

Problematizing Local Consumption: Is Local Food better simply because it's Local?

Lucius F. Hallett, IV, PhD
Western Michigan University
Department of Geography
1903 West Michigan
Kalamazoo, MI
United States of America

Abstract

Industrial, globalized food chains, with their pesticides, herbicides and lack of transparency in labor practices, imply an inferior product when contrasted with local food. However, this does not mean the local is without fault or that in some cases the global might be more fair or equitable. Ethnographic interviews in farmers' markets, supermarkets and produce distributors in Kansas City, Kansas and Missouri show how the local is constructed out of an assemblage of 'what-ever-it-takes' efforts to convince consumers of foods worthiness to be called local. This suggests that researchers and consumers need to be aware of falling into what might be called the 'Local Trap.' These interviews provide valuable insight into the workings of the local that highlight the danger of blindly equating local with better simply because of its identification as a local place. These understandings of local origins help create a semiotics where consumption at the local level is seen as better simply because it is produced locally.

Key words: local food systems, food geographies, localism, local trap

Introduction

Many consumers unquestionably believe in the local, especially in the providing of fresh food for themselves and their families. They eat food from within a 100-mile radius following ideas such as the 'one hundred mile diet' or 'one hundred mile farmers markets.' Supermarkets, farmers markets, bulk wholesalers and other types of food provider's all have different systems that bring food to them. Their marketing campaigns strive to convince consumers that the food is fresh, wholesome and affordable, suggesting that the reason to buy it at their location and not elsewhere is to buy locally, that the local is better. But ambiguous lines of local distribution, different for each type of food but particularly for produce, render these over-arching ideals ineffective at best and disingenuous in some cases. Blind adherence to "local being better" without critically examining process, the participants, and the ramifications, restricts understanding of the interests behind such current social problems of demographics, racial makeup of surrounding neighborhoods, power relationships, and the lack of access to nutritional food, areas often called 'food deserts' (see Larsen and Gilliland 2008; Raja et al. 2008; Wrigley et al. 2002; Wrigley 2002).

This article defines, articulates, and deconstructs the roles fetishizing the 'local' play in authenticating and objectifying the movement and consumption of food. My research gathered ethnographic narratives through interviews with the providers of that food to highlight examples of different situations where the local is given prominence. Among my many concerns is that the reality of simply saying that local is better is naive as well as shortsighted in the face of environmental, social, or ethically compromising local situations. What corners may have been cut in the production of food but expressly may have been perpetrated by a local producer? What social relations were strained or abused? Which consumptive arena may have been ignored? Is "localism ... based on the interests of a narrow, sectionalist, even authoritarian, elite?" (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 361).

I strengthen my argument through the context of food throughout this article by highlighting how the definition of 'local' is constructed, not given, regardless of the scale any specific network provides an area with its food. Sonnino (2007, 70), examining the embeddedness of local networks in the saffron fields of southern Tuscany, writes, "The local is a dynamic and contested social space that embodies different and potentially conflicting needs and interests."

But more specifically, this article discusses how consumer, activists and researchers need to be aware of the potential form is understanding local food and its various permutations and thus falling into what is called the “Local trap.” Born and Purcell best articulate this when they write (2006,195, italics in original):

“The local trap refers to the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale. The local is assumed to be desirable; it is preferred a priori to larger scales. What is desired varies and can include ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy, better nutrition, and food security, freshness, and quality. For example, the local trap assumes that a local-scale food system will be inherently more socially just than a national-scale or global-scale food system.”

Much of the work on the local trap is interested in the differences inherent in scale and what constitutes local versus a more regional scale in development studies (Born and Purcell 2006; Brown and Purcell 2005; Purcell and Brown 2005). Examples of the ‘Local Trap’ include the long-term ideologies and planning of city managers and policy makers and the potential technological innovation in the global fields that may have taken place for that produce to arrive at those markets. There is as well the ethics of fair trade and the health suggestions for ones family inherent in the consumption of organic food not locally grownbut vital to other economies that must be considered.

I wish to highlight the term ‘local trap’ as defined above as ‘preferred a priori to larger scales of produce production.’In the context of produce production I used tomatoes as the most consistent variable in my research. I did this because they are in all markets throughout the year but more specifically, they are also very local in season. Produce of all types: lettuce, squashes and fruits such as pears, peaches and apples replaced tomatoes as the main focus when questioning vendors and growers when tomatoes were not present.

