

Theorizing Alternative Agriculture and Food Movements: The Obstacle of Dichotomous Thinking

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Abstract

How can we understand and move beyond a persistent tendency to think, write and organize about food and agriculture as if it were possible to separate a theorist's views on gender and race from their views on farm animals? Considerable scholarship already addresses this question. This paper suggests that philosophy can contribute to the discussion by focusing a particular kind of attention on patterns of thinking. In particular, dichotomous thinking has traditionally provided grounds for separating production from consumption, and continues to present an obstacle to efforts at connecting "farm issues" to "fork issues." Three characteristics of dichotomous thinking present particular obstacles to scholarship that would deeply integrate food studies with agriculture studies. (1) Dichotomies tend to set up not just a contrast but an antagonism between their two poles, such that to be *this* means to be *not that*. (2) Dichotomous thinking tends to erase nuance, to eliminate anything between the two dichotomous options, and to purify or "clean up" the ambiguous case or extraneous material, by shoehorning it into one option or the other; and (3) Particular groups of dichotomies operate together, such that they mutually reinforce each other to create a way of understanding the world that is more plausible because of its cohesiveness. These snarls of mutually-supportive dichotomies that are nevertheless purist and puritanical in their impact, present a real (i.e. ideological, theoretical, conceptual) challenge to creating scholarly and activist movements that integrate the best of agrarian thinking and the best of critical food studies scholarship attentive to race, class and gender oppression.

Keywords

Dichotomy

Production

Consumption

Alternative agriculture

Agrarianism

Local food

It would be difficult to begin with a careful and sympathetic account of cooking, eating, and growing food and end up with radical dualism as an adequate account of those experiences. (Curtin p. 9)

Difficult, but not impossible. While any number of popular slogans remind us that food comes from agriculture (and that it is therefore impossible to have the one without the other), it nevertheless turns out to be remarkably difficult to work in these “new,” “alternative” or “progressive” food and agriculture movements in ways that fully embody the connections between growing food and eating it. Such a realization should stand as a caution to those of us engaged in alternate food and agriculture studies, whether as activists, as mainstream writers, or as scholars.

Why is integrative work so difficult? This complicated question demands many different kinds of answers, of which philosophical answers are one useful sort. Philosophy’s capacity for abstraction, while not always useful, is an asset in the present case because it draws our attention to large patterns of thinking while also inviting us to (temporarily) ignore details and particularities. Furthermore, this abstraction gives us the opportunity to imagine and suggest alternative patterns of thinking that might prove useful for advancing alternative food and agriculture movements in different promising directions.

This paper focuses on the problems associated with one such existing pattern: namely, western philosophy’s propensity to dichotomize, a propensity that can tend to shape everything in its path, including food production and consumption. I begin my examination of dichotomy with a backstory, one that comes from the field of cultural food studies and illustrates the relative ease with which our analyses sequester production from consumption, agriculture from food. Some ten years ago, I published a book called *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*, in which I developed a portrait of a phenomenon I called “cultural food colonialism” (CFC). I defined CFC as a set of attitudes and practices that shape the ways Euroamericans eat the foods of those we define as “Other,” i.e. those formerly colonized by, or ethnically and racially marginalized by, Europeans and Euroamericans. In contemporary American society, “eating ethnic,” as it is often colloquially known, is an activity especially popular among those of us with considerable cultural or educational capital but relatively little money—academics, for instance. Cultural food colonialism, I suggested then, is problematic in part because it serves to shore up and to normalize other, more material forms of colonialist exploitation. As I put it

in *Exotic Appetites*, it “softens us up” to accept other (arguably much more serious) material and economic forms of colonialism.

Cultural food colonialism is characterized by three features: a fascination with the exotic; a purist obsession with authenticity; and a tendency to regard the exotic/authentic Other as a resource for the cultural colonizer’s use. As its name suggests, CFC is an explicitly cultural phenomenon, one that focuses on the consumption of food, not its production; in the book, I documented its existence by examining restaurants and restaurant reviews, cookbooks and cooking shows, travel and eating essays, movies, and (perhaps most importantly of all) conversations with colleagues about where to eat and what to eat and who had just eaten what. In the parlance of the then-current American academic scene, *Exotic Appetites* was definitely a “food studies” book, not an “agricultural ethics” book. Or, to put it another way, it was about the consumption “side” of things, not the production “side.”

For a long time, my working title for the book was “Branches Without Roots.” That’s because the project began for me as an analysis of my own tendency both to valorize, admire, and attempt to coopt the “colorful” cultures of people of color, immigrants, and other racialized Others, who seemed so much more “in touch” with their “roots” than I; and to bemoan my detachment from my own cultural heritage. Rejecting my own roots, I saw myself as attempting to nestle in the branches of Others’ cultures, by “eating ethnic” at every chance I could get. But such rootless¹ behaviors, I suggested, are persistently unsatisfying, in no small part because they are so random, arbitrary and disconnected. Food colonizers eat whatever they want (and can afford) whenever they want it; they (more accurately, *we*) feel no real need to attend to the *cultural* contexts in which cuisines are situated. Food—cuisine—is, for the adventurer, a plaything to be explored, not a significant part of someone else’s culture that can be strengthened or damaged.

