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ETHICAL EATING: OVERCOMING ALIENATION IN THE INDUSTRIAL
FOOD SYSTEM BY ALIGNING OUR PRACTICES WITH OUR PRINCIPLES

By

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B.S. Conservation and Resource Studies, University of California, Berkeley,
Berkeley, California, 2018

Thesis

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...

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Abstract

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Environmental Philosophy

Ethical Eating: Overcoming Alienation in the Industrial Food System by
Aligning Our Practices with Our Principles

Chairperson: Deborah Slicer

Committee Member: Christopher Preston

Committee Member: Dane Scott

This thesis arose out of a moment of discord, while an environmental philosopher was eating blackberries in the middle of a blizzard in Missoula, Montana. What follows is an attempt to bridge the gap between our principles and our practices, by asking the questions: What does *ethical eating* look like? Is it possible within our current industrial food system? and If not, what needs to change? Responding to the publication of the 2019 EAT-*Lancet* report, this essay moves beyond thinking of *ethical eating* as “healthy” and “sustainable” and challenges the networks of suffering and labour that we take for granted every time we sit down to eat. This essay tells the truths of animals’ living conditions, migrants’ working conditions, and the history of inequitable transcultural relations that has brought us one of our most popular food staples: *bananas*. Telling these (hi)stories is a partial attempt to overcome the *alienation* that is a defining characteristic of our current food system. Then, utilising Steven Vogel’s notions of (social) practices and our responsibility for them, and Joan Tronto’s ethics of care, this essay attempts to show how consumer, producer, and policy maker can all do better to mitigate the suffering inherent in our current food system—the industrial food complex. I then discuss three solutions to improving our food system: *transparency*, *auditing*, and *localisation*. Finally, I give the reader an idea of what *ethical eating* might look like. I call upon my own experience of *ethical eating* over the past year to help illuminate some of the limitations of our current framework and encourage a “participation” approach on the individual level. I conclude that overcoming the *alienation* of the industrial food complex will require *eating where one is* and developing institutionalised networks of practices that compliment this individual practice by making it accessible in our communities.

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INTRODUCTION

May this thesis serve as a testament to not merely how far from ideal our current food system is, but how far even from responsible or respectable it is.

...

Winter Berries

This project was born on a freezing February morning, in Missoula, Montana. I was enjoying a light breakfast of blackberries and green tea with honey. The tea and honey were organic; the berries were not, though they easily could have been. As I was consuming this wholesome snack to fuel my day, I happened to look out my window to see a gentle snowfall partially and persistently fuzzing my view of Mount Sentinel. Suddenly, I was struck by an unease. Though enchanted by these falling ashes outside my window and warmed from within by the bittersweet ember of my amber elixir, some instinctual undertone surfaced to tell me:

this is all wrong.

As a former student of agroecology, I have spent my share of time working on permaculture farms and in backyard and urban gardens—long enough to feel both a deep concern for non-human Others and the eudaemonic value that comes from working with your hands in the soil while the sun bronzes your neck. And it was with this knowledge in my repertoire that I realised how alienated I was from the sweet and bitter delights I was ingesting on this particular morning.

Despite often being fascinated with the origin of the objects around me, it took this breakfast, and this climate, to get me to the cupboard with a certain aggressive curiosity. Within moments, I had before me three containers with wildly different stories to tell. The blackberries were packaged by the berry tycoon Driscoll's, whose farms are located in northwestern and central Mexico.¹ Peak harvesting season for blackberries in the United States happens in July and August, though harvests can run

¹ This information can easily be found on Driscoll's website.

anywhere from May to September under usual growing conditions. That is to say that eating blackberries in February ought to be an utter impossibility—especially in Montana. And yet. I bought these berries from a “local” market, convincing myself that I was helping a small business, clearing my conscience at the time. I cannot say the same for my other two items.

The green tea and the honey were both products from the O Organics brand, which is owned by Safeway, who also owns Albertsons. At the time, I was abiding by some eating-organic-is-better-than-the-alternative principle. While Albertsons (Safeway) is a US American company, this provides no insight into the sourcing of its merchandise—e.g. the O Organics Honey I was using was from Brazil, and the O Organics Tea was packaged in Canada. This was the extent of the information I had access to on each merchandise’s packaging. I do not know from what region of Brazil the honey was sourced, and I do not know where the tea leaves grew. The O Organics website does not provide this information. Garnering this information would require the complexity of a commodity chain analysis. Beyond a reasonable expectation for the average consumer.

So, this was my dilemma: I thought I was being a *good* eater. I was having a healthy breakfast, full of vitamins and antioxidants—small in portion, so as not to be overindulgent. I had purchased some of the items from a “local” vendor, while the others were USDA certified organic products. And, of course, I had skipped the consumption of any meat products, thus minimising my carbon foot print, and making my breakfast a vegetarian’s delight. Then why was my *gut* telling me that this was still wrong?

Perhaps, it is because my dietary practices on this winter morning exemplified a shallow conception of what *ethical eating* looks like. That is precisely what I will be attempting to help us better understand in this thesis. If we were to envision a *comprehensive* food ethic, what would that entail? The shallow, “good eating” I thought I was doing contained some key buzz words in most

contemporary food ethics: “healthy,” “organic,” “local,” and “vegetarian.” As I will show, these can be important criteria for a food ethic, but they are not all-encompassing.

...

Returning to the Roots

Lots of work has been done in the area of food ethics, and it is my intention to highlight the parts of this body of work which are excellent (without repeating already well told narratives), while also offering some insights into how our understanding of a *complete* food ethic might be enhanced. Every aspect of *ethical eating* that I will be investigating in this thesis has a plethora of work behind it, but none of these areas seem to be in conversation with one another. If we are going to understand what *ethical eating* looks like—if I am *ever* going to be able to sit down for my breakfast and *not* worry that I’ve perpetuated some collection of harms—then we need to bring each of these issues into one place.

In this thesis, I will be taking us through each of the concerns of *ethical eating* that I have found to be completely *necessary*. These include (1) human health, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) animal welfare, (4) workers’ welfare, and (5) transcultural relations. These five topics should be viewed as both principles *and* outcomes. For the individual, they can be taken as principles, each of which is a necessary component for *ethical eating*. However, this project is not meant to be limited to the perspective of the consumer. One of the roles of our social institutions is to help facilitate ethical behaviour among citizens—in other words, the infrastructure of the food system itself should not act as a barrier for individuals trying to eat well and in good conscience. Instead, members at each level of the food system should view these concerns as outcomes, which they are aiming to fulfil, in order to facilitate a more ethical food system.

This essay has been split into two parts. Following a review of the *Eat-Lancet* Commission’s “Food in the Anthropocene” report, PART I will cover ethical *sourcing*, giving accounts of the two

groups that suffer most under our current food system—factory farmed animals and migrant workers. Then we will be discussing the implications of international food trades by using an historical but incontrovertible example of violence, coercion, and exploitation. PART II of this essay will consist of a discussion of how we might make it out of our present arrangement by understanding *responsibility* and *an ethic of care* framework.

...

Understanding *ethical eating* consists of two major premises: 1) being able to answer the question: *from where does my food come?* and 2) developing a coherency between our principles and our practices. As I will show, even if we follow the guidelines of the EAT-Lancet report to promote healthy eating and sustainable agriculture practices, we are still left to wonder *who* will be feeding *whom*. Being able to answer this question in the United States² involves telling the stories of the nonhuman Others who end up on our plates, the migrant workers who literally harvest our produce, and the cultures from whom we derive our more “exotic” foods.

In the framework of government, policies and people are two sides of the same coin. The ignorance of the latter will result in a lack of improved legislation in the former. Therefore, another goal of this project is to reverse our general ignorance of the various moving parts of our food system—to overcome this alienation from the origins of our sustenance—in order to help us better understand what kinds of changes need to be made to create a more ethical food system. Food plays such an integral philosophical role in our lives, because it is incontrovertibly *necessary*—we *must* eat. And so it is important that our relationship with this necessary condition of our existence is one that does not, in itself, cause (or perpetuate) unnecessary harms. This project aims to present a framework of understanding that might help us avoid committing these harms.

² It should be noted that the focus of this project is the food system of the United States. This creates limitations for speaking on behalf of all “food systems,” but it is not my intention to do so. While the principles/outcomes of this project might be universalised, the realisation of these goals will undoubtedly vary between cultures, food systems, and international governances.

Within the same month that I was experiencing troubled ruminations over my *petit déjeuner*, the EAT-Lancet Commission published a report titled “Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems.”³ The Commission consists of a few dozen expert scientists and researchers with backgrounds in agriculture, environmental sustainability, and public policy. The purpose of their publication was to call for a “Great Food Transformation,” in the form of “a substantial change in the structure and function of the global food system so that it operates with different core processes and feedback.”⁴ Those different processes and feedback would consist of “widespread, multi-sector, multi-level action to change what food is eaten, how it is produced, and its effects on the environment and health, while providing healthy diets for the global population.”⁵ In other words, the EAT-Lancet Commission is looking to restructure the world’s entire food system following two fundamental principles: human dietary health and sustainable farming practices.

Accessible healthy diets and sustainable farming practices are essential pillars for most food ethicists, and the EAT-Lancet report provides a large scale vision for realising these objections. Relying on scientific consensus from nutritionists and agriculture scientists, this study aims to provide a planetary-scale diet that might help sustainably feed the anticipated 10 billion humans, by 2050. In this section, I will dive into some of the key points of the report, to show why they are important to a comprehensive food ethic. Then, I will offer some critiques of their proposed solutions to show in what ways the report comes up short.

³ Willett, W. et al. (2019)

⁴ Ibid., p 476

⁵ Ibid., p 476

The *EAT-Lancet* report is organised into four sections, the first of which focuses on healthy diets. The Commission uses a food group framework to explain what constitutes healthy eating—it is more or less a restructuring of the food pyramid we could all recognise from our grade school educations. The goal of the report is to provide a universally applicable healthy diet. In this case, the 2500 kcal/day diet is meant to be accessible to all humans, up to 10 billion.⁶ The major changes to the average US American diet include replacing most to all meats (especially red meats) with vegetable- and legume-based proteins; increasing fruit and vegetable consumption to nearly half of the mass of one's diet; and eliminating dairy fats, and most dairy products, from diets entirely. While each person's (and culture's) dietary tolerances and limitations are different, these recommendations are meant to reduce overall risk of early mortality and rates of obesity. It is also assumed that each individual have the capacity to exert moderate to high levels of physical activity; this presents challenges, such as economy of time or access to facilities, that exceed the infrastructure of the food system, but help to show how our health and habits rely on multiple levels of sociopolitical infrastructure coming together.

The second section focuses on sustainable food production. The Commission is offering a universal definition of sustainable production practices, which “use a system-wide assessment of environmental effects of the comprehensive set of parameters at various scales.”⁷ They look at six different factors in the food production system and set parameters, or limits, upon these areas of food production: climate change, biodiversity loss, land-use change, freshwater use, and nitrogen and phosphorus flows. Without favouring one criteria to the others, a sustainable food system is one in which these parameters are not exceeded. Additionally, each criteria is accompanied by an explanation of its associated causes. For example, the major goal for combating climate change is to turn the total

⁶ This optimal estimation is based on a study focused exclusively on US American subjects. Their suggestions are adjusted for populations with higher or lower average body masses, but their quantities provided could be understood as percentages of the total mass of calorie intake.