In my research it is the farmers’ markets and consumer supported agricultural schemes (CSA’s)ⁱ of Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas that emerge as physical realities for an abstract ‘local,’ acting as a symbol or beacon for those who wish to consume them. These perceived ‘better’ production schemes subsume any type of counterarguments underneath the bludgeoned perceived goodness of the local. The supermarkets of the metropolitan area strive to offer consumers choices that override this local ideal. Being of a local origin does not make produce better (healthier, cheaper, fresher) if it was grown such that there was exploitation of families, workers or environments similar to those highlighted elsewhere (see Barndt 2002, Goodman and Watts 1997). Thus ideas on tying local place to the ideal of freshness and health emerge as the local discourse juxtaposes itself against the industrialized that is seen as ‘bad, toxic, or old’ (Feagan 2007). The various processesof place making for the local are not better simply through or by this label. There are too many other variables that must be acknowledged or at the very least examined before the local place overrides any other level of excellence. This realization blurs the clarity that might be provided by producer’s of global food through authenticating how local knowledge exchanges and alleged transparencies matter more then the actual food in question (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Coles 2009).

This work builds off of the ‘local trap’ contributions to the literature; more importantly it contributes its own original ideas by providing a concrete case study that helps to re-investigate the local/global conundrum of world food production. While it does include existing ideas of local concern, for example Julie Guthmans ongoing work as well as DePuis and Goodman’s (2005) examination of ‘reflexive consumption,’ it forces new ideas of local consumerism into other types of self-examinations that must occur for a truly modern, equitable and secure food world to be realized.

The local trap is primarily concerned with development of urban landscapes as well as scalar politics within urban frames. I have co-opted the phrase because I feel it is a very good description in helping to deconstruct local food problems. My goal is to push the discussion into new directions concerned with modern realities of actual consumption problems. All of the ideas (represented by the actual physical reality of that food) of better food are available from particular areas of the world – these areas relegate local production to secondary importance. Yes, this may be detrimental to local economies but modern American (this is my primary focus although I feel it is true in most industrialized areas) agriculture is fluid, dynamic and capital intensive enough to respond positively to challenges, especially at the local level.

Research methodologiesⁱⁱ

Using produce in the Kansas City, Kansas and Missouri local food markets, farmers' markets and supermarkets as the case study, my research gathered ethnographic narratives through interviews with the providers of that food to highlight examples of different situations where the local is given prominence. I visited and interviewed workers, owners and consumers at the sixteen farmers' markets and at seventeen of the produce distributors operating within the metropolitan region at the time of the research. I talked with consumers, workers and those in positions of authority who would or could talk with me in 97 of the supermarkets (this represents 90% of those in the study area). Many of these interviews offer valuable insight emphasizing the local in counter point to the more industrialized delivery of fresh produce. These interviews are not presented in any statistical format. Details such as particular conversations are presented throughout this article to strengthen my particular arguments and points. The interviews are un-structured, free-flowing discussions started from a common framework of familiarity with a given food or questions about what to do with a particular item (Crang and Cook 2007, 1). I visited the sixteen markets a minimum of ten times over the course of three years. The markets were selected because they were all of the working sites within the Kansas City Metropolitan area (Missouri and Kansas) at the time of the study. In the case of City Market Farmers Market, Kansas City, Missouri, I visited sixty-six times, Brookside Farmers Market, Kansas City, Missouri, fifty-nine times and Merriam's Farmers Market, Kansas City, Kansas forty-five times.

Methodologically, I interacted with consumers by working in the stalls and stores of the different markets. Offering to help in the stall for free was always accepted, especially when I identified what I was looking for. This, in return, often led to talk about various networks that brought them the commodity (although not in that language), and to contacts as gatekeepers for continuing investigation, especially with delivery and distribution people. This type of participatory observation allowed me to listen in on conversations between stall owners and consumers, consumers with other consumers, and asked what a consumer might plan to do with what he or she was purchasing as part of the sales transaction. Often, after asking about a particular item, say a type of green, consumers would let me shop with them for a little while, talking as we searched the markets. I include results of interviews with people who would not give their full names and those who provided interesting comments not directly answering a particular question because I feel their responses are relevant to this paper.

An ethnographic approach to everyday consumption practices shows us "an explanation of the political significance of consumption studies" (MacKay 1997, 4). These markets and the scale of urban realities through which they operate that makes them viable economically become an object for future research. The interest in commodity exchange gives rise to what Harvey (1996, 208) calls "multiple layers of meaning." Many aspects of these layers exist: quality, scarcity, use-value, exoticness, and sexual relevance to name only a few. Each carries different weight in the relative importance for the consumer when they are purchasing. Where did the produce come from? Is it healthy? Will my family eat it? These are thoughts that factor into decisions about a foodstuff item that on the surface is only for eating. Although such a view may seem simplistic, it hides a deeper concern. What is the critical reflexive consumerism manifested in all of this? How do consumers understand their own particular interactions with our food provision system? If an examination leads a consumer to boycott or prefer a particular food purveyor or food choice, how is the system impacted and can it make a difference. If none exists, then it becomes simply one more commodity to be added to a hectic world, but researchers see the beginnings of change in the networks of food, as "alternative commodities veritably shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they were produced through carefully wrought images and texts" (Bryant and Goodman 2004, 348).