If you’ve written a critique of some cultural practices and attitudes, and you’ve called those practices “branches without roots,” and you’re now looking for a set of cultural practices to offer as a *corrective*, what do you look for? Roots of course! And where do you find those roots? In agriculture, of course, where the roots can be literal! (Insert rueful, self-deprecating emoticon.) So, when I set out to develop a cultural food anticolonialist attitude with which to conclude *Exotic Appetites*, I assigned the attitude two characteristics, one of which is agricultural at its heart.

The cultural food *anticolonialist* attitude is characterized by a persistent skepticism about one's own motives, a characteristic I call self-questioning, and by a commitment to "eating in context." The latter characteristic is agricultural in its essence. Contextualism speaks directly to the eater's desire to develop some enduring, non-arbitrary, and nontrivial connections with and through their food—some roots. Such connections are, ironically, part of what the food adventurer is seeking, when we go on our quests for "authenticity," seeking it in the connections that Others have to their own traditions. I argued that, while our desire to latch onto someone else's "authentic cuisine" and call it our own undeniably raises the specter of colonialist exploitation, that desire for authenticity, or at least the desire for some non-arbitrary, non-trivial relationship to what we're eating, is actually reasonably useful and is something to be saved.²

Where, I asked, could we cultivate contextual relationships that would give us a new kind of authentic connection? In the late 1990s, before the dawn of the locavore movement made such a claim prosaic (and, perhaps, even made that claim "part of the problem"), my answer was, "in bioregionalism and the sustainable agricultural movement." In these *agricultural* movements, one could develop *cultural* roots of a new kind, by using literal roots. These alternative agriculture movements, I suggested, give eaters a way to understand that location matters when it comes to our food. As eaters, we are *not* "nowhere in particular," we are here; and "here" is a specific (agricultural) place. Our supermarkets may suggest that we are in "Anytown, USA," but the soil *and all the people who now live there* suggest otherwise. I argued, further, that food adventurers could cultivate a new, hybrid kind of culinary authenticity that was based upon migrant ethnic cuisines rooting themselves agriculturally in their new environments, alongside older migrant communities and native communities.³ This rooting would take place by substituting regionally-appropriate ingredients, cooking methods, etc. for traditional things that are not available in the new place. If authenticity is understood in part as sensitive attention to context (rather than, say, slavish replication of the ways "they" do it "over there"), then Minnesota Hmong food can be authentic in a way that only partly derives from the way Hmong communities in Laos or Cambodia would cook; it also derives very much from Hmong agricultural practices in Minnesota, and from Hmong adoption of various culinary elements they find there as well. Would-be anticolonialist eaters could deepen *our* roots by, say, eating within our bioregion, but enjoying the culinary creations of our various

neighbors, who include natives as well as old and recent immigrants to the bioregion. And as a bonus, eating locally would no longer need to mean “dull” in Minnesota in the winter; cabbage and potatoes can be endlessly interesting, if every ethnic group subjects them to culinary techniques emerging from their own traditions.

In sum, I attempted to make my *food*-cultural project speak from and to an *agricultural* reality: all food comes from some dirt somewhere, and if we would pay attention to that fact, we could have a more *culturally* authentic relationship to our food. How could we eaters be anything *but* rootless branches, if we didn’t pay attention to dirt? Rootedness, when it comes to food, is more than just a matter of cultural connections; even if the recipes we were cooking in our kitchens were our own grandmas’ recipes, instead of some other people’s grandmas’, if our cooking never touched the ground, it couldn’t root itself (Better: if we didn’t recognize that our food comes out of the ground, our cooking can never root itself).

Note that my motivation, in defining contextualism in agricultural terms and placing it at the heart of the cultural food anticolonialist attitude, was not environmental ethics; my interest in movements like sustainable agriculture lay in the fact that they gave a foundation to our *cultural* practices. I was trying to say that food culture is always already *agriculture*.⁴

And then we had a locavore revolution. Suddenly, cultural “foodies” became passionate about alternative agriculture: about biodynamic, beyond organic, hundred mile, sustainably harvested, know-your-farmer, CSA, seasonal, heritage bred, hand fed, Rhode Island Red agriculture. Narrated by a number of very-high-profile works of journalism, essay and memoir, the American eating public’s interest in local foods exploded into a movement. Perhaps it is more accurate to say it exploded among certain segments of the American public—many of whom were counted among the Euroamerican food adventurers I’d been analyzing in *Exotic Appetites*. Suddenly, the people I’d been associating with cultural food colonialism were “finding their roots”—their sustainable, local, heirloom-tomato roots. Oddly, stunningly, one of my chief proposals for a food anticolonialist attitude—contextualism—was being operationalized by its exact intended audience—food adventurers. Or so it seemed.