⁷ Willett, W. et al. (2019), p. 461

of global agriculture operations from a net emitter of greenhouses gases (GHG) to a net sink of GHG. In other words, by 2050, the goal is for all agriculture operations to sequester more carbon than they emit annually. However, due to the complexity of our food systems, doing so is connected to ceasing all current deforestation operations making way for more agricultural lands; as well as reducing the number of animals raised for consumption on these lands; as well as eliminating the use of fossil fuels in our transportation system—in general, but in this case, for the transportation of food products specifically. This requires compliance from more than our food systems, but it is difficult to envision a transition to sustainable food production without this level of commitment. Other suggestions include redistributing nitrogen sources from over-users to under-users and implementing a “Half-Earth” policy whereby the remaining 50% of undisturbed wilderness areas be free from any further destruction, while simultaneously investing in regenerative practices of forest corridors where possible.

In the final two sections of the report, the Commission tries to show how healthy eating and sustainable practices can be complimentary to one another and outlines a five strategy plan for accomplishing what they call the “Great Food Transformation.” They offer three methods for mitigating the food system that, when combined, could produce promising results by 2050: changes in diet, improved production practices, and reducing food waste by half. Combining the findings of decades of scientific research with a range of policy reforms, immediate global-scale action, with international compliance, seems to be the only way to move forward.

The most important take away from this report is acknowledging that improving our food systems will require compliance at all scalar levels, from the local to the international. I agree with this sentiment, and what I am proposing below does not stray from this observation. I am not favouring either a top-down or a bottom-up approach, rather I understand that it will require efforts from both political angles—and all political bodies. However, while this report utilises scientific evidence for its

claims, the only normative claims it makes concern healthy eating and ecologically sustainable farming practice. No claims are made about the political structures and practices of our current food systems. It is one thing to present quantifiable metrics through regenerative agriculture and focused food production, but it is another thing entirely to recognise the labour of those building the food system from the ground up. Providing global access to nutrient-rich diets whose cultivation does not exhaust the earth's water and nutrient cycles is an essential and commendable goal. But this focus does not give us any insight into how on-the-ground operations will realise these goals. Nor does accepting the report at its word imply that the suffering and exploitation facilitated by the industrial food complex will be eliminated. The *Eat-Lancet* Commission admits that it is not their place to make such suggestions, that their study can only provide a starting point to work within. But that work still needs to be done.

My goal here, then, is to show that even if we took the *EAT-Lancet* Commission's recommendations for the "Great Food Transformation," we would still need to address the other three principles/outcomes I have mentioned above. *Ethical eating* cannot only focus on health and sustainability: it must also consider subjects' welfare and socioeconomic power structures—in other words: *sourcing*. Within the framework of their vision, the *EAT-Lancet* report needs to be able to explain to us *how* these healthy and sustainable diets are meant to reach our plates.

PART I: From where does our food come?

As consumers in the industrial food complex, the distances between our tables and the origins of our foods is tremendous. Our foods sometimes travel thousands of miles before they reach our supermarkets. Without even considering GHG emissions, it is still unfathomable to think about the journey a single piece of fruit might take to reach one's plate. (*And this is standard practice!*) There is no better word to describe this phenomenon than *alienation*. We are alienated from our foods both spatially and psychologically. The former being described by the literal distance our foods often travel to meet us in the markets, and the latter best represented by our general ignorance of the labour and energy that is required to move our foods across frontiers. Unfortunately, as we shall see, a repeating consequence of the *alienation* of our food system is the suffering of its participants that comes along with it. That is what we will be exploring in PART I. But first, we must understand more completely what it means to be alienated within the industrial food complex.

...

Understanding Alienation

When I had my epiphany last winter, my first instinct was to rush to my cabinet and locate the origin of my foods. Of course, I didn't immediately find what I was looking for. When I wanted to ask, "from where did my breakfast come?" I was unable to answer this question in a complete sense. Instead, I was left with a *superficial explanation*: Mexican blueberries, from a "local" supermarket, and Brazilian honey and Canadian-packaged green tea, both purchased from a supermarket chain. This experience of being unable to transgress a certain level of ignorance can be thought of as one manifestation of the concept of alienation. In this case, my alienation comes from my inability to *literally know* the origin of my food. This should come as a shock, since food is a biological necessity of the human condition. To

be thus alienated from our sources of food would be like relying on a socioeconomic framework to deliver our oxygen; as a result, the commodifications of our food has caused us to lose sight of its necessity, likening lentils, a necessity, to a denim jacket, an accessory, rather than a delicious fuel for our activities.

Before we jump into our alienation from food, it might help to better understand how deep of a role alienation has played in our association to the world around us. In *Thinking like a Mall*, Steven Vogel reminds us how alienated we have become from those *objects* that environ us. And while the core of Vogel's project is the deconstruction of the human-nature dualism, I believe his explication of our alienation-from-our-environment translates well within the framework of our food system. Vogel writes,

“The total number of people directly involved in producing the objects in my own immediate visible environment right now must be in the tens of thousands. [...] And yet as a phenomenological matter we do not typically experience the objects in our environment this way. They are mere objects, things we simply find around us, things we use, enjoy, ignore, without thinking about the processes through which they came to be, and most importantly about the people—real flesh and blood people, just like us—whose effort and labor helped to bring them into existence.”⁸

Vogel is bringing to light the degree to which we have taken our world *for granted*. We live as though the objects that surround us have always been there or have always been these objects. In our daily grinds, rarely do we stop to ask ourselves questions like: *Where did my chair come from?* or *Whose hands were responsible for assembling its back and legs?* or *From where was its wood sourced?* *Was it ethically sourced?* *Was it logged under a sustainable operation?* *What are the living conditions of the workers responsible for building my chair?*—and not just the ones who shaped its pieces or glued them together; *all* of the labourers at every stage in the production chain. “In our ordinary relation to these sorts of items,” Vogel writes, “such questions never arise; the items are treated as if they had simply come into existence of themselves, or as if they had always been in existence.”⁹ These sorts of items

⁸ Vogel, S. (2015), p. 84-85

⁹ Ibid., p. 85

are not just the objects at which we sit or in which we drive or on which we write; they also include those things-themselves that we consume.

...

So, *from where does our food come?* I have identified two categories of explanation to this question: *superficial explanations* and *systemic explanations*.

The *superficial explanation* might seem straight forward and goes a little like this: just check the sticker on your banana. In the case of a banana in the United States, it will most likely say Dole, Del Monte, or Chiquita. If the sticker does not come with a complimentary location—such as Guatemala, Honduras, or Costa Rica—then one might find the answer on each company’s website. Easy enough still. However, not all foods’ origins are this easy to discover. This might work for most fruits and vegetables, but origins quickly become difficult to know once we investigate manufactured and processed foods. Most, if not all, processed foods contain a plethora of ingredients, and it is not easy to determine from where each ingredient comes. In fact, at most, a company might provide the location of its most used manufacturing facility, and sometimes they will only tell you where their headquarters is located. In order to know from where each of its ingredients are sourced one must go out of their way to find this information, say, on the company’s website. And companies don’t make this process very easy for the consumers.

That is why I am calling this a *superficial explanation*. This way of identifying the origin of one’s food (and food products) is shallow and limited. It also gives the (even shallower) impression that the truer origin of one’s food is merely the supermarket itself. As Vogel writes, this *superficial explanation* leads to the origin of our food products “being treated as if it occurs with the financial transaction in which they came into one’s possession, and not in the processes of labor that produce

them.”¹⁰ Not only are we spatially alienated from the origin of our foods, but we are also psychologically alienated from the reality of the processes of labour and socioeconomic institutions that have brought our foods to the supermarket. This ignorance has literal, harmful impacts on labourers working within the food system, as well as animals being raised for consumption.

As Vogel helps show, in order to truly answer the question of from where our food comes, we need to formulate a *systemic explanation*. So far, we have been framing the issue of *ethical eating* as one belonging to the food *system*. Therefore, we can begin to understand that it is not Albertsons alone that provides me with my nourishing goodies, but it is also the market’s employees, the delivery truck drivers, the farmers, the harvesters, the seed and biochemical manufacturers, and the beings themselves whom we consume. To un-alienate ourselves from our food is to recognise the *systemic* (and social) structure of our food system. And to eat ethically is to care about (and for) each link along this complex chain. Therefore, to be *systemically* alienated from our foods raises many moral dilemmas.

While we ought to be concerned about the welfare of all members in the food system chain, I will be focusing on the two most represented by food ethics literature: animals and migrant workers. First, I will focus on animal welfare, which is more widely covered and understood. Then I will discuss the conditions faced by migrant farm workers in the United States—whose harm can be linked to their literal invisibility in our current food system.

...

The Case Against Factory Farming

The practice of vegetarianism in the United States can be found as early as the founding of the nation itself. In 1772, republican doctor Benjamin Rush “published his advice on healthy living, advising a (now-familiar) moderation in spirits, a mostly vegetable diet, and adequate exercise.”¹¹ Less than a

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85

¹¹ Dupuis, E. M. (2007), p. 36

century later, in one of his more controversial chapters, the poet and pioneer environmentalist Henry David Thoreau wrote, in *Walden*, “I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food.”¹² Nowadays, there is a plethora of reasons why one might follow the suggestion of Rush and Thoreau. Motivations run from one’s religious practices¹³ to improving one’s health and mitigating climate crisis¹⁴—these two latter motivations constitute the primary focus of the *EAT-Lancet* report. In fact, according to the Commission, if the world changed to a purely vegetarian diet (and changed *nothing else* in terms of farming practices or waste reduction), then GHG emissions could be reduced by one-third¹⁵ by 2050. As noted above, not only is industrial animal agriculture responsible for tremendous GHG emissions, it is also a primary driver of land-use change, watershed pollution, and biodiversity loss. In other words, a nationwide movement to a vegetarian diet would have tremendously positive implications for the environment. However, perhaps the most socially ubiquitous reason for practicing vegetarianism is the concern for animal welfare. While plenty of work has been conducted in this area of study, I will be focusing on how the industrial food complex helps facilitate the suffering of animals through two mechanisms: commodification and ritual distancing.

Before I begin, I wish to make the disclaimer that *I am not interested in discussing the ontological question of whether or not it is ethical to kill animals*. This topic has its own arena of discussion, and for the purposes of an inclusive food ethic, I will not include that discussion here. Instead, I am using an ethics of care framework presented by Raymond Anthony, philosopher and council member for the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society, which states that “to care

¹² Thoreau, H. D. & Cramer, J. S. (2004)., p. 206

¹³ Johnson, A. (1996).

¹⁴ Fox, N. & Ward, K. (2008).

¹⁵ Willett, W. et al. (2019)., p. 473—They could be reduced even further, to nearly one-fifth (or 80%), if everyone went vegan.

adequately for someone or something with whom we have a relationship or with whom we are situated is a quality of the morally good person or society.”¹⁶ In other words, regardless of one’s beliefs about that moment of life-taking, we must be able to unify under the goal of protecting the dignity and well-being of the *lived* experiences, to the best of our ability, of all nonhuman Others. Whether or not one consumes meat, we can agree that current industrial food system practices are morally indefensible.