What is 'Local?'

A Kansas City, Missouri CityMarket vendor, selling peaches from his farm in Missouri ("best @#\$^ peaches in the world!") said to me: "Look at that asshole; it's all bullshit; he didn't grow those (pointing to bagged Jonathan apples); what is he selling? He bought those in St. Joseph and is passing them off as his. I tell you, it's a wonder this market even exists! Did you know they came to my farm to check to see if I grew my own food in December? December! I don't even have an idea of what I will grow yet, let alone starting things. And how can you tell if I grew my peaches if it is the middle of the \$%\$#@## winter? What a joke!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Although some researchers use the term “placeless foodscape” (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000, 319; see also Murdoch and Miele 1999; Murdoch, Marsden and Banks 2000) for our current situation real places still exist in our mental picture of the places of food production and what happens there resonates. Food is now so much a part of globalized culture that we all seem to know it, but are still not fully aware that the space our foods travel is both hidden in the price and yet, at the same time, the cause of that price as the scale of production in these industrialized spaces allows for the tremendous yields that make it so inexpensive. Places make spaces, or better put, the places of production in the globalized food chains make the distance to the local visible. Food must then travel between places so the distances between them should become transparent. This is simply not the case (Harvey 1990). All of the ideas of modernity in our foods add successive layers of problems for a reflexive consumer (Dupuis 2002). It is a very troubling concept not often articulated in local activism that the distance a tomato travels from Wathena, Kansas, to the Brookside, Kansas City, Missouri farmers’ market somehow creates a far more expensive price than that from the Santa Rosa plant in Mexico to a “Hen House”, a local supermarket chain, in Overland Park, Kansas. The spaces for the latter are greater geographically but the idea of the former carries more use value as a commodity for consumers. Strange though this may be, that the scale of globalized production is what leads to the cheaper price, the idealization of the local product gives rise to a mental space that is greater than the global tomato, making it more expensive.

Kirwan, in his study of farmers’ markets in the UK, suggests that two over-arching ideals provide the platform of their operations. First, that the produce is of a localized origin and second, that the vendor be directly involved in the production process. He suggests that for UK purposes this is 20-50 miles from sites of production. From multiple interviews including some included below, local in Kansas City is generally thought to be within a two hundred mile radius. He writes: “The intention has been to create alterity [an openness] within the food system by re-spatializing food through insisting that it is locally produced, and re-socializing food by ensuring there is direct contact between the producers and consumers concerned” (2004, 396).

Guthman (2007,464) writes that a multiplicity of labels attached to the local can be applied such that “some are governed by marketing agreements that designate who can market under a given name and thus involve some form of verification. Other products deemed ‘local’ are governed simply by a producers’ self-claims and public willingness to buy both the idea of the local and the claim”. Guthman (2004a, 2004b, 2007) specifically is concerned with the misconceptions of ‘local’ in the co-opting of labels regarding the organic farming movement. The type of local activity concerned in this article is what Guthman (2007, 462) label “generic localism” and what Dupuis and Goodman have called “unreflexive localism” (2005, 360). Thus we need to “explore the ambiguities and subtleties of the ideas of ‘localness’” (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000, 296). The upshot here is that there is no hierarchy given to any particular market within Kansas City when interviewing people on the subject of local.^{iv} Simply put, the different contexts of the local trap are exposed through the discourses provided by those involved, opening the term up to a critical examination of the semiotics implied (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). The truth is, the players involved construct this local definition and it is not given by some external entity. Consumers really do not have any control over the ‘locality’ of that food.