This was undoubtedly good news. Eating—to paraphrase Wendell Berry—was again becoming an agricultural act.⁵ Today, we talk about food movements and agriculture movements in the same breath; we even hyphenate them as food-and-agriculture movements. Scholars use the

concept of the “food system” to connect the activities of producing food (farming) with the activities of consuming it (eating).⁶

In the intense, heady (and sometimes almost optimistic!) atmosphere that characterizes the current American alternative agrifood scene, it can now often *seem* as if any separation—benign, hostile or somewhere in between—that had existed between food studies and agriculture studies, between the consumption and production sides of food, has grown over. Food-culture folks have, of late, been singularly focused on the “agri” part of agriculture—and ag folks have shown considerable attention to the “culture” part. It’s true that some of the popular consumer movements that have sprung up in support of alternative agriculture can feel a little too simplistic in their approaches, a little too rah-rah, a little too thin of concept to be in it for the long haul. But on the *scholarly* front, both “sides” of the food and agriculture divide are coming to articulate, in clear and important ways, that food and agriculture are connected to each other and must be studied together. My food anticolonialist hope *seems* to be coming to fruition; food *seems to be* remembering its agricultural roots. Likewise, agriculture studies, in the form of movements like the new agrarianism, is bringing attention to the *culture* side of agriculture.

These are positive intellectual and cultural movements in the United States, and they deserve some celebration. But all celebrating aside, it is still difficult to do scholarship that bridges the chasm between food and agriculture; scholarship, for instance that places the most subtle and nuanced agrarian thinking in conversation with food studies scholarship that is, in particular, deeply attentive to matters of race and racism, gender and sexism. Too often (to put it bluntly), participants in alternative food movements who wish to include attention to agriculture in their work do so in a way that sees them bracketing or sequestering their important critical analyses of race, class and gender oppression, as if these structures did not shape the agricultural context as well. For instance, witness the ways in which food activists and scholars alike have taken up the agricultural work and thought of Joel Salatin. Salatin’s “beyond organic” approach to agriculture is deeply entangled with his libertarian and conservative Christian views, views which led him, among other things, to assign very traditional gender roles to women and men. Salatin himself is very clear—and apologetic—about the fact that his agricultural practices are deeply connected to his religious beliefs. Food writers and food scholars too often have proceeded as if those religious beliefs could be bracketed, as if they

were not integral to his farming theories and practices and thus did not need to be interrogated when one is discussing Salatin's farming.

Salatin has of course sometimes been criticized in both the mainstream and scholarly food presses; views he has expressed about the role of women on his farm have come in for some pointed criticism. But it is the nature of that criticism that I question. His critics seem to treat his gender conservatism as *separable* from his agricultural practices, as if it is possible to unproblematically love one but not the other.

Vasile Stănescu's essay "'Green' Eggs and Ham? The Myth of Sustainable Meat and the Danger of the Local," offers a similar argument, well documented. He observes that "since locavores choose to focus, unscientifically, only on the question of food, that focus blends over into negative portrayal of women," and, further, that "there is [a] tendency to argue for the return of traditional gender roles of heterosexual men farming and ranching while heterosexual women cook and clean." To be clear: Stănescu is not (simply) criticizing someone like Joel Salatin for holding reactionary views about gender; he is interested in showing why *otherwise-progressive* figures disregard, or even validate, gender views they would otherwise eschew, because those views are part of an agricultural practice they choose to advocate. As illustration, he points to two high-profile writers that contribute to what he calls gender conservatism: Michael Pollan (author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*) and Barbara Kingsolver (whose nonfiction work *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* chronicled her year of eating locally).

How can we understand—and, hopefully, move beyond, this still-persistent tendency to treat sociocultural commitments as separable in principle from agricultural commitments—to think, write and organize about food and agriculture as if it were possible to separate a theorist's views on race from their views on farm animals? I suggested at the outset that answering this question requires all disciplinary hands on deck—including the discipline of philosophy. Considerable scholarship already does exist. What philosophy can contribute to it is a particular kind of attention to patterns of thinking. I think part of our difficulty in doing this connecting work has an abstract and philosophical root: the persistence of dichotomous thinking. The difficulty of doing work in critical food studies that never loses touch with agricultural production, and of doing work in alternative agriculture that stays similarly connected to critical social issues of consumption arises, in part, from a particular set of dichotomous assumptions. Careful, persistent

attention to these dichotomies, and to the general tendency toward dichotomous thinking, can make real (albeit abstract) contributions to advancing both alternative food and agriculture movements and the scholarship supporting them. Such work is by no means sufficient to the complex and complicated task, but it is nonetheless useful.

For several years now, I've been thinking about the connections between and among a resilient set of dichotomies that permeate and give shape to the ways we think about food and agriculture. Food/agriculture is itself one of the dichotomous pairs, as is consumption/production. Others include culture/agriculture, global/local, inclusive/isolationist and cosmopolitan/provincial; transient/settled and outsider/insider; urban/rural and industrial/agrarian; mixed/pure and contextual/universal. Other pairs are even more foundational and abstract; their scope includes these pairs, but also extends far beyond them; culture/nature and self/other are two more far-flung pairs.