In the words of Frank Reese, the only certified “heritage” Turkey farmer in the United States, “*People care about animals....They just don’t want to know or to pay.*”¹⁷ This is one of the many perspectives that Jonathan Safran Foer accounts for in his book *Eating Animals*. Of all of the characters to make an appearance in Foer’s story, Reese might be the most admirable for engaging in practices that provide “an argument for another, wiser animal agriculture and more honourable omnivory.”¹⁸ Through Western philosophy alone, there are several systems of ethics that might help us understand improving the treatment of farmed animals. Andrew Johnson, author of *Factory Farming*, identifies contract theory, rights theory, and consequentialism as the top contenders.¹⁹ Each of these systems has its own issues—ones that they would have anyways—but, used in conjunction with one another, they may help us broaden our conception of moral responsibility. In addition to these systems, Johnson suggests that incorporating epistemology into our ethical frameworks helps us expand them. For example, “evolutionary and behavioural studies provide evidence of similarities between other animals and humans”—most notably the ability of nonhuman animals to use tools, communicate, and develop social hierarchies.²⁰ This increased understanding of the nonhuman might help us continue to extend greater moral consideration to other species (and beyond).

¹⁶ Anthony, R. (2017), p. 221—Anthony derives this ethics of care directly from Joan C. Tronto, who will be featured more extensively in PART II.

¹⁷ Foer, J. S. (2009), p. 114

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 244

¹⁹ Johnson, A. (1996).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53

One of the driving forces Johnson identifies that results in animal harm in industrial farming is economics. For example, he writes that the tradition of confining thousands of hens into small cages translates to “efficiency in terms of the maximum number of eggs at the minimum price” for farmers.²¹ This can also affect the sustainability of an operation, in cases where it is cheaper to let animal waste runoff in troughs, rather than be soaked up in straw to be turned in to manure. Foer gives dozens of accounts of inhumane treatment of chickens in the United States—citing de-beaking, starvation, and manipulating sleep cycles among standard industry practices—wherein “about 180 million chickens are improperly slaughtered each year.”²² Additionally, Johnson is willing to give Descartes at least partial blame for his mechanistic view of the world, which gave the privilege of “minds and souls” exclusively to humans. Foer provides many accounts corroborating Johnson’s assertion that this Cartesian metaphysics persists in industrial animal farming. Perhaps the focal point of Foer’s book comes when he asks the question, “*What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?*”²³ We can appreciate Foer’s sentiment here insofar it asks us to confront what is *true*. When we are made aware of all of the facts, we are given the opportunity to make complete, uninhibited ethical decisions. In this case, committing ourselves to resisting and reforming the current dominant system of animal agriculture.

Beyond economic incentives and Cartesian dualism, Johnson identifies another, more literal, cause of our alienation from the suffer of animals in factory farms: ritual distancing. If you have ever had a hand in slaughtering or processing a farm animal, then you know it is a visceral experience. A hen’s body will flail itself like a child imitating a fish out of water, for minutes after her head has been removed; the flesh underneath her skin remains warm and wet in your palm as you remove her

²¹ Ibid., p. 57

²² Foer, J. S. (2009), p. 133—Birds remaining conscious when their throats are being slit is said to happen “all the time.”

²³ Ibid., p. 252

intestines; her bones splinter like a defrosting oak tree as you snap her talons at what seems like her knees. As Johnson points out, this is a tremendously emotional experience, perhaps even traumatising,²⁴ and “[t]he trend towards larger numbers of animals being under the care of fewer farm workers can result in less awareness of the animals’ general health and condition.”²⁵ There is little doubt that if we were all required to be-head and de-feather a chicken ourselves each time we wanted to make a soup stock or a baked pasta, the number of vegetarians would immediately increase; and the number of weekly dinners involving meat would plummet. Not just because of individuals’ squeamishness, but also because of the sheer labour this requires—in slaughtering, carving, cleaning, and cooking, and also for the more acute awareness of taking a life. Whether or not one believes in the ethics of this action, it is entirely different to hold abstract principles and to be able to act on them. And there is a tremendous phenomenological gap between neatly processed slices of “meat” in the deli window and the living, breathing, squawking avian animal that was only minutes ago embodying the world of consciousness. As consumers, we are accountable for this reality. However, being as distanced as we are from factory farming allows us to categorically separate these two entities, turning the living bird into a mere commodity in our minds.

Anthony challenges us to take a step back and look at the industrial food complex in a larger context: as a technology itself. In this way, our relationship to animal welfare is also constituted by our relationship to technology. Much like Johnson, Anthony also sees how economics, and the subsequent decisions made by a select few, have put pressure on the industrial food complex to engage in harmful behaviours. The ever-increasing expectation of “cheap and abundant” sources of food has directly affected “our relationship with technology and the nonhuman world.”²⁶ Due to the predominant

²⁴ Johnson, A. (1996), p. 53

²⁵ Ibid., p. 57

²⁶ Anthony, R. (2017), p. 215

corporate control of our food system, “efficiency” has become the primary principle of production, and the alienation of humans from the suffering of animals within this system has created a vicious (and violent) cycle of harm. To respond to this, Anthony calls for adopting an “ethic of care,” which consists of four elements: *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*.²⁷(The four elements of an ethic of care will play a significant role in PART II.) These elements would extend to consumers, producers, and legislators alike, in order to facilitate better practices at each tier of the food system.

Including animal welfare in *ethical eating* is about respecting the dignity of nonhuman Others and minimising the cruelty committed against them. There are many ways to come to this conclusion. For example, if one uses a purely consequentialist approach, we might say that better practices towards animals results in greater overall utility at all levels of the food system. Additionally, Johnson and Anthony both make a case for emphasising gratitude by noting our interdependence on all nonhuman beings in the food system. Focusing on this perspective could help increase our expectations of how animals are treated in the food system. However, as both also point out, it is not enough for consumers to passionately “demand” better practices. It is also up to legislators to uphold these standards through policy. According to Johnson, this policy might need to be international in some cases, too—specifically when a practice is outlawed in one jurisdiction but then merely imported from another, where that practice has not been made illegal.²⁸ This might call for restrictions on certain imports, and compliance from governments, distributors, and consumers would be necessary.

For this section I have also considered the question of whether meat-eaters should (literally) *have a hand* in killing their own meat. I’m not committing to a position on this topic, but it is this kind of question that might help us overcome (by mitigating) the suffering caused by the alienation of our food system. Ultimately, all of this requires *transparency* in the food system, so that we may know

²⁷ Ibid., p. 221

²⁸ Johnson, A. (1996), p. 62

what the best practices are, *who* is practicing them, and *how* we can participate—whether we remain consumers or find ourselves in roles of greater decision-making power. In case it has not been made explicitly clear: *industrial animal farming is incompatible with ethical eating.*

...

Invisible Bodies on the Front Lines of Our Food System

As shown above, a primary contributor to the suffering of animals in our food system is consumers' distance from harmful practices. But compared with the coverage animals receive from organisations, such as *PETA*, and activists, the humans predominantly responsible for actually harvesting, processing, and packing our food products in the United States appear outright *invisible*. In 2013, Seth M. Holmes published an ethnography titled *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*, an immersive and experimental exposé, wherein he documented the traveling, living, and working conditions of Triqui migrant labourers who make up the back bone of the food system in the United States. The numbers are more staggering than one can imagine. Holmes cites that nearly “95% of agriculture workers in the United States were born in Mexico, 52% of them unauthorized.”²⁹ In this context, “unauthorized” means “undocumented” or “illegal.” Given this classification, migrant workers' lives (and bodies) go unprotected and unrepresented by both the legal and health care systems. This makes them—the individuals who literally feed us—tremendously vulnerable to a plethora of harms.

In the contemporary United States, the topic of immigration is politically and dramatically polarised. Immigration tends to get viewed through an economic lens, and disagreements are grounded in job security and medical welfare at the surface. Holmes asks us to dig deeper. The relational disparities between US Americans and Mexican immigrants result in the horrible treatment of the latter

²⁹ Holmes, Seth J. (2013), p. 40

on the grounds of what Holmes calls structural and symbolic violence: that is, the social and cultural lenses through which Latin American immigrants are viewed in the United States are largely due to underlying social and political hierarchies. Holmes describes his own work as aiming “to denaturalize ethnic and citizenship inequalities in agricultural labor, health disparities in the clinic, and biologized and racialized inequities in society at large.”³⁰ In this context, the denaturalization of inequality means recognising these phenomenon as the social (and racist) constructs they are, rather than perpetuating the idea of a cross-cultural hierarchies as something inherent in different peoples’ global situatedness, as though it were something “natural” of the north to dominate the south. In order to give an honest and reliable account of human suffering, Holmes *embodies* the experience of a native Oaxacan, migrating to the United States to work on berry farms in Washington and California.

Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies helps us understand the severity of food system injustices against migrant workers, and especially against their bodies. Holmes begins by recounting his experience crossing the border with a group of Triqui people, beginning in Oaxaca and ending in the dangerous heat of the Arizona desert, where they are eventually apprehended. This experience for Holmes is traumatic, and yet he is humble in recognising that he’s been let off easy compared to his co-travellers, who are deported and forced to try again. Next, Holmes shares of the hierarchies found on a specific farm and illuminates the relationships between citizenship, language spoken, and ethnicity and the types of work distributed. With the Triqui migrants being primarily undocumented and speaking an indigenous language (not Spanish), they find themselves the least advantaged in terms of treatment and accessibility to certain roles on the farm. Holmes then follows the stories of three Triqui men navigating medical clinics both in the United States and San Miguel, in Oaxaca. Guided by Michel Foucault’s explanation of “the clinical gaze,” Holmes offers a substantial critique of how medical

³⁰ Ibid., p. 185

professionals objectify their patients by ignoring the conditions of their lives and labour that result in their poor health, often essentialising their habits or culture as “dirty,” rather than a result of their occupational conditions.³¹

Holmes shows how structural and symbolic violence have been normalised and internalised into the fabric of US American culture. The Triqui people have been pigeon-holed into their place in the workforce and as undocumented “aliens” (solidifying their condition as *neither here nor there*). Symbolic violence is exercised through the very language that is used to deem immigrants “illegal” or “unskilled;” and these structures and symbols are reinforced as long as we continue to use them. In fact, these stereotypes are reinforced with such consistency that even some of the Triqui people themselves have internalised these prejudices and found a way to establish pride in their hard work and alleged resistance to pesticides (which is obviously false, but gives them a sense of value above others they see around them, who are all “above” them according to the social and political structures they exist within).³² What is most compelling about Holmes’ account is that it shows how deeply we, in the United States, are reliant on the structural and social inequalities that immigrants face with their labour and their bodies. And, further, that we perpetuate these harmful inequalities as long as we are complicit.

Holmes’ account is not the only one illuminating these structurally facilitated injustices against workers’ health and safety. The meatpacking industry has been the single most dangerous profession in the United States in the last 50 years. Countless horror stories have been shared over the past decades, with many of them ending in workers losing law suits against the companies themselves—sometimes even after losing limbs.³³ Some workers claim concern for the “emotional toll” of slaughtering

³¹ Ibid., p. 165

³² Ibid., p. 173

³³ Schlosser, E. (2001, July).

hundreds of animals *per hour*, day after day, to keep up with factory demands.³⁴ And migrant workers are particularly vulnerable in the meatpacking industry since their undocumented status makes their labour cheap and disposable. They are often unable to advocate for better working conditions or protect themselves against injuries due to fears of deportation.³⁵ And in cases where undocumented workers have been able to stand up for themselves, such as dairy activists in Vermont taking on Ben & Jerry's ice cream,³⁶ they can face arduous bureaucratic loopholes that take years to settle, and meanwhile they're suffering long work weeks, making less than minimum wage, and living and working under inhumane conditions to keep their industry functioning, all while facing the threat of deportation.³⁷

The other major health concern faced by migrant workers, as alluded to above, is exposure to harmful pesticides. Not only are migrant workers exposed to pesticides while on the job. They can also be disproportionately affected by “pesticide drift,” or “the offsite airborne movement of pesticides away from their target locations.”³⁸ Their families can also be affected by this “drift.” Since migrant workers often must reside within close proximity to their work sites, where the cheapest housing tends to be, spraying events easily carry over into these housing areas. In addition, regulatory responses to “pesticide drift” can inadequately represent migrant worker communities, due to their invisibility from governing bodies. Being able to avoid pesticides in our foods remains a privilege that many US Americans take advantage of, but the same can't be said for the labourers on the front lines of our food system.