Local food systems are inherently geographic, linked as they are in consumers’ minds to visions of freshness due to nearness, place and the spaces between all of the places of production, ideas of the distinctiveness of a local origin, and an accountability or transparency in the delivery of the food that would suggest it is of a ‘higher’ quality than foods from the globalized produce systems (Goodman and Watts 1997; Kirwin 2004). These types of short supply chains, bringing the best produce from the area into direct, face-to-face relationships between producers and consumers are key to the success of the local farmers markets. Ilbery and Maye (2005, 331-332), in their study of “alternative and short food supply chains (SFSCs)” along the Scottish/English borders, suggest that these chains at face value represent the best type of local businesses noting that they are better for the consumer because the information contained about the production relationships are more transparent (Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003). The word of the producer in local settings is often all that guarantees the consumer of the many reasons for purchasing his/her product as opposed to others (accepting, of course, that personal relationships with producers is what initiates the contact and continued consumption of their produce). Research shows however, that upstream and downstream from local entities realities intersect with the national and international. From the Kalamazoo Gazette, a local Michigan paper: “The folks at Sam’s Club are touting their commitment to helping local food producers, noting a fifteen year relationship with Baileys Farms of Schoolcraft, Michigan.

If you bought a pumpkin from a Sam's Club store in the Midwest this season chances are good it was grown by Baileys Farms. The grower contracted to supply 70,000 pumpkins to locations in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Florida." The idea that pumpkins purchased locally but sold regionally or nationally resonates if you are the grower. This is all well and good from in and around Schoolcraft or areas nearby, but what if you grow pumpkins on your own farm in Ohio or Illinois or Florida that you sell as local and you see pumpkins selling in Sam's Club touted as invested in local production schemes?

On first impression because of its faceless nature and 'lost in a crowd' populations, the urban landscape would seem to be anything but a local space. Instead, the concrete and asphalt, and the supermarkets and mega-stores along the highways, would be the main focus of an industrialized food production system that brings food to the city much the same as any commodity, say clothing, is brought there for consumption. Globalization, seen in food circles as overcoming the vagaries of nature to provide consumers with fresh and diverse food year-round, give the many different providers of food options that ensure availability. As Benson and Fischer (2007, 809) point out, "produce appeared to come from a vague agrarian setting that is delocalized and yet situated 'abroad.' Food geographers and local activists strive mightily to suggest otherwise in the opportunities for consumers to consume outside of these globalized agrarian systems. The methods are called many things: local or alternative food systems, alternative food chains, and alternative agro-food networks among to name only a few (Bonanno et al. 1994; McMichael 1995; Goodman and Watts 1997; Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Hartwick 1998; Hinrichs 2000, 2003; Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003; Winter 2003; Hughes and Reimer 2004; DePuis and Goodman 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2005; Watts, Ilbery and Maye 2005; Feagan 2007). What is important is that, in the urban environment, the image presented when food is constructed to appear as if it was local is different from that of the global represented by industrialized food.

When the local isn't so local

In the Merriam farmers' market, on a Saturday morning in June 2005 tomatoes are selling for \$1.50/lb. in all of the stalls and a mid-sixties couple said sadly to one of the stall owners: "There are no homegrown tomatoes yet, are there." "Well," he replied, "there are some fresh Missouri ones though!" The couple merely shook their heads and walked slowly back to their car. I said to the stall owner: "Well that gives a definite description of what homegrown means." He sadly responded: "Those folks think it should be from right next door; I guess they don't think it through that my farm is forty miles south of here. It might as well be in Florida." I asked him if that is something that comes up often--the concept of what is local. He said, "I consider anything that is grown within a day's journey to be local." I responded with: "But you can drive from Colorado in a day!" To this he said: "I would consider a potato harvested [in Colorado] this morning, delivered this evening from there to be local. Maybe not a tomato or lettuce, I guess, but a potato for sure." I then asked, "So just how are those Missouri tomatoes you have any different than those that you could grow yourself later this summer?" But surprisingly he then said: "Actually, they are from Arkansas and I think that they are greenhouse grown but I am not sure, I got them from Des Moines."

The owner of a mid-sized farm in Wathena, Kansas, on the south side of the Missouri River across from St. Joseph, says that his property has eighty acres of loess soil on a northern exposure sloping down to the river. According to 'John,' this makes it an ideal tomato-growing property. He will have anywhere from 1,200 to 1,600 plants every year, with each yielding around twenty pounds in a good year. He says, "I could go to Brookside if I wanted, but I have been here since '93 [in the City Market] and I have a following. I feel a bit of loyalty to them because even in lean times I sell out. I have to have some trust, right? In the market, you know. I specialize in heirloom tomatoes so people know me." John comes to the City Market primarily on Saturdays and Sundays, but also on Wednesdays and Fridays [two days when few customers come] out of that sense of loyalty. He sells as well at Zona Rosa [a new, upscale shopping center in the northern part of the city] on Tuesday evenings: "Those people are great! They need produce so bad they will pay anything. It's great; you could name your price there. Of course I don't, but I sure could!"

John said that one of the problems with food in the city is the lying that goes on within some of the bigger companies, "They will mislabel tomatoes as homegrown, or even heirloom, when they are, in fact, commercial. I still think that most consumers are unaware of the foods they eat, but I have enough business here that I don't worry about it."