Philosophers have exhaustively detailed the ways in which dichotomies and dichotomous thinking lie in the background, or on the “garden level” of much of the history of western thought. Foundational dichotomies such as mind/body, self/other, subject/object, and reason/emotion make their way into everything from religious doctrines to scientific theories to commonsense beliefs. While many contemporary philosophers have done this analytic work, my own choice for the philosopher who most compellingly lays out both the history and the consequences of dualistic thinking, going back to the ancient Greeks, is John Dewey. His work *The Quest for Certainty* interprets our obsession with dualism as an outgrowth of our desire to have certainty in an unstable, often dangerous world. Indeed, Dewey's understanding of the emergence of dichotomous thinking in western philosophy is particularly useful in this context, for he argues that the contemporary distinctions between theory and practice, between art and craft, between abstract and applied knowledge, even between nature and culture, can all be traced to our early vulnerability as humans, a vulnerability that led us, on the one hand, to try to *make* (that is, *craft*) certainty in an uncertain world, and, on the other hand, to reach beyond this uncertain world, to locate—in the gods or in the Forms—some absolute certainty that could not be budged.

I presume the existence of that work, in order to consider the particular ways in which dichotomous thinking grounds the disconnection between production and consumption—or, to put a more optimistic face on things,

the ways it continues to present an obstacle to efforts at connecting “farm issues” to “fork issues.” Three characteristics of dichotomous thinking present particular obstacles to scholarship that would deeply integrate food studies with agriculture studies.

1.

Dichotomies’ tendency to set up not just a contrast but an antagonism between their two poles, such that to be *this* means to be *not that*. Each pole gets defined in such a way that it contains nothing of the other. Contrasts are not just sharp, they are mutually exclusive; part of the very essence of one pole consists of being *not-that*. (For an example, consider the familiar Cartesian description of body, which includes being *not mental*.) To be urban is to be not at all rural—and vice versa. Fail to maintain this separation, and you risk contamination.

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From a dualistic perspective, contamination—or impurity—is a danger. Thus, this first feature leads to:

2.

A tendency to erase nuance, to eliminate anything between the two dichotomous options, and to purify or “clean up” the ambiguous case or extraneous material, by shoehorning it into one option or the other. Dichotomous thinking requires understanding cases in the middle as being, “really,” instances of one of the two polar extremes—or as understandable primarily as admixtures of the two. The poles are the conceptual foundations in terms of which other things are defined; they, in contrast, are never explained in terms of the “murky middle.” When the two poles of a dichotomy are morally freighted (as they so often are), dichotomous thinking thus encourages rigid partisanship, a belief that only one pole represents the right choice, the virtuous position, the thing worth caring about.

Anthropologist Amy Trubek (citing political theorist Wendy Brown) reads in this tendency to *purify* a companion *puritanism*, a “righteous insistence on knowing what is True, Valuable, or Important.” In the present moment, one of the categories that has come to express such a righteous insistence is food; which are the “‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods[?]” (p. 193).

The debate about the merits of local food being vigorously carried out in the mainstream press illustrates this tendency. A recent opinion piece and the comments it engendered are quite typical of the sharp antagonisms that have arisen over this set of issues. In “A Bitter Reality,” Tom Keane argues that “the local food movement is an affectation based on bad logic and bad

economics, one that, widely adopted, would actually harm the environment and potentially impoverish millions. Particularly here in New England, it would also turn mealtimes into dull, pallid affairs.” Keane dismisses the virtues of local foods on all counts, including economic, culinary and environmental ones, and argues unequivocally for a globalized food system. Responses posted online to his piece in the first two days were almost all critical—and almost all equally sweeping in their praise of local foods and their criticism of global food.

This example interests me not because of the truth of any individual claims made, but because of the stark way it illustrates the partisanship. One respondent to Keane’s “Bitter Reality” illustrates this tendency, even as they attempt to challenge it. In an effort to nuance the issues of local food, they write, “It’s not always about giving up things outright nor is it about trying to make the whole world filled with only small farms,” but in the same paragraph they suggest that “For those who find the whole philosophy taxing to think about, you can boil it down to a simple A or B choice: if there are 2 apples for sale and one is grown in New England and the other in Washington State or New Zealand...choose the local one!” (Keane).

I’ve already alluded to the final feature of dichotomous thinking that is particularly helpful for reflecting on food and agriculture dichotomies. It is this:

3.

Particular groups of dichotomies operate together, such that they mutually reinforce each other to create a way of understanding the world that is more plausible because of its cohesiveness. This clumping tendency magnifies the power of any individual dichotomy, while also often masking any implausibility it would have, were it to be examined on its own terms.

Consider, e.g., how the modern western philosophical binaries of mind/body, reason/emotion and man/woman effectively created a world view that long seemed more coherent and plausible because each pair relied upon and “stuck up for” the others.

