of the earth, but also required to exercise stewardship of the gift. Whether you're a religious believer or not, that is traditional wisdom worth heeding.” Similarly, Barbara Kingsolver explains the absence of these values in our current society, and of the disconnect between our spirituality and the land. “Our culture is not unacquainted with the idea of food as a spiritually loaded commodity.”

The local farming paradigm seeks to change this.

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101 Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 31.

102 Dreher, *Crunchy Conservatives*, 172.

103 Kingsolver, *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, 67
When Zach Lester and I sit down to talk, the crisp November breeze rustles the big trees that surround the property, and our discussion quickly takes a turn away from the logistics of farming to a more philosophical stance. Zach Lester emphasizes his relationship to the soil as a connection with nature. He said, “I really have to grow the soil, and plants happen to be what I make my money from, but overall my real relationship as a farmer is with the soil. Plants are showing you what the earth needs, what it’s lacking, what you’re lacking, it’s teaching you things all the time.” Although Zach says he was raised Irish Catholic, he has become more spiritual than religious. Farming has expanded his thinking about religion and spirituality considerably, and he has absorbed ideas from unexpected places—Austrian naturalist Viktor Schauberger, for example—who developed a theory of water engineering based on observing trout. Schauberger was a semi-insane pseudo-scientific figure at best, but Zach’s inspiration come more from the idea of viewing the natural world as a living organism, and that you can learn immense amounts just by looking and listening closely. This is a fundamental theme in Zach’s description of his own work—listening to his plants closely and learning from them. He says this concept has influenced him, both as a gardener and a person; this view of his farm is a fundamental part of his spirituality.

Zach, like other local farmers, took a circuitous career path. He started working in medicinal plants, and gardening for large estates while playing in an Irish folk band in New York City. He was doing all landscape work, and worked with a chef there once, who “had all these

104 Zach Lester, interview with author, November 20, 2012
bullshit romantic ideas” about growing all his own food, and hired Zach to do it for him. But he “didn’t really want the hard part, didn’t want to put the effort into the soil, just wanted to convey the image.” None of the farmers I spoke to would deny that their lifestyle can be romanticized—both from within and without of the movement.

He met his wife at a rooftop Halloween party in New York, and they moved back to Virginia to lease a small five-acre piece of land, doing gardens and Zach’s favorite: perennial borders. But he says they run into problems leasing, rather than owning their own land. Sometimes owners are more concerned with the land “looking nice” than being necessarily the best for the land. So gradually Zach and his wife moved away from gardening and are just farming, having purchased the fifty acres on which we stood only a few years prior.

Zach describes the farmer market experience as both conveying the product to the customer in the best way possible and having an intimate experience with the customer based on knowledge. This word is possibly the backbone of the local movement—the knowledgeable food movement (contrasted with a know-nothing orientation to our food in this country currently). As a local farmer, Zach invests more in each person, in getting to know them, as the customer does the same for him. People come to local food for the health of it, but the more they know about the soil and planet, they become intertwined with the steps of production.

This connectedness reflects a profound spiritual connection with the farm operation, and a perception of the work itself as an enactment of these moral values. Joel Salatin said in an interview, “I see myself today as Sitting Bull, trying to bring a voice of easternism, holism, community-based thinking to a very Western culture. If we fail to appreciate the soul that
easternism gives us, then what we have is a disconnected, Greco-Roman, western, egocentric, reductionist, fragmented, linear thought process that counts on cleverness." This quote, like many of Salatin’s interviews and public speeches, is heavy on buzzwords. But his general point in one worth noting. It combines the stewardship of ecological Christianity with a fluid view of the natural world that, if it has American roots at all, is a derivative of a Native American “theology of place.” “Radical Christians are just as bad,” Mike said in our interview. He thinks there is value in bringing the balance of eastern religions that is missing in the West. “The challenge is adapting old ideas to a new situation.” This spirituality combines traditional religiosity with a strong view of the earth as filled with spirit. Therefore, although sometimes rooted strongly in Christianity, the spirituality of local farming is also a firm challenge the Western theological tradition. Yet no one better articulates the specific morality of the local farmer’s values than Barbara Kingsolver:

Wake up now, look alive, for here is a day off work just to praise Creation: the turkey, the squash, and the corn, these things that ate and drank sunshine, grass, mud, and rain, and then in the shortening days laid down their lives for our welfare and onward resolve. There's the miracle for you, the absolute sacrifice that still holds back seed: a germ of promise to do the whole thing again, another time. . . Thanksgiving is Creation's birthday party. Praise harvest, a pause and sigh on the breath of immortality.107

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105 Purdum, “High Priest,” 2005

106 Alan T. Durning, This Place on Earth: Home and the Practice of Permanence, (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1996).

107 Kingsolver, Animal Vegetable Miracle, 284.
Conclusion

To eat responsibly is to live free.
—Wendell Berry, *The Pleasures of Eating*

In some sense, the best way to conclude this thesis is to talk about what it isn’t. In many ways this project is limited by its size. With only four participants, I am unable to draw more general conclusions about the local food movement, or say with statistical certainty that these farmers represent the entire population. However, the small scope of the project is also freeing; it allowed me to engage deeply with each participant and give a voice and texture to this subculture that could not exist in a large study. My goal was to bring in these examples, to share the nuances of their philosophies, and use their stories to confirm or challenge the national dialogue about food and farming. This thesis takes a small snapshot and uses personal stories to provide deeper insight into major themes in the culture.