He understood that there were people who would not buy from him because his fruits are not perfect, heirloom tomatoes are knobby and often bruised because the plant's energy goes more to the fruit than the supporting stem, and the crop ends up growing along the ground. But John doesn't care. He tells me, "I know that those who know will buy my food; I always sell out so I don't get offended by that."

On 14 July 2006, a Friday, I spent from eleven in the morning to three simply standing around at the City Market. Almost no one was there. Only Global Produce and River Market Produce had products on display. Throughout the morning several cars drove into the market but no one bought much. In the early afternoon a truck from United Foods out of Topeka pulled up in front of Succotash restaurant. This is a small breakfast and lunch place in the north building of the market. Among the many boxed items were a couple of bags of onions and several boxes of potatoes from Colorado. I asked the girl checking in why they would buy produce from Topeka when they were in a produce market. She replied, "It's just easier, cheaper and we don't have to deal with anyone." I said, "But it's summertime, the produce is right here and a lot cheaper now than in winter; in winter I could see." And since we were standing next to the actual market selling this cheaper produce it would seem both logical as well as proactive to purchase the exact produce they ordered from Topeka 80 miles away. She just laughed and said, "Why bother with them!"

Produce distributors located along the outside buildings of the City Market sell melons from Guatemala at the same time as market farmers sell local melons from southern Nebraska. The melons from Guatemala are one dollar each when local melons sell for \$2.00 a pound. Others will offer melons from Colorado, famous in Kansas City for being among the most flavorful in the country and only appearing in the market for a short time in early August. Local activists would suggest the purchase of the local ones to ensure the success of that particular network. Reflexive consumerism might result in the Rocky Ford melon gracing a table. But economies of scale means that globalized melons are the cheapest.

Another vendor there told me that he gets apples from St. Joseph, Missouri because his brother-in-law wholesales from there and he can tack on a smaller order without messing that up. He sells them at the KCK market because "older people eat more apples, and they like fresh, local ones." But later, another vendor called him out by saying "all food here has to be food grown in Kansas or one county next to it in adjacent states." Asking other vendors that day I could not find out if this was true but it suggests that it would limit the direction food travels to the market one told me:

"This ensures that the food is at least local at the state level. We have a very different crowd, much older. Most walk here or at least car pool; no one seems to have much money. There is more of a neighborhood feeling. People can drive right into the parking lot, bring their own shopping bags, and go to each stall to visit, chat for awhile and then go home with a little fresh food."

The first gentleman assured me that his apples were grown in a Missouri county right next to Kansas, he only gets them from the distribution market in St. Joseph.

The vignettes above present multiple examples of what I am discussing in this article. The vendor considers local to be Colorado, the customers do not even include Missouri in that definition, offering that, to them, local would be 'homegrown.' There is also the further revelation from the vendor that the tomatoes are not in fact from Missouri but are brought up from Arkansas. This is also a function of geographic areas of production based upon climate, as it was too early in the season for truly local tomatoes. Growers must compete with different production sites that geographically have a mental space in consumer's minds for particular foods. Competition from outside sources leads to a lack of transparency at the local level fostered by the availability and price of the alternative foods. The ethics of others becomes an issue.

Transportation to market difficulties

The owner/operator of a small farm located in Spring Hill, Kansas, south of the city says, "I thought it would be easy to find a location to park and distribute my CSA produce [she offers a CSA program as her primary income source], but it wasn't easy. One local store who I asked about using their parking lot said it [I] was too much competition, another would say my produce was not related to their product. I don't want to leave the produce in tubs: one person took another person's weekly produce, they don't always pick it up promptly, the tubs might get too hot (even with ice), etc.

When we talked about the difficulties in bringing food to Kansas City, both for her and for major producers, she replied:

“I don’t really understand the question. What do you mean by ‘production areas?’ California and Brazil are production areas, but so are other local farmers. The biggest difference in ‘shipping’ produce and local produce is the variety that we grow. To have a ‘shipper’ you must breed into the vegetable or fruit the ability to stay firm for several days. Some vegetable and fruits are harvested very green (such as tomatoes) and they ripen during shipping. Some fruits are exposed to gases that encourage ripening. Asian Pears do not ripen after they are picked. They just can’t be shipped. Sungold Tomatoes will split during shipping, and are a local product only. The varieties of strawberries are getting better for shipping, but they are so much better tasting when vine ripened. Sweet corn will start losing its sugar content after it is taken from the stalk, even with cooling (which slows down the process). Some varieties of sweet corn should be eaten within a few hours of picking. Large producers will use a quick-cool system to keep the vegetables fresh and refrigerated trucks and freight cars. The small grower, such as myself, might have a cooler and we wash in cold water right away, but the expense of refrigerated trucks is out of the question. We just try to harvest right before delivery as much as possible.”