The local foods case illustrates this clumping effect as well. The act of naming something “the local foods movement” has had the effect of collecting together a whole set of (perhaps previously only loosely-related) practices and principles that partisans then tend to defend or criticize as a package. While it can be salutary to understand a set of concepts as related to each other, doing so in ways that prevent us from seeing them as separable and able to be operationalized independent of each other,

mitigates those salutary effects. In the case of the local foods movement, for instance, those defenders of “the local” who have investigated the reasons for the movement less, or who tend toward the doctrinaire, may resist acknowledging numerous studies that show that understanding the environmental impact of our food is far more complicated than answering the question “how far was it transported?” “Local” became shorthand for “foodmiles,” which, in turn, was shorthand for “ecologically (‘green-ly’) transported.” Once these linkages were formed, it became very difficult to decouple the “local” from “green”—and not just “green transportation.” Rather, it came to seem to encompass all things ecological, despite research throwing this very generalization into question. Indeed, even considering energy use alone, the research showed that transport represents a relatively small portion of the energy used in producing food, such that labeling a food “green” solely because it was transported a short distance is quite tendentious.⁷

Within any cluster of dichotomies, the relationships among dichotomies are complex; wormholes connect particular ones together in ways sometimes evident, sometimes hidden. Arguments that begin using one set of terms can slip, virtually without notice, to another. This tendency strengthens the sense that particular dichotomies are in fact integrally connected to each other. In the cluster containing cosmopolitanism and localism, for instance, the path connecting “cosmopolitan” and “urban” is so broad and flat that sometimes the terms are practically understood as synonyms. The connection between purity and localism, on the other hand, is more indirect and less well traveled; it may require a journey through other concepts like “authenticity.” (This kind of link can be put to rather crafty uses, saying indirectly or by insinuation, what can’t/shouldn’t be said directly. For instance, given the insidious associations with the concept of “purity,” it can be handy to use the word “local” instead, knowing that it will make back-channel connections to purity.) Many of these pairs are linked to each other by a virtual conceptual superhighway. The links between urban/rural and culture/agriculture, for instance, are incredibly strong. So, too are the links between consumption/production and culture/nature. Some pairs are subsets of other pairs; some are connected only by association or intimation (cosmopolitan/local is one subsidiary form of the global/local dichotomy, for instance, while hybrid/pure is connected to urban/rural far more indirectly. Some of the connections are explicit, widely understood, and often reinforced (food/agriculture and consumption/production, for

instance). Others are secret, hidden, sometimes shameful or at least embarrassing (urban/rural and hybrid/pure comes to mind in this context as well). Much of the power of each individual dichotomy lies in the facts of its being connected to others in multiple ways. It also derives from our varying willingness and unwillingness to admit and name these connections. Some of the links are logical or conceptual; other links are something more like “guilt by association.”

Whatever their genesis, whatever the means by which they persist, it is worth our while even just to notice the various tangles, connections and slippages among these various dichotomies; rendering them visible means at least being aware of the ways in which one’s thinking is being shaped, and may mean being able to imagine a different configuration. In my own experience, recognizing *and also problematizing* the kind of easy slippage between food studies and culture on one side of the line, and agriculture studies and nature, on the other, has been instructive for developing a more precise understanding of the character of the obstacles to truly integrative alternative food and agriculture movements.

To generalize, these snarls of mutually-supportive dichotomies that are nevertheless purist and puritanical in their impact, present a real (i.e. ideological, theoretical, conceptual) challenge to creating scholarly and activist movements that integrate the best of agrarian thinking and the best of critical food studies scholarship attentive to race, class and gender oppression. Problems arise for scholars and activists whether they come from the food side *or* the agriculture side; they are manifested in persistent views that contrasts the urban, cosmopolitan, transient, cultural hybrid to the rural, localist, rooted, “natural” purist.⁸ I’ll offer a brief example of the sorts of problems I believe thinkers from either the food side or the ag side confront, when they attempt to do work that genuinely embraces the “other side.” I conclude with a brief look at an unlikely image to serve as a philosophical intervention in our dichotomizing tendencies.

Before proceeding, I should note several things about my approach. First, I choose as examples extremely familiar figures about whom much has been written. This is intentional, not lazy. Second, I am painting in broad strokes, which enable us to notice patterns and tendencies, not to establish airtight causal chains. Third, I am intentionally not drawing sharp divisions between activism, scholarship, and popular writings on these topics, because these three strands of work in alternative food and agriculture clearly

interpenetrate and influence each other and often share important assumptions, even as their methods and aims obviously differ.

First, then, an example from the consumption side. While many consumer movements have lately attempted to link production and consumption interests by advocating for and supporting alternative agriculture in multifarious forms, such movements can sometimes embrace a naïve “agrarian-ish” philosophy that is rooted less in contemporary agrarian theory and more in popular fantasies of the “family farm.” Such enthusiasm for family farm rhetoric too often pays little attention to the fact that, for agrarian thinkers historically, the aspects of that philosophy that are specifically focused on the raising of animals and crops attach, in essential ways, to hierarchical and exclusionary sociopolitical commitments.⁹ The result is that alternative food movement advocates who embrace values of antiracism, feminism, queer friendliness and multiculturalism may *well* have criticized “beyond organic” farmer Joel Salatin for, say, not allowing woman interns on his farm,¹⁰ but they will not treat Salatin’s misogyny as in any ways conceptually connected to his views on agriculture, despite his being pretty clear about the fact that these various views are mutually constitutive. Apropos this point, Alice Julier notes, in private correspondence, that “The fastest growing segment of people going into sustainable agriculture right now is women. Conventional agriculture is dominated by men. So, you have this person advocating the basic philosophy of sustainability here who is defining it in ways that exclude the vast majority of new practitioners. Add to that fact that conventional agriculture is a hostile, gender-divided place for women; land ownership, inheritance and education are all stratified.”¹¹