Farmers are having a cultural moment in American society. In February, the 2013 Super Bowl commercial by Dodge called “So God Made a Farmer” was instantly a viral sensation. More popular books and movies that discuss food and farming are making it into the mainstream—people everywhere are hungry for a connection to their food. And while farmers still represent a cultural icon, what this image means for American society is very much up for

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debate. As Barbara Kingsolver eloquently explained, this phenomenon is part and parcel of our connection with the land that has slowly atrophied over the last century:

When we walked, as a nation, away from the land, our knowledge of food production fell away from us like dirt in a laundry-soap commercial. Now, it's fair to say, the majority of us don't want to be farmers, see farmers, pay farmers, or hear their complaints. Except as straw-chewing figures in children's books, we don't quite believe in them anymore. When we give it a thought, we mostly consider the food industry to be a thing rather than a person.  

This cultural desire for reconnecting with the source of our food makes looking critically at the local food movement (and all the food movements for that matter) timely and relevant.

The boundaries of the movement help us understand contemporary American society more generally. The underlying principles of local food is not politically left or right, but has universal applicability that transcends political divisions; but of course, thing are always more complicated than they seem. The origin story of local farmers is part of a longer populist thread that runs back to before the nation was founded, and the cultural enactment of that history through food choices is becoming ever more popular; bacon has become a cultural meme. Local food participants are in conversation with the literary icons that define their food philosophies to a broader national audience. In the same way Wendell Berry writes about his farmstead, Richard Holcomb and Zach Lester connect with the specific history of their farmland. And the moral compass that guides these farmers is equally complex—grounded in both


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Christianity and eastern spirituality; farmers construct their own set of values through intimate communion with, and stewardship of, their own farm. Walking through the cowshed with Mike, talking about the cycles of milk production is as much a spiritual lesson in humility as it is an agricultural one. At the beginning of this research process I expected disconnect between the moral terms used to describe agriculture in literature and the perspective of the farmers with whom I spoke, but this was not the case. Just like the authors who argue for the spiritual significance of living in communion with the land, local farmers view their occupation in spiritual terms. This morality can vary from very Christian (in the case of Joel Salatin) to more secular (Kingsolver), but they all emphasize the same central aspects: humility before creation, a symbiotic relationship with to nature, and a responsible position of stewardship.

Outlining the boundaries of this movement does not guarantee its success, however, and the question Pollan posed at the beginning of this paper—whether the food movement here to stay—is still unanswered.\textsuperscript{111} But that is not the only unanswered question. This year of research has only touched on the surface of many issues that are still open for investigation, topics that were too large or complex for me to address adequately in this thesis.

First, in almost every conversation I had, the topic of raw milk legislation kept resurfacing. Inspired by the interview with Mike Haigwood, and comments from other participants, I hope to follow the curious case of raw milk legislation in America; when did it

happen? Why did it happen? This represents a fruitful area of possible research. One incident in Los Angeles, where FDA agents and local police officers raided a natural-foods coop called Rawsome Foods in the same manner of a high-profile drug bust provides one illustrating example of many.\footnote{112} Public debates over legalizing raw milk can offer insight into the terms of this debate, as well as offering insight into the broader politics of cleanliness as they evolved over the last half-century. Finally, comparing local farmer knowledge with the public information campaign of the FDA against the consumption of raw milk can further explain the antipathy between alternative food consumers and the regulatory position of the government.

Perhaps more complex however is the role women play in this entire discussion. Like raw milk, feminism seemed to surface in some way at every turn. Beginning in August with Engelhardt’s \textit{Mess of Greens}, the intersection between women’s rights and food politics has been on my mind. And there is serious debate over how women can fit into the local food paradigm. Some women, like author and activist Lierre Keith, argue that local food is a feminist pursuit, that reconnecting with the cycles of the earth empowers women against a male-industrial complex.\footnote{113} On the other hand, many feminists argue that Wendell Berry’s brand of localism (or, \textit{Ari Levaux, “The Latest Raw Milk Raid: An Attack on Food Freedom?” The Atlantic, August 15, 2011 http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/08/the-latest-raw-milk-raid-an-attack-on-food-freedom/243635/; add others?\textit{Lierre, Keith, The Vegetarian Myth: Food, Justice and Sustainability.} (San Francisco,: PM Press, May 1, 2009); Rudy, “Locavores,” 2012; Laura Delind, “Bodies, Place and Culture?” \textit{Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics} 19 (2006):121–146; Vasile Stănescu, “Green Eggs and Ham? The Myth of Sustainable Meat and the Danger of the Local,” \textit{Journal for Critical Animal Studies} 8, no. 1/2, 2010.}
if not Berry himself, at least those who support him) is simply a veiled attempt to undo the gains of second-wave feminism, and put women back to barefoot in the kitchen. Those of this view worry that emphasizing the local and familial is one small step away from xenophobia, homophobia, and nativist reversion to the most repressive aspects of American culture. Explaining this tension would be an equally compelling avenue for cultural, sociological and political research that could easily fill two theses.

Expanding this thesis to a larger group of interview participants would allow me to speak to these emerging questions, as well as draw more conclusions about the development of a variety of alternative food movements. Much like the review of James McWilliam’s book *Just Food* argued at the beginning of this paper, the current literature affords the opportunity to write a thoughtful examination of the varied rise of alternative food movements. This thesis should be the spark for such an endeavor. The national conversation about food and farming, although it may continue to evolve, is not going to fade anytime soon.

This topic, although it may appear fringe, speaks to the bedrocks of American society and culture. Local farming is growing for sure, but I doubt we will ever return to forty percent of the American workforce in agriculture as we had a century ago. However, there is no question that the paradigm of industrial agriculture has overstayed its welcome. In a society where we are increasingly disconnected from where and how our food is grown, the local farming can bring us back to the land through a distinctly American lens. I hope the conversations that these farmers
engage in with their work—about the role of government, the trajectory of American history, and the value of listening to the land—can be informative for the discipline of American studies.

There is certainly an appetite for it.
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