Demographic problems of ‘Whiteness’ or ethnic distance

The markets are often surrounded by neighborhoods whose demographics present purchasing power discrepancies that are often hidden by the allure the physical presence of the market offers. These income inequalities isolate those who most need the food offered there. Or, put it in a different light, do they highlight the dilemma of serving only a “narrow ‘class diet’ of privileged income groups” (Goodman 2004,13; see also Hinrichs and Kremer 2002, Slocum 2006) regardless of race, focusing merely on class?

Multiple interviews from the Brookside farmers market suggested that if there was a Hispanic, Black, or Asian person in the neighborhood, they were either there to mow the lawn, clean the pool, or act as a nanny. In many ways this reality is a problem for Brookside. Anecdotal evidence suggests that theirs is the most organic, the most ‘healthy’ of all of the markets. It is also, by far, the most expensive. The customers at Brookside do not complain, but the people who most need the food offered there cannot afford to shop. A market trader there commented,

“Many of my customers focus their buying needs on Saturday morning. Our market is their primary destination, but keep in mind they are also from Brookside in general. I have some who complained when we moved here from Barstow School [the location for the market up until 2005] but most are in this neighborhood anyway. ... While it is something they like--the market and the connection to the farmer--they realize that they are connected to the global through money, since they have so much of it. ... They recognize that it exists but that is due to an education and world-view level that most don’t have based upon their money. Brookside is limited, a little closed as a community, but people here crave the market connection, the attraction to the community. They say ‘it’s too much gas to drive down there [to the City Market].”

Rachel Slocum (2006) and JulieGuthman (2008) have identified ways in which these discourses instantiate whiteness upon the market, keeping minorities from participating proportionately. Slocum (2006, 5) notes “the ‘sticky connections of property privilege and paler skin’ enable white bodies to stick and flow, opening spaces to some, closing them to others” (Saldanha 2006, 18). Guthman asks “to what extent these marketplaces are coded as ‘white space’ (389)? To questions like this, Jill Silva, who worked as food editor of the Kansas City Star newspaper for the last twelve years replied, “In some areas of Kansas City there is an ethnic catering to the local area, but that breaks down in the suburbs because what is ethnic there? North of the river we hear a lot of complaints about access to goods, especially foods. I mean, why would ‘Dean and Deluca’ put a shop at 119th Street? How does that serve north Kansas City?”

In essence, Brookside is a destination market—you have to go there from some other place, making an effort as if it were an event, not simply food shopping, although those who live there do not look at it that way. In summer tomatoes there sold for \$4.00 a pound during a time when they cost \$1.50 at all the other markets – even the same tomatoes from the same growers. All of the vendors come from somewhere in Missouri or Kansas. Although I often heard “Oh, we grow our food in north Kansas City,” or even “We just come over from Bonner Springs,” I never heard “We grew this in the immediate neighborhood.”

To say that an heirloom tomato comes from the market does not imply that it was grown there in the same way one from nearby Wathena, Kansas. What is implied is that Brookside tomatoes are better because the neighborhood itself is better. It is, in many ways, a reflection of how better off people who live there are from other parts of the city. It is implying a quality of life beyond just the quality of food. It also suggests that demographics play a bigger role in the movement of food (at least organic food) in the city than some of the major players would admit. At the time of these interviews Cosentino's was the only chain to have stores in Brookside. But the type of neighborhood it is makes it unrealistic to expect their competitors to respond to the demands the money of Brookside commands. If, as suggested by David Ball, President of Ball Foods, operator of Hen House and Balls Family Markets, it takes 10,000 roofs to support a supermarket, they are excluded in a practical sense because not enough households exist to support additional stores. I am not being critical about the idea of this market by interjecting my own conclusions. I simply wish to point out a crucial point about a local construct. The farmers market serves its purpose for the community and has a legitimate place in the local economy. It is totally organic (that seems to be the basic point of its existence), but many people in the city either cannot afford the cost of most products or do not feel comfortable with its upscale, white setting. This potentially changes the face of Brookside into one of exclusion even more than does the price of its tomatoes.