Seen from the other direction, when culturally progressive food theorists and activists embrace an alternative agriculture movement like agrarianism, they may elect not to examine how the agrarian ideals they embrace—Wendell Berry’s emphasis on longevity in place for example—links (by way of wormholes but also by way of some more direct conceptual connections) to a particularly stealthy kind of ethnocentrism, racism (and insiderism). An agrarian thinker like Berry is quite clear that the pieces of his philosophy fit together conceptually. It is less than thoughtful if critical food theorists don’t take such linkages seriously—meaning, by seriously, not just acknowledging that a particular agrarian thinker advocates sexist or racist views, but addressing the ways that those views are related to the claims they make about farming.

An episode of a video program called “Portlandia” effectively shows those connections using sardonic wit. In the episode, a young, socially-conscious urban couple is portrayed attempting to make menu selections while out for dinner on their first date. They interrogate the server about the chicken they have considered ordering; eventually, they decide they must visit the farm to see how their animal was really raised. The farm is of course the parody of an idyllic land where all the chickens have happy lives and names. The farmer, however, turns out to be a hypnotic cult leader with a collection of wives, all of whom are dressed in appropriately submissive clothing. They adoringly cater to his every need. While visiting the farm, the couple falls under his spell and decides to stay; the woman dons the appropriately womanly garments and ministers to the farmer/cult leader’s every need. They finally (somewhat inexplicably) snap to their senses and return to urban life and the restaurant, where they proceed to order dinner.

The show could be taken as a broad swat at someone like Salatin, who was catapulted to super-stardom (in part) by Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Pollan’s work has undeniably contributed enormously to the visibility and power of alternative agricultural movements; it has also been quite exhaustively critiqued from the vantage point of various alternate food and agriculture theorists. To that extensive body of critique I want only to add the observation that his book is a good illustration of the fact that even members of the “choir” are susceptible to the pitfalls of dichotomous thinking. Pollan is especially prone to the “clumping” tendency, the third feature of dichotomies I described.

Where do we see examples of work from the agriculture side that continues to struggle to connect food and agriculture, consumption and production? Here, the work of Wendell Berry is instructive. Berry has unarguably made monumental contributions to the movement known as the “new agrarianism,” a movement that many would say he originated. While there is much in Berry’s work to be admired, it is also quite apparent that the way in which he sharply contrasts rootedness and transience, and valorizes the former, ends up rendering all those displaced from their lands into hyphenated or abridged or qualified moral agents, much as, in centuries past, people of color and white women were only partial citizens. In a world filled with refugees and asylees, as well as willing migrants, it is problematic, at least, to suggest (as I believe Berry does) that rootedness is a kind of non-negotiable condition for full membership in the moral community.

While Berry is trying to be careful not to demonize the transient ones (whom he calls “road builders,” and describes as placeless), he nevertheless spends little to no time acknowledging and valuing the contributions of the newcomer, the outsider, the interloper to the community. I submit that his inability to do so is also an outgrowth of the tendency toward dichotomization. In particular here, it is a kind of inverting or upending of a dichotomy that has received considerable attention of late. Whereas it often flies under the name of cosmopolitanism versus provincialism (under which flag it is clear which side of the dichotomy is valorized), Berry has switched things up to favor the “provincials.” Such a move, I submit, ends up morally privileging those who are racially and economically in a position to stay put. It might appear otherwise; that is, it might appear that such a move valorizes the vantage point of people of color and ethnic minorities. In “A Native Hill,” for instance, he praises “The Indians and the peasants [who] were people who belonged deeply and intricately to their places. Their ways of life had evolved slowly in accordance with their knowledge of their land, of its needs, of their own relation of dependence and responsibility to it” (Berry 2002, p. 11). That praise dries up, however, if, say, those Indians find themselves becoming “placeless,” moving from where they belong (i.e. the places they’ve been “for a long time”) and hitting the road. Given the frequency with which ethnic and racial minorities are most likely to find themselves forcibly displaced, globally, this means that these groups of people are going to be most prone to becoming “placeless” ones who cannot be fully parts of Berry’s virtuous communities.

Berry is well known for having written a work that confronts racism directly (*The Hidden Wound*), so to make this charge against him might seem unfair, or at least out of left field. I mean, rather, for it to show the degree to which dichotomous thinking can tend to reintroduce difficulties in spite of a theorist’s best intentions. Berry means to address the particular nature of racism in America; he does so in one of his major works. The fact that, elsewhere, he develops a view that ends up perpetuating racism in another form is in no small part due to the persistence of either/or thinking. For Berry, you’re either a road builder or a rooted one, because you’re either part of a healthy community or you’re part of its dissolution.