As Anthony's ethics of care suggests, recognising and responding to the responsibilities we have to those with whom we have relationships is key for “the morally good person and society.” In the

³⁴ Foer, J. S. (2009), p. 254

³⁵ Elk, M. (2018).

³⁶ Balcazar, E. (2017).

³⁷ Orleck, A. (2018).

³⁸ Harrison, J. L. (2006).

case of migrant workers, their *invisibility* does not erase our relationship (or responsibility) to them. *Ethical eating*, then, would necessarily include a focused effort in mitigating the suffering of our food system's most vulnerable (and essential) persons. Much like the case for animal welfare, representing the needs of migrant workers will require efforts at the level of legislators, in addition to consumers. As shown by the case in Vermont, communicating with bureaucrats can take years, and all the while *real* humans are suffering. While health care and immigration reforms may be made in localised legislation within the United States, Holmes suggests that we extend our vision beyond domestic policy. Presently, the structure of our food system *invites* the exploitation of migrant labour in order to keep prices low; ironically, these policies coexist within a framework that punishes “unlawful” migration, therefore criminalising individuals for utilising the system of labour on which the United States’ food system depends.³⁹ Solving these harms appropriately requires international compliance, such as renegotiating trade deals, like NAFTA, which have disproportionately affected Latin American economies and caused socioeconomic conditions that incentivise labourer migrations. And even still, adequately reforming our food system may require going as far as reimagining which foods we consider accessible to ourselves. For this, we must consider the historical and contemporary consequences of transcultural relations.

...

No More Bananas in the North

One of the emerging responses to the industrial food complex—which has been characterised by a rapid drop in the number of farmers in the United States in the past century, corporate control of seed and fertiliser inputs, vertical integration of production,⁴⁰ and the appropriation of land from vulnerable

³⁹ Holmes, Seth J. (2013), p 13

⁴⁰ Howard, P. H. (2016).

populations by corporations, also known as “land grabbing”⁴¹—has been the food sovereignty movement. The food sovereignty movement is a political initiative that seeks to protect “the rights of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”⁴² In other words, the food sovereignty movement is a response to the corporate monopoly on food that instead recognises *farmers* as the proprietors of the food system. Unlike a globally centralised food system, such as the one presented by the EAT-*Lancet* Commission, the food sovereignty movement focuses on localised farming practices, often in rural and marginalised communities.⁴³ If it is the case that we could achieve a globalised food system, as proposed by the Commission, what would that mean for local food economies? The Commission is working under the implicit assumption that, in order to achieve its goals, our transportation sector will be (at least closer) to carbon neutral by 2050—since the GHG emissions that agriculture is responsible for do not end when the produce leaves the farm. This seems to suggest that long-distance transportation of food products needn’t necessarily be ecologically unsustainable—though we may remain skeptical. However, they do not give any indication that international trade will be in everyone’s best interest. Or, put more directly, a centralised food system does not guarantee that every population’s social and economic sovereignty is protected. In this section, we will discuss how historical international relationships can help us better understand what it means to be responsible for and responsive towards the circumstances that have brought our foods to our tables.

...

When I was first contemplating the inclusion of this section, I wanted to call it “culturally appropriate” eating; but this isn’t quite correct. It turns out that even in contexts where this term *is* being used, it is

⁴¹ Charles, D. (2012).

⁴² Black, Vanessa. (2016).

⁴³ Altieri, M., Nicholls, C. I. (2012).—The importance of localising the food system will be discussed more in PART II

an extremely difficult one to apply.⁴⁴ Some want to let appropriateness be guided by neoliberal forces of “free trade,” thus letting an abstracted will of the people determine what is acceptable; in other words, what is “appropriate” is determined by demand in the supermarket.⁴⁵ Others have argued that culturally appropriate food is context-specific and can really only be understood through social practices, a category to which food production and consumption certainly belongs.⁴⁶ In such a case, the appropriateness of a food would be determined by the culture in which it is situated, with its significance changing in different contexts. But in the majority of cases, when “culturally appropriate” food is mentioned, it is not defined at all, including in the *EAT-Lancet* report.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, none of these understandings helps us get closer to the real concern at hand: *how do we practice being responsible for and responsive to the origins of our food?*

Historically, socioeconomic relations between countries in the world’s north and south have been defined by colonisation—with it came the enslavement, displacement, cultural erasure, and genocide of indigenous populations of the Americas. These relations also manifested as extractive industries, in which, northern countries would appropriate large areas of fertile, resource-rich land, and export these raw goods to their home countries, enriching their own economies and forcing local populations to work as the (often enslaved) labour of these operations. This appropriation of land and displacement of people are both examples of what Karl Marx referred to as the “metabolic rift,”—or the alienation that results from separating human production from natural conditions. This concept has been evolved to incorporate both the violent upheaval of localised social structures as well as the rupturing of nutrient cycles, by transporting organic matter long distances, thus degrading local soil

⁴⁴ Charles, D. (2014).

⁴⁵ Committee on World Food Security, The. (2014).

⁴⁶ Sampson, D. & Wills, C. (2013).

⁴⁷ Willett, W. et al. (2019)., p. 480

conditions and increasing the need for fertiliser inputs.⁴⁸ As expressed by one of the core principles of agroecology, sustainable farming uses a “closed systems” practice, which minimises nutrient and resource loss by working within the “flows of energy, water, and air,” already imbedded in local ecological systems.⁴⁹ Maintaining the ecological metabolism of a particular area means minimising the amount of resources lost by that locale—the globetrotting of foods across continents is damaging to local nutrient cycles everywhere. This metabolic rift results in the harm of both social populations and ecological systems.

To help illustrate this concept, we can use an historical example: *bananas*. The history of Banana Republics is archetypal of north-south relations. In *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the World*, Peter Chapman provides an illuminating account of Minor Keith, a Scottish-American from Brooklyn, who established banana plantations in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, conspired with military dictators to cripple local economies through unregulated, international entrepreneurship, and literally changed the world of fruit consumption in the global north.⁵⁰ While overseeing the construction of the trans-Central American railroad, Keith married into the Costa Rican aristocracy and began running a monopoly of banana exports into the United States by the late nineteenth century. Keith was notorious for manipulating railway prices for small farmers trying to export their crops, and, once they went bankrupt, he would incorporate their lands into his banana empire. With the help of a few other characters, Keith was able to wreak havoc across several more Central American territories, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Costa Ricans.

⁴⁸ Foster, J. B. (1999).

⁴⁹ Black, Vanessa. (2016), p. 8

⁵⁰ Chapman, P. (2007).

At the turn of the century, Panama disease began ravaging plantations, and in just two decades, over one hundred thousand acres of banana crops would be devastated. In an effort to stay two steps ahead of the spreading, United Fruit moved its operations in whichever direction it could, leaving behind entire communities of workers to fend for themselves in ghost towns, without jobs; in some cases bridges and railroads were deconstructed and tossed into the ocean. United Fruit was utterly unconcerned with the well-being of the local workforces they left behind. In addition to displacing vulnerable workers, the preferred disease mitigation technique was to spray copious quantities of “Bordeaux Mixture”—a pesticide containing copper sulphate. These vast monocultures were turning previously fertile lands into cesspools of infection and poison. As long as the Company could outrun the wave, they could stay ahead of the competition. Wherever there was untouched land ahead of them, United Fruit would “carve out another part of Central America’s infinite jungle.”⁵¹ This blatant disregard for workers’ welfare or ecological health was standard practice at United Fruit.

At different times, the US government had various levels of involvement in the banana trade. Attempts to bring down United Fruit during William Taft’s administration—famous for breaking up Standard Oil—were thwarted by a Supreme Court that considered such affairs “beyond jurisdiction.” And when President Woodrow Wilson tried to reverse this trend by instantiating taxes on banana imports to support the nation’s poor, he was met with resistance by United Fruit, whose “lobbyists had convinced enough people that the company was actually a benevolent one.”⁵² However, after WWII, this *laissez-faire* attitude would no longer hold. In 1951, Guatemala had democratically elected Colonel Jacobo Arbenz, an educated and cultured “military modernist,” who did not see the company as beneficial to the well-being of Guatemalans and planned to reclaim unused territory from United Fruit. Capitalising on the post-war McCarthyism, United Fruit, with the help of an historically prolific PR-

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 105

⁵² Ibid., p. 81

guru, Edward Bernays, managed to turn Guatemala into an emerging “communist” state in the eyes of Washington. By 1954, United Fruit had garnered enough international support across western Europe and other Central American countries to move to action. After Bernays and members of the CIA staged an elaborate coup to oust Arbenz, Guatemala experienced “decades of military dictatorships during which scores, if not hundreds of thousands of people died as death squads killed or ‘disappeared’ anyone regarded as politically dangerous.”⁵³ United Fruit would return the favour a few years later by offering two of its ships for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, further solidifying their role as an international bully. This policy of intervention in Central America would continue over the next three decades, even as United Fruit’s power and prevalence began to plummet.

Nonetheless, United Fruit’s propaganda game remained merciless. They had their own team of film makers who put out imperialist (racist) depictions of life in “Middle America”—one of which is titled *Journey to Banana Lands*.⁵⁴ Bernays was a shameless, self-proclaimed propaganda artist, who was hired by United Fruit for no reason other than to keep all of this under wraps. There’s no denying the success of this campaign. The ubiquitousness of the banana as a staple in the US American diet is unquestionable. Ironically, bananas aren’t even endemic to Central America; they’re originally from the rainforests of Malaysia. And yet, if they were to be removed from the grocery store tomorrow, it would cause an absolute uproar—a testament to the fact that United Fruit is responsible for forcefully writing its place into history.

...

“United Fruit never left us,” writes Chapman.⁵⁵ Today, we know them as Chiquita, their rebranding coming at the end of the Cold War. If one does some navigating on the Chiquita website today, they

⁵³ Ibid., p. 124

⁵⁴ A copy of this twenty minute film can be found on Youtube under the same name: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI5WI6MxWLo>

⁵⁵ Chapman, P. (2007), p. 191

will find links to articles with titles such as “Chiquita tackles the challenge of empowering women,” along with a sustainability report that declares a commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. On their “Banana Story” page, they highlight the company’s century-and-a-half old history. “The origin of Chiquita” is marked at 1870 with a photo, not of Minor Keith, but of a smiling, chin-bearded Captain Lorenzo Dow Baker, the sailor who was responsible for transporting the first shipment of bananas into Boston. Other slides mention the beginning of the United Fruit Company and their advertising campaigns throughout the 1950’s. They make no mention of the company’s murderous past. They also do not mention conspiring with the CIA to overthrow the Arbenzes in Guatemala, nor their offering of ships in the Bay of Pigs invasion. This is a dramatic deescalation of a narrative considering that, when Chapman’s book was published (in 2007), this section of the Chiquita website was titled “Our Complex History,” and at least mentioned the Bay of Pigs.