Directly across from the stall I am working in at the City Market a young woman says to the Asian woman behind the table, "wow, what great looking lemon grass, is it organic?" The older woman is not certain just what that means. She says something to her husband in their language and looks to the vendor who I have been interviewing across the aisle in City Market, for help. He asks the younger woman what she is looking for. "I want to know if the lemon grass is organic, was it grown without any chemicals and under pristine circumstances?" He asks the vendor, "did you grow the lemon grass in any different way than how you grow your other produce?" She says, "It's grown next to the fence, does that make a difference?" The woman says, "but is it organic?" After a number of exchanges like this the young woman moves away exasperated, muttering, sputtering a little I think, and says indignantly, "I only buy organic." My interviewee guides her to his stall where he sells organic, heirloom tomatoes. The Asian woman looks at me, smiles and says in perfect English, "What the fuck!? It's a weed!" This exchange highlights several issues; first, that of different ideas on organic (a topic worthy of examining in and of itself but not my focus) but also that of what I am calling ethnic distance or the perceived barriers that ethnicity or class brings which mitigate against inclusion into particular food networks (Slocum 2006). An interviewee told me that farmers' markets are simply "liberal welfare for the farmer, brought about by SUV's and Lexus and paid for by the city" (Lemberg 2009) and thus do not represent the true character or make-up of the people or neighborhoods they purport to enhance.

The local clouds the transparency of its own food

Consider the perfectly ripe, consistently sized, wonderfully colorful tomatoes in many Kansas City farmers markets from growers in the religious communities along the nearby Missouri River and south of town. My research indicates that people purchase tomatoes from these vendors simply because of the stereotypical images of Amish, Mennonite and other conservative farming communities: this image is that the food will be organic, of an heirloom nature, be fresh, ripe, and ultimately (it is hoped) delicious. On cursory examination this means nothing. Interviews with other producers reveal that these tomatoes come from two single seed groups that are genetically modified (called various things by market traders, Jet Star and Mountain Fresh seem to be slang for the two seed types). Further, enclosed greenhouses are the reasons for both consistency in appearance and yearlong production and, while the heat source that enables this production is a wood-fired oven and all that this implies, the modern, industrial production is hidden behind the branding process.

Although the above example is that of a linear network similar to any distribution network, it is also an example of making more of the local. Not of the tomato in this case, but of the religiosity, the wholesomeness, or purity that produces the tomato. Consumers purchase this fruit based upon the ideal that the people represent, not the ideal of the fruit itself. Actually the tomato is irrelevant here. The hybridized fruit itself is nothing more than an example of a "placeless foodscape." This fruit to consumers embodies no particular locality, only a vague, better, local place embodied through the religious groups. Interviewing other traders who did not wish to seem sacrilegious about the growers made me wonder if the story was true. I do know that week after week through the entire farmers market season, the "religious" tomatoes were always the same size, ripeness, and color. No consumer thought to question them however; they simply took them as being authentic, heirloom tomatoes. Nor did I until various stall owners pointed the facts of their production out to me.

Several of these same vendors told me that they would be growing their produce in similar fashion in the future to compete. On 8 October, 2005, Bill, wearing an impressively dirty pair of overalls, pointed across the center aisle of the City Market, and mumbled:

“The Amish or Mennonites, whoever they are, you know, they sell these perfect ‘Mountain Spring’ or ‘Mountain Air’ tomatoes. Perfect, but they are tasteless, and they flood the market with them (although they charge the same price as for heirloom tomatoes). We are going to grow some next year just because we have to compete. We have loyal customers; in fact, they keep us in business. People argue with us all the time about the produce. What they don’t realize is that each variety only has about a two-week window where it is available and then you wait for the next variety to ripen depending upon species. Not always do you get the same type [of produce in general, but I think he meant tomatoes in this particular instance] for a long period. Right now there are the remnants of the year that we can sell so the market has a lot of leftover stuff such as the last plums, end-of-the-year tomatoes, cukes that are getting seedy... [we are] only going to be growing squashes and lettuce right on through the fall.”

Conclusion

As a metaphor, ‘the local’ offers researchers insight into many aspects of our modern world. Cultural geographers grapple with ideas of how the various different systems of our world operate, especially through food (McMichael 1995; Cook and Crang 1996; Hinrichs 2000, 2003; Feagan 2007; Blake, Mellor and Crane 2010). These include concerns with the nexus of the global and the local that “can be explored by ‘mapping’ the labile, sliding identities forged in specific yet globalized sites” (Watts 1991, 11). It is important to realize that a commodity is something more than its physical form, even when thinking of the market itself as a commodity. This includes the place locale as well as the mental space that physical market embodies. Consumers make an idealized construct based upon what they believe a commodity represents and use this to create a hierarchy of value. I cannot, from my research, suggest that they have complete knowledge of the commodity. Perhaps, though, they “know it, but they have never thought about it” (Page 2005, 301). These constructs can be straight forward of course, but also can be manipulated and contorted into situations where the value so important to the consumer, that of the local, is hidden inside or behind something and becomes the ‘Local Trap.’