In discussing Berry, philosopher Paul Thompson’s book, *The Agrarian Vision*, reproduces this problem, even in the context of a work that explicitly challenges dichotomous thinking. In a discussion of Berry’s history of farming in America, Thompson observes that “Berry’s critique selects one

dimension of that history”—a history that sidesteps the ways in which agrarian ideals are wound around with race, gender and class exploitation. While Thompson acknowledges that “the way one tells the story is crucial to its moral lesson” (p. 117) and acknowledges that “in another context we might ask” questions about the relative repressiveness of industrial agriculture, slave plantations, the manorial system, and the family farm, these questions “must be deferred in the present context,” because we need to “pay attention to the disappearance of place, the dissolution of community and the dissipation of human virtue” (pp. 117–8).

I submit that one cannot talk about the dissolution of the community—or any of these other things, for that matter—without talking seriously about the structural inequality present in that community that is dissolving. To paraphrase Eve Sedgwick, “An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged *in its central substance* to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern race and gender systems” (p. 8, emphasis added). We cannot *not* talk about race and gender, even as we are talking about community and longevity and all the other agrarian virtues Berry articulates. To suggest that we can, I submit, is to participate in the kind of tidying up and sorting that I have suggested is one of the standard problems with dichotomous thinking.

So far in this essay, I have attempted to make plausible the claim that a dominant tendency in western philosophical thought—dichotomization—can be seen as partially responsible for various difficulties being experienced by writers in both alternative agriculture and alternative food studies work. I’ve done so by way of a sketch, and with the aid of a few already-very-well-known examples. My aim and methods both have been suggestive, not deductive. I will conclude this suggestive sketch by pointing to one way in which we might counter (or perhaps reframe?) dichotomous thinking.

I suggested at the outset that Dewey’s analysis of the history of dichotomous thinking is particularly salient to the present discussion. However, I’m less certain than I used to be that Dewey’s usual proposed method for challenging dichotomies is effective at redirecting the kinds of situations we face. Dewey routinely suggests that the way to (re)solve dichotomies is to burrow underneath them until one locates the common assumptions that inevitably underlie them. Recall that, in my sketch of his argument in *The Quest for Certainty*, for instance, I noted a number of

dichotomies that Dewey believes emerged from a single (category of) desire; namely, to get some stability in a precarious, unstable and dangerous world. Locate the shared assumptions, Dewey suggests, and you can see your way out of the dichotomy. Thus, for Dewey, the most important way to move beyond dichotomous thinking is to find the commonalities, and show the two “sides” that they are really just two aspects of the same “side.”

Of late, I have found myself unsatisfied with this solution, which tends to minimize the degree to which dichotomies do draw us in, and satisfy us on some level. I have been exploring a different approach, one advocated by French theorist Michel Serres in his work *The Parasite*. Serres’ work does not attempt to find common ground or otherwise resolve dichotomies in order to solve the problems dichotomous thinking present our fifth. Instead, he proposes a kind of grasp-the-nettle approach that involves acknowledging the overwhelming tendency to think in dichotomies, and, at the same time, the overwhelming messiness and unruliness of the resultant dichotomies. Serres challenges the neat, tidy two-ness of dichotomies by drawing on an unusual, unappetizing image; the parasite.

Serres’ proposal begins from two features of the living world he finds inescapable and pervasive, namely: beings’ dependence upon other beings for sustenance, and the tendency of that dependency to diminish the being on whom it comes to rest. Nature, in short, is full of beings that are (literally or metaphorically) parasites. In this relationship, we can, he believes, find a way to think into the ways in which dichotomies fundamentally shape western philosophy, beginning with the subject/object dichotomy. The parasite image or model (it is more than a metaphor) is, I submit, particularly apt and suggestive for the topics of food and agriculture.

The word “parasite,” in French, has three chief meanings, and in exploring dichotomies Serres draws on all three: the biological one (an organism that preys upon a host); the social meaning of an uninvited guest who somehow worms an invitation for dinner, but then must “sing for his supper,” and finally (a meaning it has in French but not English), noise, static, or interference in a system. Serres offers the parasite as a “reformulation of the once great and now weatherworn Enlightenment divisions between self and collective, society and nature, the scientific and the literary, myth and politics” (Brown, p. 1). The metaphor of parasite calls us to notice that the two poles of the dichotomy are neither independent nor (mutually) interdependent. Rather, the relationship is a “hungry” one, in which one party is regularly at the mercy of the other. The effect of this rethinking is to

pay attention to the mess, the between-ness, the relationship; to notice the amount of “stuff” that is not captured by either of the poles.

In the same sweeping, all-encompassing spirit in which Serres rethinks dichotomies-in-general, I suggest putting the metaphor to an additional, related use, this time as a (slightly ironic) way to rework the dichotomous thinking that has persisted in food studies and agriculture studies, despite the best intentions and efforts of theorists and activists in both groups.

Several features of the parasite recommend it for this purpose, and counter the specific problematic features of dichotomous thinking I identified above.

First, as I have already noted, it doesn't use the Deweyan move of attempting to eliminate dichotomy by insisting that opposing poles are not actually in opposition, but instead share the most basic, fundamental assumptions. It isn't, for instance, particularly useful to suggest that food and agriculture can be reduced to some more fundamental category.