Perhaps, by now you’re thinking, *So what? What are we even supposed to do with this knowledge? Are you suggesting that we condemn bananas in the United States, thus undermining the work of thousands of labourers in Central America?*

Not exactly. But it does raise the question *does every Chiquita banana carry the history of the blood shed by the United Fruit Company in its peel?* I believe that if we are being *attentive*, as Anthony suggests, or “cognizant of what is going on in food production” and willing to “[scorn] being mechanical or rote or unthinking in our interactions with others who demand our moral sensitivity,”⁵⁶ then the answer is *absolutely*. What implications this has will be different for different individuals, situated in different positions, but there is a claim to be made that this history qualifies for a discussion of political and economic restitution. In fact, in the mid-1990s, West European nations were electing to pay higher prices for imports from former colonies, as a way “to help their ex-colonies develop”—they

⁵⁶ Anthony, R. (2017), p. 221

called it “Fair Trade.”⁵⁷ Chiquita was among the companies leading the charge to against this initiative, countering with their own concept: “Free Trade.” While it’s not obvious that “Fair Trade” products are successful, they are on the rise.⁵⁸ Even Chiquita, as far as they claim, has turned a new leaf.

While I am only satirically suggesting that we have *no more bananas in the north*, for the time being, the distance between ourselves and our food products makes it difficult to completely comprehend the various and complex conditions in any given food operation. As I have alluded to above, *transparency* is a key element to rectifying our food system, which might necessarily involve shortening the distances between our farms and our tables. I also believe that rigorously applying an ethics of care framework to all food products can be an efficacious strategy for identifying and eliminating contemporary maltreatment of labourers (and animals). No doubt, it is imperative that these patterns are not repeated. It is not obvious in the *EAT-Lancet* report that their global food system demands a kind of ubiquitous ethical treatment of workers. Therefore, it is possible that the exportation of the mistreatment of workers could continue to happen, even in a sustainable and healthy food system.

...

I wanted to share this story about bananas, because their presence in US American culture is unquestionable; and yet this violent and insidious history has been all but erased from our collective consciousness. United Fruit paved the way not only for tropical fruits in the United States, but also for how corporations conduct business internationally. What is now referred to as “Corporate Social Responsibility”—or private, “ethical” self-regulation by corporations conducting international business—is not unlike how United Fruit behaved throughout the twentieth century: building housing for workers, setting up health clinics, and investing in agriculture education programs. And yet, as

⁵⁷ Chapman, P. (2007), p. 188

⁵⁸ De Pelsmacker, P. et al. (2005).

Chapman writes, “None of that was a guarantee against its abuses.”⁵⁹ While Chiquita’s Big Banana rivals Dole and Del Monte both offer “Fair Trade” certified bananas, guaranteeing “fair wages” to workers, these programs do nothing to protect the majority of their workers—*everyone else* who doesn’t work under these “Fair Trade” conditions. Chiquita has no “Fair Trade” certification at all; instead, they elect to continue practicing “Corporate Social Responsibility.” Many other contemporary examples exist that carry a potential for being exploitative of workers and local economies and ecologies—vanilla⁶⁰ and quinoa⁶¹ come to mind immediately. Just like the case with bananas, these stories are not straight forward, nor inherently good or bad. But they do call for a more vigilant interrogation of asking *from where does our food come*.

⁵⁹ Chapman, P. (2007), p. 205

⁶⁰ Baker, A. (2018).

⁶¹ Bajpai, P. (2019).

PART II: *The gap between principles and practice*

The purpose of PART I has been to provide some *transparency* to a reader who might otherwise be unfamiliar with these truths and to give a more complete sense of what it means to be alienated by the processes of our current food system. The idea being: now that you know what I know, we are better equipped for moving forward in the discussion of *ethical eating*. Hopefully, we can agree that it is morally intolerable to allow the harms illuminated by *sourcing* to continue. However, this thesis needn't be a crippling exposition of the horrors of our food system merely—though it might also be this. Throughout PART I, I have referenced and bookmarked the elements that might help to mitigate these horrors. Now, we will take a closer look at these elements, and explore how they can lead us toward practicing *ethical eating* in a more just food system.

If the theme of PART I was *alienation*, then the theme of PART II is *coherency*. The argument I am making here is that there is a tremendous *gap* between the principles we uphold and how those principles are expressed in our practices, specifically in the context of the industrial food system. First we will explore *responsibility*: from the individual to the collective, from consumer to producer to legislator, it is necessary that there is a *coherency* with regards to our understanding of *responsibility*. Then, we will discuss three mitigation techniques that reflect the values inherent in an ethic of care framework: *transparency*, *auditing*, and *localisation*.

...

Minding the Gap

In 1977, farmer, poet, and activist Wendell Berry published a book called *The Unsettling of America*, in which he refers to our failing food system as a “crisis of culture.”⁶² Berry makes the case that our culture's concentration on turning individuals into specialists has eroded our competence, each

⁶² Berry, W. (1977)., p 43

individually. Naturally, so it would seem, by way of compounding emergence, a culture of incompetent individuals will be collectively incapable of manifesting morally adequate policies with which to govern themselves—ones based on the virtues of workmanship, care, conscience, and responsibility.⁶³ Berry’s focus on the individual helps us orient ourselves in our daily practices and the communities that we inhabit. He juxtaposes the farmer to the individual who has recently moved to the city. The former embodies self-reliance, loyalty to place, and pride in one’s work, because she has developed an intimate relationship with the (natural) processes on which she relies; whereas the latter is dependent on the authority of others and is dispensable to their will.⁶⁴ Berry’s city-dweller is also susceptible to being alienated from the processes on which *she* relies. As Vogel points out for us, those objects which surround us, and the processes necessary for bringing those objects to us, are so complicated—the chain of consumerism is so long—that we are unable to account for all of its moving parts. When we don’t have our hands directly in the soils of our fruits, and when we cannot account for all of the hands along the way, we are less competent in our ability to take responsibility for these harms. Berry would even say that this degree of alienation renders us wholly *incompetent*.

In general, the participants in our modern industrial food complex *are* incompetent. In 1910, when the US population was just over 92 million, 6 million of them were farmers. By 1997, the US population had nearly tripled at 273 million; meanwhile, the number of farmers dropped to just over 2 million.⁶⁵ Despite accumulating another 50 million citizens in the past two decades, the number of farmers has stagnated. The overwhelming plethora of processed “foods” that line the shelves of our markets are literally the work of chemists, and most of them wouldn’t qualify under what the EAT-*Lancet* Commission considers “healthy.” Not only is it impossible for the lay consumer to be an expert

⁶³ Ibid., p 22

⁶⁴ Ibid., p 48

⁶⁵ Lyson, T. (2004).

in L-Cysteine or Azodicarbonamide, most people don't know that the leaves of a zucchini plant will give you a rash or that many flowers are perfectly edible, some being as sweet as candy. As I've noted several times, food, unlike televisions or sports cars, is a biological necessity. And I agree with Berry, that this ignorance by way of alienation is best described as *incompetence*.

Our culture in the United States, in our universities and our industries, has adapted to breed specialists—experts in one mode of labour, alienated from all others. *No wonder*, Berry would argue, *that we have become thus alienated from our food system as well*. What minds does such a culture produce? What kinds of priorities does it pursue? What kinds of values does it uphold? Berry gives us some insight into this ideal US American, perfect by the culture's standard:

the kind of mind, for example, that can introduce a production machine to increase "efficiency" without troubling about its effect on workers, on the product, and on consumers; that can accept and even applaud the "obsolescence" of the small farm and not hesitate over the possible political and cultural effects; that can recommend continuous tillage of huge monocultures, with massive use of chemicals and no animal manure or humus, and worry not at all about the deterioration or loss of soil.⁶⁶

If it is the case that our industrious culture encourages, in its most obedient citizens, a kind of indifference to the details of the processes that make their lives possible, then perhaps our culture *is* in crisis. For Berry, the appropriate response to this corruption of our characters is a turning inward, a re-imagining of what we expect from our communities, lest we be alienated even from our most intimate and familiar spaces. He writes, "The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities [...] just as the individual character loses the sense of a responsible involvement in these relations."⁶⁷ And yet the industrial farm complex seems to be doing exactly this. And the industrial farm complex *is* our food system. The one through which we have come to expect a year-round stock of asparagus and tropical fruits. Our food system functions at the hands of migrant

⁶⁶ Berry, W. (1977)., p 27

⁶⁷ Ibid., p 23-24

farmers whose presence in the United States has been instrumentalised—when it isn't being politically *alienised*. Yet they remain unrepresented for protection in crisis.⁶⁸ We are not being honest with ourselves, in our reliance on this system, which in turn relies on the real suffering of vulnerable populations of humans and animals.

...

On the one hand, I agree with Berry, that each of us *turning inward* is an important, even necessary, component to mitigating the suffering caused by our industrial food complex. To understand what values will help us do this, we will utilise Vogel's investigation of *responsibility* and Tronto's formulation of *an ethic of care*. On the other hand, we cannot place the entire brunt of responsibility on the consumer merely; we must also extend our moral expectations to producers within the food system and legislators overseeing its functions.

Recognising the true meaning and implications of *responsibility* requires an understanding of to what (and whom) we are responsible. According to Vogel, insofar as humans are inseparable from nature, our creations—which are colloquially understood as artefacts—are, too, inseparable from nature. The primary implication of this insight is that we are subsequently profoundly *responsible* for our artefacts. Vogel also emphasises that our artefacts are not private, but rather *social* constructions. We create in community with others—both humans and nonhumans. Of course, our artefacts are not merely our buildings or technologies, but also our efforts of conservation and our social institutions. In this way, the industrial food system is also a human artefact. By recognising the “builtness” of our environments, we begin to understand that our responsibility to the world is pervasive—that the fundamentally relational quality of our interaction with others and the objects that surround us implicates us in being attentive to their wellness. Vogel writes,

⁶⁸ Philpott, T. (2020).

“To see that the world of artifacts that surrounds us...is something we have built, and that we have built together (socially) [...] [is] to see ourselves as *responsible* for it. [...] We are responsible for the artifacts that surround us in that we made them, or helped make them: they are part of a world that we have worked through our labor to bring into existence.”⁶⁹

We can see, then, that we are responsible, specifically, for the actions we have taken, for the institutions we have created in the world.

As a consumer, one would be rightfully reluctant to claim personal responsibility for the low wages and dangerous working conditions that migrant workers suffer in meat packing facilities. However, once one has been made aware of these conditions, it would be disingenuous to claim that this information was irrelevant to one’s consumer choices. Every time one purchases industrially grown meat or conventional fruits and vegetables, an animal suffered and a human (and possibly her family) was doused in pesticides. Vogel gives us some indication on the degree of our being implicated in these cases as well: “If the artifacts that surround us are ugly, if they work poorly, if they generate poisons and other toxic waste, if they make life worse for us and for the other creatures that inhabit the world with us [...] this is (in part) our doing, and our fault. And so it is also our responsibility to fix it.”⁷⁰ We are never separated from our social institutions; our actions (or practices) are inherently social—they involve others, always. Therefore, we know that our choices are always made in relation to others. This puts a strong emphasis on purchasing *well* within the consumer framework. It is irresponsible to make food purchases when one does not know from where one’s food comes, because the data shows that severe harm is being inflicted upon others somewhere along the way.