Everything is local--we recognize the immediate effects upon people. From my own personal ethical make-up I understand that the consequences of my actions show me how to connect the inequalities of society into my own life. Thus, I am embedded in a web much like a commodity, which flows through me from others, but also between others from myself in a constant (re) shuffling. Food is available at all times and in many different modes while turning us away from the factors of production and the differences of variety. We gain access while losing knowledge of our foods. The semiotics of the local farmers market, whether in Kansas City or your own town, shout out “consume local, eat the local.” This is the commodity of the fetish; in this case fetishizing the local, no less than the dancing of Carmen Miranda hides the truth behind the banana (Marx 1976 [1867]; Harvey 1990, 1999; Cook and Crang 1996; Cook, Crang and Thorpe 2004). This local fetish also hides the exploitation behind a veil of the local as ‘better’ circling back to a type of double fetish (Cook and Crang 1996). Grayson (2004, 302) writes, “When consumers believe they are in the presence of something authentic, they can feel transported to the context to which the object of location is authentically linked, and thus they feel more connected with the context.” The context here of course is the local, because eating locally creates its own authenticity. This is hidden behind all it means to be local. This also tightens the tensions over how semiotics take the consumer from ‘the present and into a realm of spatial-temporal fantasy’ (Gottdiener 1982; Goss 1993, 1999; Coles 2009) where they are doing the right thing by consuming the right thing in (and from) the right place.

Many different ingredients go into a single meal and each one has an individual, involved production history. These all go to form a curtain around the meal. Criticisms run from ‘who cares’ to ‘preaching to the converted.’ Consumers who actively shop with good intentions may not fully follow through on the repercussions of their actions (Dupuis 2002). Again, it harkens back to those who would pay more for a tomato coming from forty miles away than for one from a thousand miles. Or, is it better to buy a local strawberry with some small amount of chemical used to control slugs from the back of your neighbors very smoky and leaky truck, then one from California that is certified organic? Kansas City may be different than other cities in the percentage of reflexive consumers who act this way, but this question is outside the scope of this article.

The name Kansas City perhaps evokes ideas of the nation's 'heartland' or 'breadbasket,' but this does not translate necessarily into cheap food, or for that matter, into more readily available food sources. We are not inherently better off eating local here in those food systems than anywhere else simply because we live in one of those mental places. This paper has presented examples of what I mean. What is relevant is discussion of the differences between what is said about delivering food to the city and what actually occurs on the street. Food activists, researchers, alternative systems advocates and the general public all must search for ways to make the local movements of food transparent, sustainable and equitable. Suggesting that the local trap be avoided is essentially suggesting that consumers must not simply accept that local as better and inquire more deeply into their food.

Notes

ⁱ Community Supported Agricultural Projects are farmer/consumer linkages where local farmers provide consumers with a pre-determined (weekly, bi-weekly, etc.) delivery schedule of the most fresh, local products. These are most often fruits and vegetables but may include meats, baked goods, and honey products as well. See Hinrichs 2000, 2003 among others.

ⁱⁱ Research was conducted under Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) # 08-09-29, Western Michigan University and the University of Kansas.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fieldnotes are listed here in the same sequence they appear in the text. They provide dates and locations of those whose stories open chapters and those I interviewed who consented to answer my specific questions but would not give their names.

Fieldnotes: 5 August, 2006 City Market, Kansas City, MO.

Fieldnotes: 17 June, 2005 Merriam Farmers Market, Merriam, KS.

Fieldnotes : 17 October, 2006 Zona Rosa Farmers Market, Kansas City, MO.

Fieldnotes: 17 March, 2005 City Market.

Fieldnotes: 26 October, 2006 City Market.

Fieldnotes: 17 April, 2006 39th St. Community Market, Kansas City, MO.

Fieldnotes: 31 August, 2005 City Market.

Fieldnotes: 15 April, 2006 Brookside Farmers Market, Kansas City, MO.

Fieldnotes: 31 August, 2005 City Market.

Fieldnotes: 14 July, 2006 City Market.

Fieldnotes: October 8, 2005 City Market.

Fieldnotes: 26 August, 2006 Merriam Farmers Market

^{iv} See www.localharvest.org, for the guidelines to The City Market see: [www.thecitymarket.org/pdfs/City Market Gen...Information.pdf](http://www.thecitymarket.org/pdfs/City%20Market%20Gen...Information.pdf)

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