There *are* vantage points—consumer and producer, for instance—and sometimes those vantage points are organized in genuinely parasitical fashion, with one “eating into” the other in a way that diminishes the second. It would be a mistake to take those vantage points as fixed identities, however; for instance, the consumer is also regularly the consumed. Relatedly, the relationship between the intrusive parasite and the unsuspecting host—or between noisy interruption and the one interrupted—is always unstable and susceptible to reinterpretation, from a different vantage point; one man's noise is another man's conversation.

Third, the parasitic relationship might still be characterized as antagonistic, but neither member of the antagonistic pair can define itself in exclusionary ways (the way, say, mind and body are defined in classic Cartesian dualism). The host and parasite are too much like each other, too much in each other's debt, too likely to become the Other to ever be defined as mutually exclusive. The parasite model also makes room for nuance, subtlety, shades and variation, by virtue of the fact that even the two poles do not have fixed identities. Perspective is all-important.

Consider how differently Serres' model would treat the outsider than does Berry's. The drop-in guest knows that tomorrow he may play host; the annoyed host knows that he may tomorrow find himself dependent on someone else's unwilling hospitality.

We cannot begin our work to create alternative food systems anywhere other than right where we are, with the assumptions and institutions that we already have, with the messy, hostile dichotomies that plague our thinking.

Euroamericans, for instance, cannot disregard the agrarian legacy we have inherited from our Jeffersonian past—a legacy which, in turn, cannot be separated from the history of chattel slavery in this country. But while we cannot choose different starting points—we cannot choose to be unshaped by our history—we certainly can and must question—continually—the features of our world that our starting assumptions occlude or efface. In proposing a focus on dichotomy, I’ve suggested only one aspect such questioning might take. It might feel like a ridiculous luxury to add “challenge dichotomous thinking” to the list of tasks that we should add to our work in alternative agriculture and food theory and practice. Nevertheless, I believe that keeping one eye trained upon this set of dichotomies with their powerfully hypnotic pull can enable our resultant theoretical and practical work to be all the more effective. Failing to take dichotomization into account will unquestionably hobble our efforts to create alternative food and agriculture movements that meet the expectations of the land and of the people who dwell and eat in it.

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¹

Rootless cosmopolitanism: I of course did not intend for my position to invoke the anti-Semitic ideology that brought us this phrase, but the link is of course made almost unavoidably. And ultimately, I must recognize that views such as mine are susceptible to being taken to that extreme. That is why I shall ultimately argue that we need to challenge dichotomies using methods other than simply offering the other horn of a dichotomy, in order to correct the extremism of the first horn.

²

I submit that it might be something similar to the idea of a “focal practice” developed by Albert Borgmann. Paul Thompson describes Borgmann’s position in Chap. 4 of his book *The Agrarian Vision*.

³

While her project is different in many respects from mine, I think that Amy Trubek’s attempt to create a distinctly American concept of terroir might be a fellow traveler to this idea. See *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*.

⁴

I was operating in ignorance of an important tradition that was attempting to do just this sort of work. The Annales school of history, which originated in France, included such notable writers on food as Fernand Braudel. And on this side of the Atlantic, sociologists Harriet Friedman and Melanie DuPuis were doing work that explored production-and-consumption. It is surprising to me that I failed to find this work when I was researching *Exotic Appetites*. Is this a function of the fact that there was not yet an established concept of a “food studies scholar” and that “food studies” as a stand-alone (inter)discipline was just coming into its own? (Or was it because I was a lousy researcher?) Thanks to Alice Julier for challenging me on this point.

⁵

See Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating.” In Curtin and Heldke, op cit.

⁶

A recent definition of food system Alice Julier and Gil Gillespie have developed illustrates the effort to understand the relationships between and among production and consumption: “the set of complex, interrelated, and often tangled biophysical and social structures, processes, and

materials that yields plant, animal, mineral, and synthetic substances that people define as consumable for sustenance or pleasure and that a population in a time and geographic areas consumes for sustenance” (60).

7

See Edwards-Jones, et al. See also Sarah DeWeerd. The two accounts together offer academic and mainstream explorations of this issue. For some of the first work on the relation between miles food travels and ecological effects, see the work of Rich Pirog and Iowa State’s Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Regarding the tendency to associate the local with all things positive, see Branden Born and Mark Purcell; and Mark Purcell and J. Christopher Brown.

8

Alice Julier argues that the urban agriculture movement represents an important—and growing—exception to this claim. I would agree, and would point to this movement as an important source of models and inspiration for deeply integrative work.

9

Here, the work of the group known as “Twelve Southerners,” called *I’ll Take My Stand* is emblematic.

10

He apparently now does accept women interns. The application form includes the following caveats (which are accompanied by pictures of young women and men who are, for the most part, fair haired, fair skinned): “Bright eyed, bushy-tailed, self-starter, eager-beaver, situationally aware, go-get-‘em, teachable, positive, non-complaining, grateful, rejoicing, get’erdone, dependable, faithful, perseverant take-responsibility, clean-cut, all American boy-girl appearance characters. We are very, very, very discriminatory” (<http://www.polyfacefarms.com/apprenticeship/>).

11

See Eleanor J. Bader.