As Berry might argue, our communities and social institutions are manifestations of each of our individual values. While political and economic power dynamics have a tremendous role to play—e.g. under current global socioeconomic arrangements, the optimal EAT-*Lancet* diet is affordable only in high-income countries (without accounting for specific socioeconomic situations within those

⁶⁹ Vogel, S. (2015), p. 164

⁷⁰ Ibid., p 164-65

countries)⁷¹—there must be an expectation of consumers to resist being implicated in the harmful practices of the industrial food complex. Otherwise, the institutions we allow to emerge, as a result of our daily practices, begin to reveal our lack of commitment to those values themselves. While calling for institutional change is mandatory, as we will see, such efforts are not a substitute for our individual responsibilities to the collections of others entangled in our food system web. Caring for these collections of others begins at the individual level, in each of us recognising our reliance on complex networks of others to feed us and having enough respect to mitigate their suffering along the way. If our mitigation efforts, in practice, are substantially lacking in efficacy, then this serves as a testament to our social *incompetence* in caring for the individuals that make up our collective social systems.

...

Utilising an ethic of care framework can help us understand the kind of *coherency* between our individual principles and our institutionalised practices necessary to effectively mitigate the harms perpetuated by the industrial food complex. As noted above, Anthony derives his ethics of care model directly from Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*.⁷² The four primary elements of an ethic of care are: *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*. There are two immediate reasons why Tronto's framework is relevant to the industrial food system dilemma: 1) she repeatedly refers to the ethic of care as "a practice, rather than a set of rules or principles,"⁷³ and 2) like Vogel, she believes that, because it is our *practices* for which we are unquestionably *responsible*, we need to bring more attention to our creation of harm-causing social and political institutions. Doing so can help us overcome the alienation that has been the theme of the industrial food complex for the past half-century. We will be discussing the other three elements—

⁷¹ Hirvonen, K., et al. (2020).

⁷² Tronto, J. C. (1993).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 126

attentiveness, competence, and responsiveness—in the next section on solutions. But, first we must explore these two strengths to Tronto’s position.

An ethic of care *as a practice* means that it is not merely something in which we believe, but it is something in which we must *participate*. Tronto writes, “Care as a practice involves more than simply good intentions.”⁷⁴ Much like virtue theory, this framework is predicated on a *checking-in-with* or *coming-back-to* its elements, to make sure they are working. It would not be enough to merely set guidelines of best practices; it is also necessary to follow up on those guidelines to make sure they are providing the intended benefits. This means identifying practices that are adaptable and context-specific, as well as developing practices that align with the needs of the stakeholders themselves. An ethic of care framework does not favour top-down or bottom-up solutions, but looks to incorporate the strengths of both. Let’s take the example of migrant farm workers. Legislators might pass a law requiring adequate protective gear against pesticides for labourers. However, on the ground, this might not be sufficient in also protecting their families, who are still exposed to the aforementioned dangers of “pesticide drift.” It might then be necessary to either accommodate protections for workers’ families or improve wages so that those families can live away from exposure to these harmful chemicals. Depending on the immediate economic feasibility of either option, it might even be more reasonable to switch to an organic practice altogether. While I am aware that this could come off as an oversimplification of the labour framework of the food system, this example is merely meant to show that there needs to be communication across the various levels of the chain of command. This also implies that it would be necessary to bear witness to and mitigate pre-existing social and political hierarchies—such as the ones exposed in Holmes’ ethnography. This is not something that we can guarantee with

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 136

abstract principles alone. It is something we must *practice*, by making sure that there are adequate personnel in charge of overseeing these operations.

This focus on *practices* is fundamental to understanding how we are *responsible* for the ways in which our food system operates. Tronto writes that our “responsibility to care might rest on a number of factors; something we did or did not do has contributed to the needs of care, and so we must care.”⁷⁵ This is not unlike Vogel’s notion of us being responsible for our environments and institutions insofar as we are always *building* them. Our responsibility to others is borne out of our relationship with them. The purpose of an ethic of care is to adequately and effectively represent these relationships in which we are always implicated. In the context of the food system, consumers are wholly dependent on the labour of other humans and the lived (and died) experiences of animals. This quality of interdependence that characterises a primary condition of our being-in-the-world counters the most severe interpretations of the rational individual whose self-interested decision-making is often framed as untethered to others—if only abstractly. To care, then, is to accept this interdependence and develop a moral framework that takes it to be true. Therefore, we could say: being that it is the case that we rely so greatly—though often unconsciously—on the efforts and experiences of others, part of living the moral life requires responding to the needs and wellness of those others. The remaining elements of an ethic of care—*attentiveness*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*—help to frame how responsibility-taking should be best practiced. An ethic of care is not merely concerned with recognising harms, but also with making sure that when we attempt to alleviate those harms, our methods (or *practices*) are sufficient in doing so.

If we are going to accomplish this harm mitigation adequately, then we need to step out of the atomistic framework. This implies being more willing to take responsibility for our reliance on the

⁷⁵ Tronto, J. C. (1993), p 132

social institutions that facilitate our lives of convenience and abundance—*which I'm assuming we enjoy*. Whether or not one has an active hand in causing a specific degree of suffering, nonetheless she is reaping the benefits of that suffering at the supermarket. As Tronto points out, we might be responsible because of something we have *not* done. An obvious example of this comes from being implicated as a witness to a murder—or merely the *planning* of a murder—and not reporting it. Similarly, if you knew without the slightest reasonable doubt that the jeans you are wearing were manufactured by enslaved children, who were being beaten and starved, and when they ripped you went out and bought the exact same pair, it would be difficult to argue that you aren't at least somewhat an accessory to this crime against humanity. While it might not be easy to argue for your crime in a court, it is easy to see this as a moral failure. The sad irony is that this happens in our food system every day—sometimes to humans and all the time to animals. Food growing and animal raising are practices which can take place in a myriad of forms: many of those forms are perfectly harmless; many of those forms are utterly harmful. We have a responsibility to the marginalised participants in the latter forms, insofar as their suffering feeds us and insofar as it is cruel and wholly unnecessary.

Finally, I would like to point out that using an ethic of care framework is merely *one* way of formulating an adequate response to the industrial food complex. The reason I believe it is a more effective framework is because of its development as a *practice* and its understanding of having a *responsibility* to increase our attention towards and develop adequate responses for our practices. There are likely dozens of other ways to approach mitigating harms in the industrial food complex, and I do not wish to promote an ethic of care at the expense of other potentially efficacious solutions. However, I do believe that any alternative framework presented must also provide an emphasis on *practice* and not merely on some set of moral principles. I am also aware that this particular account of *ethical eating* might be missing some more specific accounts—whether cultural, political, or economic.

However, in such a case, I would argue that while this conception of *ethical eating* might be improved by collecting additional considerations, it could not be improved by disregarding the conclusions I am setting forth.

...

Mending the Gap

The concerns of *ethical eating* that have been the focus of this essay are not new; the stories of suffering I have shared are not my own. These issues run so deep into the fabric of our food system that one could see them less as symptoms of a failing socioeconomic industrial enterprise and more as characteristics of that system's success: cheap and abundant food; shelves stocked year-round, unabated by, thus unconcerned with, seasonal shortages; fast-access dining; fruits and vegetables from around the world; and the appearance of food security—all the while, any suffering experienced along the harvest and distribution chain has been vaporised out of view. Whilst we meander the consumption-maximising architecture of our local supermarkets, *we sense no suffering*. The failure, then, of our food system is not a lack of economy: it is a lack of *attentiveness*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*. But how can we hope to be responsible for that which we cannot see? or that which we do not know?

First, we must begin with the assumption that the concept of being *responsible* for our *practices*—as laid out above—is something that we desire, that it is consistent with our conception of moral behaviour. From here we can link the themes of PART I and PART II. My argument throughout PART II has been that we must find a way to achieve a *coherency* between our principles and our practices. Thus, if it is one of our principles that we are *responsible* for our *practices*, then this ought to be reflected in those practices themselves. Tronto's ethic of care is also explicitly holistic. It exists under the ontological assumption that our world and its processes are inherently interconnected. Individuals always exist within webs of relationships with others—humans, nonhumans, and abiotic forces.

Therefore, an ethic of care aims to be representative of this ontological position. Caring for the others on whom we always and necessarily rely is a form of showing recognition and gratitude for this existential condition we inhabit. This applies well to the structure of the industrial food system, by which food travels vast distances across many geographies and hands. Being grateful for the complex of people and processes that allows us to sustain our well-being through sustenance means improving our awareness about those processes and developing adequate responses to any suffering of people and animals along the way. These elements are specifically addressed by an ethic of care and can better prepare us for mitigating food system harms. Additionally, my argument throughout PART I has been that *alienation*, or the consumers' distance, both spatially and psychologically, from the harms of the industrial food system, are predominantly responsible for our inability to mitigate those harms. Therefore, necessary to cohering our principles and our practices is overcoming this *alienation*. That brings us to the second fundamental way in which an ethic of care can help us overcome the harms of food system: by associating its three remaining elements—*attentiveness*, *competency*, and *responsiveness*—with the three solutions mentioned in the beginning of this section—*transparency*, *auditing*, and *localisation*.

...

The first element of an ethic of care is *attentiveness*. Tronto describes an unfortunate irony in our access to *attentiveness* as consumers. Despite occupying an historical moment wherein “[w]e have an unparalleled capacity to know about others in complex modern societies [...] the temptations to ignore others, to shut others out, and to focus our concerns solely upon ourselves, seem almost irresistible.”⁷⁶ What is worse is that this situation regarding access to knowing has only improved since *Moral Boundaries* was published. (*So the drought in our knowing appears to have gotten worse!*)

⁷⁶ Tronto, J. C. (1993), p. 127

Tronto goes on to make important distinctions between ignorance and inattentiveness—the former not necessarily being the fault of the agent; the later being a kind of wilful blindness.⁷⁷ As shown by the issues of *sourcing*, the invisibility of the harms perpetuated by the food system, to both humans and animals, are built in to the structure of the system itself—slaughterhouses in remote areas, migrant workers’ living camps out of view of major highways, and harmful practices exported to countries where workers’ rights are not as heavily regulated. These are all, in part, a consequence of a lack of *visibility*. If an important distinction regarding one’s being implicated or not in some harmful practice is her *knowledge* of said practice, and if the *invisibility* of harmful practices is understood to be built into the social structure of said practice, then the appropriate solution would be to increase the *transparency* of said practice.

The responsibility of improving this *transparency* can be seen to fall in both the hands of consumers and legislators, though to differing degrees. On the one hand, it is reasonable to expect consumers to take more care in evaluating the structures responsible for providing them with their goods and services. While my example above of one’s jeans being made by enslaved children was hypothetical, it is not so hypothetical in reality. Such practices are, unfortunately, very real. Additionally, we tend to at least acknowledge these abstractly—as can be shown in media, film, and literature. We make jokes about animals suffering and about Latin Americans picking our fruits. And while I am not arguing against maintaining a good sense of humour in a complicated world, making jokes has never absolved us of our responsibilities to those suffering harms. We need to be more willing to acknowledge our interdependencies on others and the processes that support our individual living. This is where an ethic of care calls on us to consider a more holistic ontology. Otherwise, we are living disingenuously, as though it weren’t true that consumer choices have some impact on structural

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 129

manifestations of harm. On the other hand, there are obvious limitations to a consumer's ability to know everything about certain products. For example, I mentioned the arduousness of conducting a commodity chain analysis. These can take hours, if not days or weeks, and some of them end in no results. Additionally, some corporations strongly exercise their rights to privacy. The most obvious example happens in animal agriculture, wherein exposing the severely torturous treatment of animals might constitute "trespassing" onto private property. In these cases the "animal liberator" faces punishment—often jail time—while the "animal torturer" is defended by the law. Reversing this trend would require compliance from policy makers. One response to this latter example, and others like it, is to utilise public-access rights similar to other industries. For example, the Toxic Release Inventory requires corporations to publish their pollution records.⁷⁸ This principle might also be extended to the welfare of animals and workers. Operations that provide better living and working conditions might also be subsidised within the budget of the Farm Bill. Another solution is funding for more exposé projects in general—such as the work accomplished by Foer, Holmes, and even this essay. Increasing public awareness also increases our responsibility to respond to our new knowledge. However, awareness itself is not enough; we also need enforced action.

...

Part of my degree requirements at the University of Montana included participating in an internship related to environmental philosophy. For my internship, I worked within my institution's sustainability infrastructure—specifically with the campus dining department; more specifically I worked at expanding the university's composting infrastructure. I worked in conjunction with members from campus administration, catering, and one of the privately owned buildings called the University Center (UC). The UC contains the catering kitchen, as well as a food court—one of the major eateries for

⁷⁸ Purdy, J. (2015).

students. When I first arrived to my university, I noticed that the food court in the UC was serving food in compostable containers without providing composting receptacles for adequately transporting this waste. My goal was to improve this arrangement, to provide post-consumer composting in the food court area. While this is still a work in progress, we did make two tremendous improvements. The first is that all kitchens in the catering and food court areas are now composting 100% of their pre-consumer waste, which has resulted in a nearly 30% reduction in waste-by-weight headed to the landfill from all building operations.

The second improvement happened because of *auditing*. The UC and the local waste management company had an agreement to haul the enormous landfill container once per week—or 52 times per year. For more than five years, the understanding as articulated by their active contract was that a filled container was being removed each time. This was not the case. On a simple inspection of the container, one day before a planned pickup date, it was obvious that the container was not even half full. When we confronted the building manager, who oversees waste operations, he affirmed that it hadn't been “full” in years. In addition to the 30% waste-by-weight reduction accomplished by the composting project, this simple observation led to a contract renegotiation involving fewer pickups that will now be saving the UC \$10,000 *per year* in waste operations.

Auditing works as a complimentary solution to the problems that arise in (in)competence. Monitoring the waste stream of a university building is not unlike accounting for the treatment of the various cogs within a food system complex. For one, both are *practices* in the sense of being socially instituted and exercised. They also run into similar issues of efficacy and maintaining employee satisfaction. One of the obstacles the composting project faced was the unwillingness of the waste collectors' union to be responsible for the removal of food waste, as it wasn't in their contract to do so; they handled landfill and recycling bins exclusively. This was a component that we had to respect and

work within the limitations of. But accomplishing these improvements also meant knowing what we learned, which required intimate investigations. In the context of viewing an ethic of care as a practice, Tronto writes that there is “a constant ongoing assessment of how adequately care is being provided.”⁷⁹ Effectively mitigating the harms perpetuated by our food system will require diligent and ceaseless efforts. Our body of knowledge needs to be consistently updated; there can be no one-off solutions. Not only must we reverse harmful practices of the past and mitigate harmful practices in the present, we must also maintain ethical practices into the future.

It is unreasonable to expect to fix the myriad of injustices committed against animals and labourers in the industrial food system in one broad sweep. We must return to these industries again and again, just as I hope the UC continues to conduct audits every couple of years. Such an undertaking will likely be more suitable for an *intermediary*—or, an organisation devoted to performing audits themselves, in order to improve transparency regarding food system operations. However, it would be necessary that the degree of transparency that is necessary to illuminate and eradicate is supported by legislators. This might even come at the expense of some operations, but such causalities must be supported by our institutions themselves. This would then be a direct representation of our practices cohering with our principles. We need adequate policies that are beneficial to their participants, whether through positive or negative incentives. However, we also need vigilant *auditing* infrastructure, in order to ensure that these policies are being upheld.

...

Tronto’s final element of an ethics of care is *responsiveness*. In the context of care-giving, the notion of there being a care-receiver implies a kind of vulnerability and inequality.⁸⁰ That one must accept care from another can put them in a position of feeling powerless in their circumstance. Tronto points out

⁷⁹ Tronto, J. C. (1993), p. 141

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 134

that this is specifically problematic in a political framework where it is assumed that the fullest conception of a citizen is one who is “autonomous, and potentially equal.”⁸¹ This position ignores the nuances of perspectives that arise in any society, which necessarily contains inequality. The key to *responsiveness*, then, is to provide adequate care without pretending like everyone is exactly the same. In order to do this, Tronto emphasises the importance of “a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and of all of the actors’ situations, needs and competencies.”⁸² In other words, our practices of care must be context-specific.

Non-industrial food movements have a concept for this: it’s called *localisation*. It’s hard to deny the allure of the *localisation* movement. Its goals include community empowerment, economic equitability, and delicious, healthy, pesticide-free food. Some have argued that *localising* the food system does not guarantee organic practices, worker protection, or animal integrity, and it is important to not fall into this “local trap.”⁸³ However, others are increasingly coming to understand the importance of concentrating our efforts into regional food production.⁸⁴ For example, one of the EAT-Lancet Commission’s strategies involves “sustaining agricultural diversity to ensure nutrition quality by supporting small and medium farms, which supply more than 50% of many essential nutrients in the global food supply.”⁸⁵ In contrast, industrial-scale farms are predominantly responsible for producing commodity crops, which, over the past several decades, have decreased the variety of species we eat in favour of those that make the most money. Not only does this inhibit the goal of increasing global nutrient intake, it also endangers those species that we do grow, since monocultures are more vulnerable to the spread of disease. An additional irony of these highly marketable commodity crops is

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 135

⁸² Ibid., p. 136

⁸³ Born, B. & Purcell, M. (2006).

⁸⁴ Kloppenburg, J. et al. (1996).

⁸⁵ Willett, W. et al. (2019), p. 480

that they are often *not* produced for human consumption—such as corn and soybeans—and are instead used mostly as biofuel and feed crops for livestock.⁸⁶

Additionally, local farmers are incentivised to be transparent with the hope that your business will be returned in the future; and their practices more often reflect the pride of the artisan, whose relationship to the labour of cultivation is worn on her hands and brow. On the other hand, by relying on seasonal labourers who are disposable and assumedly many, industrial agriculture characteristically appropriates workers from their otherwise situated practices in order to maximise the outputs of commodity crops. Foods, and the practice of farming, are place-specific. As plants, foods are endemic to certain areas. And while they can be transported across geographies or grown in greenhouses, there are many instances where this will never happen.⁸⁷ Thus, localising our food system has its own reflexive cultural benefits of promoting an appreciation of *where we are*. Each of us belongs to a *place*, whether indigenously or as an immigrant, and cultivating an understanding of that place helps us feel more responsible towards it and become more responsive to it. In this way, *localising* our food system helps us have gratitude for the plants and animals that we consume, the people who deliver us our sustenance, and the ecological processes that are necessary for facilitating all life. And ultimately, we would be less willing to tolerate harms, whether to humans or nonhumans, taking place in our backyards, in our own communities—not that this is an excuse not to care about sufferings abroad. In other words, a shorter distance between our farms and our tables can help us be more attentive and competent in responding to any conflicts that arise. It would be naïve to believe that we could ever completely eliminate *conflicts* in our social institutions, but the consequences of discrepancies in perspectives or methodologies needn't lead to the copious degrees of suffering we witness in the current food system. The *transparency* of our food system and the ability to *audit* its practices can both

⁸⁶ Winders, B. (2018).

⁸⁷ Hence, the real meaning of *No More Bananas in the North*.

be improved by keeping those practices closer to our communities themselves, rather than exporting them—both geographically and psychologically.

To this final point, *localisation* can also help directly improve conditions for workers. Given the kinds of protections for labourers that the United States is able to offer, these mechanisms can be utilised to reform our expectations of migrant workers' treatment. For example, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) has made tremendous progress fighting for migrant workers' rights. It was only two decades ago that farmers in Florida were picking tomatoes in slavery-like conditions. Through diligent social activism, and visibility through US media outlets, the CIW developed the Fair Food Program, in which over a dozen food chains participate, including Walmart, Whole Foods, and Burger King.⁸⁸ The dairy farmers who confronted Ben and Jerry's in Vermont were inspired by the CIW when they protested for minimum wages and better working hours. Though millions of migrant workers continue to be under-protected in the United States, it is within our legal system that these protests can take place. The same cannot always be said outside of the United States. Documenting international violations of human rights becomes complicated quickly. The further we are from the sources and mechanisms of our food system, the more difficult it is to identify these problems and take appropriate action. Even in the case of developing a more participatory system of decision making, such as food democracy, its success could be predicated on the distance between our farms and our tables.⁸⁹

Localising the food system can be understood as manifesting in two ways. The first is to encourage individuals to *eat where one is*. We will expand on this idea more in the conclusion. In general, this idea asks of consumers to pay more attention to the immediate environments in which they are situated and formulate their food system in response to that environment. The second way of understanding *localisation* is to embrace the principles of the food sovereignty movement. To empower

⁸⁸ Fair Food Standards Council. (2020).

⁸⁹ Hassanein, N. (2003).

farmers as the proprietors of our food system is to recognise the significance of their role in sustaining our access to living-giving sustenance. *Localising* our food system also means organising our communities around the essential role farmers play. Unfortunately, under our current social and economic organisations, farming is a thankless job. Empowering farmers means improving their influence on the practices, organisation, and distribution of our foods. And while the sustainability of the transportation of certain foods will be predicated on the renewability of the energy and transportation sectors, farmers ought to be well-equipped to choose what happens with their own produce. In this sense, the *localisation* of our food system also means facilitating the autonomy of its most relevant stakeholders: the farmers themselves.

...

Each of the issues raised in this essay are specific *practices* facilitated by the industrial food complex. Our alienation from our food has been perpetuated by a system that ships food thousands of miles before it reaches our markets and homes. It has capitalised on policies such as NAFTA, which have crippled international economies and led to the diasporas of populations, who have, in turn, been exploited in the name of manufacturing an illusion of “cheap and abundant” food. In fact, one of the principles of agroecology seeks to promote social cohesion in all food producing communities, in order to “reduce migration”⁹⁰—which is to say that an *attentive* and *competent* response to migrant worker injustice includes an acknowledgment of the disinterest of migrant workers to leave their homes in the first place. In short, these injustices have been institutionalised into the expectations of the modern consumer. Our blind reliance on this system has implicated each of us more than we’d like to admit. Which is why I agree with Berry in calling for a reform in our individual characters and consumer choices, in addition to advocating for structural change.

⁹⁰ Altieri, M., Nicholls, C. I. (2012), p. 13

If we are in the condition to do so, we cannot wait for legislators to change our practices for us. As I have been alluding to, a necessary component of overcoming the *alienation* of the industrial food complex is for each of us to have a greater hand in how we are fed. That we must cultivate better practices—as called for by Tronto’s ethic of care—implies that we *participate* in the changes necessary for mitigating suffering in the food system. This can take on various forms: it might mean re-learning to grow our own food in our backyards through community education programs; it might mean participating in local city council meetings to incorporate edible landscapes into our neighbourhoods; it might mean building better relationships between our urban centres and their immediate rural neighbours. Regardless of how it manifests in a particular community, an ethic of care calls for active *participation* in the institutions we seek to reform. Being an *attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive* individual means seeking out ways to become involved in creating a more moral community. Without asking the individual to do too much—say, reform the entire Farm Bill—one can certainly engage with one’s own neighbourhood, town, or city, in order to manifest these principles of care into a practicable ethic. While overcoming the injustices of the food system will require compliance at the level of policy makers, by promoting *transparency* and vigilant *auditing*, as well as *localising* our food system structure, the inspiration to make these changes begins in each of us, individually, and is further empowered when we participate with the network(s) of others with whom we share our communities.

CONCLUSION

“The decision to eat animals or not eat animals is a fraught one. I live in the middle of one of the most productive swathes of forest and pasture ecology in the world. [...] I choose to eat meat because meat is what we produce here. Modern diets, including plant-based ones, are deeply embedded in an industrial food system I’ve spent my adult life working to avoid. [...] My choice has been to eat where I live, and here we’re surrounded by small cattle ranches, and enormous herds of wild ungulates.”

—Charlotte McGuinn Freeman, “Blood on my Hands”⁹¹

“But something was missing. Everything I wrote had this *evangelical* tone. [...] I realised neither knowledge nor social justice gives enough heft for people to change tracks. To be in synch with the living systems, to restore the land, to eat beautifully with conscience, to find meaning in an everyday humble meal, an imaginative relationship with the physical world had to be created. Our hearts had to be rekindled by something stronger, more alluring, than any feel-bad information. Something you never thought of before—like seaweed for breakfast on a limestone beach in September.”

—Charlotte Du Cann, “Uncivilising the Table”⁹²

Efforts and Insights in Ethical Eating

Following my mid-February epiphany, in addition to beginning the quest of constructing this thesis, I decided to take my own shot at *ethical eating*. To commemorate this undertaking, I’ve accumulated nearly 30 receipts from 3 different continents. Most of them come from three “local” grocery markets in Missoula; the rest come from supermarkets in Brazil and Germany. Missing from my collection are records of the trips I made to Missoula’s weekly Farmers’ Market, as well as pickups from the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST, or Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil and the Western Montana Growers Cooperative. *Ethical eating* meant that I was choosing foods that were healthy, sustainably grown, and not produced in a context of exploitation or suffering (to the best of my knowledge). While I cannot give an exact idea of how/where the boundaries of *ethical eating* begin to dissolve, I was eating mostly fruits and vegetables, as well as some eggs and meats, from local farmers, and opted for produce sourced in Montana when I could not attend the farmers’ market.

Unfortunately, as any of my friends will attest to, I was not perfect in my practice. For one, I was met with more than a handful of obstacles: the economics of time, space, and money; the

⁹¹ Freeman, C. M. (2018).

⁹² Du Cann, C. (2018).

challenges presented by restaurants; and the limitation on my diet set by the seasons themselves. In practice, these obstacles seemed to compound exponentially, revealing their interrelatedness and the hydra-esque complexity of the food system. Sharing some of these limitations might serve to reinforce the necessity of rearranging our institutions to better encourage the values I attempted to uphold.

Budgeting took on several faces in this practice: *temporal*, *spatial*, and *monetary*. This latter constraint should come as no surprise; *ethical eating* on a budget is tremendously difficult. In fact, despite living on a graduate student budget, my position might still be considered privileged. This has to do with the other two constraints of budgeting. The *temporal* dimension of budgeting refers to the amount of time it takes to purchase and prepare local food. Researching *ethical eating* in real time—by which I mean in the aisle or stall of the market—can add hours to your trips over time. Whether it’s checking labels or chatting with vendors, the process can be arduous. Having enough time to do this is something many (if not most) US Americans don’t have (or don’t feel they have). I also ran into an issue with “Made in Montana” goods, where it was not always obvious whether the ingredients that made up the manufactured food item could all be locally or ethically accounted for. Additionally, buying *ethically* almost always means having time to cook one’s own meals. I was never able to find a substitute to the cultural convenience that is US American fast-food or late-night snacking—every time I indulged in either of these in the past year, I was breaking my *ethical eating* vow.

The *spatial* dimension of *ethical eating* manifested in a couple of ways as well, and is interlocked with the *temporal* dimension. Firstly, on a larger scale, being situated in western Montana gave me a certain privilege of access to a tremendous variety of local produce, grains, and ethically farmed animal products. This is not the case for many US Americans, especially those living in larger cities and suburbs; for them, access to *ethical eating* can be found in sparse farmers’ markets. This presents the second degree of scale-dependence. On the more local scale, it might be the case that one

doesn't have access, either by knowledge or transportation, to a place to engage in *ethical eating*. As a carless individual, I found Missoula relatively easy to traverse, with its free public transit system and each of its markets being within a couple of miles from my apartment. Meanwhile, thousands of neighbourhoods in the US suffer in food deserts, where their nearest access to food for miles is a gas station or a fast-food joint. And if one doesn't have access to adequate public transportation or a personal vehicle, then "healthy" food is a practical non-option. Budgeting for *ethical eating* under current (even *favourable*) circumstances requires significantly more time and energy than the average US American might have access to. As a graduate student, my ability to spend time shopping and cooking for myself was inconsistent. And if I couldn't catch a ride with a friend or grab a bus before they finished their routes, then I wasn't buying food that day. In the event that I wanted to order takeout or even go out for a bite with a colleague after class, I was *never* following the rules.

Rather than remark that restaurants place a limitation on *ethical eating*, it would be better to say that, save for extreme cases, restaurants and *ethical eating* are incompatible. If we follow the evidence from the stories I've told throughout this essay, then it is almost impossible to make a positive case for restaurants. Even if we focus on the best cases—restaurants that source their meat respectfully *or* provide a seasonal menu *or* try to order from local vendors—we will find that none of them are able to sustain this practice. There are two reasons for this: 1) a restaurant cannot run on its local economy alone, and 2) a restaurant that followed ethical sourcing would not be able to stay open all year round. Whether it's local, free-range beef burgers or autumn squash pizza toppings, the vast super-majority of restaurants we attend are not providing a welcoming environment to *ethical eating*. Their seasonal or local dish is never their *only* dish—and for good reason! Doing so would result in a localised shortage of supply on particular food items and could also drive away customers who didn't like the Daily Special. *Sauces, spices, cheeses!* These can't all be sourced locally, and, under present conditions, there

is no guarantee that the manufacturing of many of these products isn't at the expense of some humans, animals, or the environment. The second reason restaurants might be incompatible with *ethical eating* has to do with the earth herself: specifically, her *seasons*. While it has not been explicitly mentioned in this essay, it is strongly implied that an ethical diet would also follow the seasons. It is not sustainable to transport goods across the world, and I could not be certain of the ethical treatment of animals and workers outside of contexts where I could meet the farmers themselves. When I would go to Missoula's markets, I was at the mercy of the farmers and the shelves. If it wasn't sourced in Montana (which is, admittedly, a large territory to begin with), then I wasn't eating it. This meant that I had to abide by the seasons of Montana as well; my winter diet consisted mostly of eggs, milk, beef, and root vegetables. When I did go out to eat with friends, I opted for local burgers; otherwise, I ate vegetarian or vegan meals. But I would not claim that I was ever practicing *ethical eating* in any restaurants, whether in Missoula or abroad. While I am not ultimately interested in condemning the restaurant industry, I believe that they have a long way to go before we could consider their practices as helping facilitate *ethical eating*.

The structural limitations of *ethical eating* are many, and I am not expecting such an undertaking to be accessible to everyone. As a consumer, do what you can: eat vegan at restaurants, vegetarian at home, and try to avoid factory farmed meats at all costs (*Even though this won't be possible everywhere or for everyone.*) Investigate the products you buy on your smartphone when you have an extra minute—or do it when you get home—and try to cook your own meals at home as often as possible; avoid processed and manufactured foods, and assume that the practices get worse the further you get from your home.⁹³ I expect anyone interested in practicing *ethical eating* to run into the

⁹³ Even if this isn't true, you could not possibly be creating any additional harm by practicing this precaution.

obstacles I've outlined above. I also expect them to find more. And I hope they share these barriers with their communities.

...

To Eat Where I Live

The true flaw in my *ethical eating* practice was that I tried to do it wholly as a consumer. As Berry writes, “the responsible consumer must also be in some way a producer. Out of his own resources and skills, he must be equal to some of his own needs.”⁹⁴ As I continue to contemplate *ethical eating*—and its role in my life as a social practice—there are some changes I would wish to make in the future. Until our food system policies begin to reflect the values of responsibility and care that I believe we do uphold in our private lives, we will have to get creative if we want to uphold those values ourselves. The primary principle that I believe must be embraced is *to eat where one is*. Learning one's immediate culture, both socially and ecologically, is key to understanding *from where our food comes*.

The simplest way to do this would be to have a garden. Without delving too deeply into all of the limitations of this practice—including the investment in real estate and seeds and the time for planting and weeding—humour me, for a moment, in indulging in the eudaemonic privilege of being able to provide for oneself (and one's community) through immediate cultivation. This requires a careful attention to landscape, so that we may know the sunniest patches of our yards. It also requires an intimate relationship with time, both in daily weeding and watering practices, as well as in conversation with the seasons. As the sole proprietor of your garden, you could wholly account for all participants in the chain of cultivation and production.

Of course, not everything is so easily up to us—not only because of the limitations of time and space required to cultivate land, but because not everyone lives in a house with a yard. *What about the*

⁹⁴ Berry, W. (1977)., p. 27

city-dwellers? I hear. But should this be an exception? *To eat where one is* in a city would imply some amount of knowledge of local flora and foraging, so that one doesn't accidentally poison herself. It would imply investing more local revenue in edible landscapes and urban gardens—reimagining green spaces as more than just parks with large lawns and lining streets with fruit trees and native plants. It could also involve urban hunting or bug collecting, for a fast protein fix, and relearning skills, such as freezing, pickling, and canning. And it resists the criticism that these are a romanticisation of primitivism. These practices, like gardening, require a degree of expertise, an interaction with a body of knowledge that, at first, might be found in books, but then must evolve into a learned *practice* in one's surroundings. This, too, implies a kind of conversation with one's environment, a total embrace of *where you are*. It is my hope that our culture in the United States, in all of its recent and rapid political and technological advancements sees the importance of adopting a more place-specific *ethical eating* framework. We cannot be afraid to reimagine what *ethical eating* means, nor expect its possibilities to be asserted exclusively by dumpster-diving *freegans*.⁹⁵ I believe we can do better than this. Individuals can learn urban foraging together, while public institutions provide foods to forage. Insofar as our communities and cities are *built* environments, we can choose to make those space more edible, to facilitate engagement with our *places*.

...

On the other hand, if it is the case that these proposals are too strange or seem to be asking too much; if we aren't willing to part with tropical fruits in temperate climates; if we believe that migrant labourers' bodies are worth less than consumers' bodies; if we believe that the life of an animal is mechanical and her suffering is meaningless; then these are reflections of the cultural crisis that Berry has eluded to for 40 years, of a society lacking in compassion, responsibility, and integrity. We must gaze upon our food

⁹⁵ Hoffman, Ashley. (2014).

system, as if it were *a mirror of accountability*, for it reflects our values: whichever practices have emerged and we perpetuate, whichever expectations we have upheld regarding which foods should be accessible, whichever cultures we've deemed expendable, all reveal themselves in our social and political institutions. The industrial food system is one with which we interact, at least three times, every day. We cannot escape its consequences, and we cannot escape our complicity. Every time we get hungry, we should try to remember what it takes to feed us—how far our meals have traveled and at whose expense. And then, we must work, continuously, to end the treating of others, humans and nonhumans alike, as an exploitable means to our dietary ends.

This requires a fundamental food system reform. And it requires us to care.

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