

# Are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars?

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**Abstract** Much is being made of local food. It is at once a social movement, a diet, and an economic strategy—a popular solution—to a global food system in great distress. Yet, despite its popularity or perhaps because of it, local food (especially in the US) is also something of a chimera if not a tool of the status quo. This paper reflects on and contrasts aspects of current local food rhetoric with Dalhberg’s notion of a regenerative food system. It identifies three problematic emphases—the locavore emphasis, the Wal-Mart emphasis, and the Pollan emphasis—and argues that they are shifting local food (as a concept and a social movement) away from the deeper concerns of equity, citizenship, place-building, and sustainability. It is suggested that local food activists and advocates might consider the use of multiple methodologies and forms of expression to explore the integration and reintegration of local food into diverse and redundant place-based practice. A short case study of a low-income, urban neighborhood in Lansing, Michigan, illustrates the value of contextual analysis for more fully enabling the local food movement and a regenerative food system.

**Keywords** Local food movement · Local food · Locavores · Regenerative food system · Ethnography

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## Introduction

I remember it quite clearly. I was talking to the four people who’d come to my workshop on local food and CSA when 5 min into my presentation one member of my precious little group said, “Oh, this isn’t the workshop on cover crops, is it?” and in the blink of an eye I’d lost 25% of my audience.

We, the believers in the local food movement, have come a long way since the early 1990s. Some might even say we’ve arrived. Locavore is now an official word in the New American Oxford Dictionary. The logic of local food is the subject of incessant media exposés and public chatter—from blogs to zines. Even the President of the United States has a homegarden and will be required to pull a weed from time to time. Much has changed.

The purpose of this paper is not to deny or disparage this remarkable change in the nation’s awareness of food and the food system—the local food system in particular. Rather, it takes our current romance with local food as a given and while it does not advocate returning to the days of wholesale faith and sacrifice, it does advocate more self-reflection. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to caution local food advocates and activists, researchers, and practitioners against letting our critical guard down and assuming that the work we have done—because it is now so popular and our audience now so large—has been (and continues to be) all the right work.

There is a need, I believe, to continually question our direction as well as our orienting values. It is to this end that I’d like to express some reservations about where the local food movement is headed and the values that it seems to be (and not to be) promoting. In particular I am concerned that local food and the local food movement has given short shrift to the ownership and practice of local

food—to the nature of participatory democracy and the empowerment of local people. I do this first by presenting my understanding of how local is embedded within a sustainable food system, then identifying three problematic emphases that I feel have come to characterize local food (and the overall movement), and ending with a few tentative suggestions of how we (researchers, activists, practitioners) might work to further ensure the promise of local food.

### Things possibly forgotten

Some 15 years ago (about the time I was talking to audiences of 3 and 4 people), Dahlberg (1993) wrote a bellwether essay on regenerative food systems. He argued that if we were serious about food and about laying the groundwork for sustainability (locally, nationally, globally), then “we must go beyond the typical narrow focus on production [agriculture] to a broad analysis of complete food *systems*” (1993, p. 75, emphasis in the original). Specifically, he challenged that we needed to approach the food system—through research, policy, and daily practice—as existing on many levels and across many distances simultaneously. In other words, he wanted to make sure we did not forget that such a system was at once particular and place-based as well as evolutionary in nature. It could not be understood apart from ecology, history, and political power. And its problems could not be addressed simply as matters of production or consumption.

Dahlberg proposed that the best way to understand (and hopefully enable) such a system was through “contextual analysis.” This, he explained, was a matter of “determin[ing] what are the key processes and structures of a system at one level of analysis and how that system is influenced by the systems above and below it” (1993, p. 77). A system, he felt, was built upon the interconnections between and among individuals (human and otherwise), their households, communities, regions, etc. At the same time Dahlberg also argued that the “goals and values relevant at each level for the health and regenerative capacity of the system need to be included” (1993, p. 77). Such analysis, then, could not be values-free or universalistic. One size, one solution, one set of prescriptions did not, could not, fit all. Quite the contrary. The integrity and the creative possibilities found at all levels—but most especially at the smallest (or least) level—and within all systems and subsystems were the sources of diversity and redundancy—the *sin qua non* of a regenerative system and in this case a regenerative food system. For Dahlberg, as for many systems scientists (e.g., Mollison 1994; Bawden and Packham 1998; Hawken 2007), activity at the ground level—unique local expressions—contained the adaptive

possibilities that could offer stability to higher, more abstract levels of a system and resilience to the system as a whole. Flexibility is understood to reside at the local level, in the vast numbers of small places, in their innovation and in the overlap of their many functions. To use Hawken’s biological analogy, grassroots activity collectively serves as an immune response for the planet. Diversity and redundancy (or conversely the relative absence of uniformity and instrumental efficiency) are at home in real lived places. Letting these places speak for themselves and listening to them carefully (i.e., less partially) are much of what Dahlberg meant by “contextual analysis.”

Other critical dimensions according to Dahlberg (apart from the hyper-dominant concerns of production economies) were “ecology, ethics, and equity.” With these “3-E’s,” he reminded us of the guiding principles and relationships basic to a regenerative food system—the use and restoration of the natural resource base; the recognition of our kinship to all other life forms; and the fair distribution of resources, voice, and power. These enabled the vitality of small places and the opportunity for contextual analysis. Our job as scholars, scientists, activists, and citizens was to see with many eyes (i.e., to be inclusive socially and disciplinarily), to question continually the non-neutral nature and contextual consequences of our institutions and technologies—all the while marveling at the infinite complexity and dwindling resilience of our one and only planet.

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Now let’s fast forward a decade or so. As mentioned earlier, we have come a long way since Dahlberg presented his argument and there can be little doubt, at least in theory, that what we refer to today as local food and the local food movement share much in common with his notion of a regenerative food system. Feenstra (2002, p.100), for instance, defines the local food movement as “a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies—one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption [are] integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and local health of a particular place.”<sup>1</sup> Her definition goes well beyond production agriculture and is attentive to the many processes up and down the food chain that sustain a food system as well as their environmental, community, health, and economic implications. It is clearly place sensitive (contextually aware), values oriented (collaborative), and participatory in nature (self-reliance). Using the term “civic agriculture.” Lyson (2004, 2005), likewise, has drawn our

<sup>1</sup> I’ve chosen Feenstra’s definition of the local food movement because her work is both extensive and thoughtful. It is also the definition that appears in Wikipedia’s entry for local food—arguably a reliable reflection of popular knowledge.

attention to the social relationships and political relationships embedded within a wide range of alternative agrifood projects.<sup>2</sup> For him local food systems are civic in nature and, as such, are instruments of place-based negotiation, collective responsibility, and a participatory democracy.

Perspectives such as these have considerable depth and breadth. Much care has been taken to balance the embedded and the economically rational, the experiential and the theoretical, the immediate and the long-term, the need for self-protection and social justice. But concepts, however, thoughtfully defined, are not actual behavior; they may even serve to mask or otherwise excuse discrepancies between the two. It is worth noting that when put into practice, the majority of local food research and programming has focused first (and sometimes solely) on the market potential and economic outcomes of local food as vehicles through which to realize food system reform (DeLind 2002; DeLind and Bingen 2008). There is respect for the contextual and qualitative—for values, behaviors, wisdoms, and identities that constitute and are constituted by natural landscapes and cultural and political histories. Too often, however, it is assumed that such phenomena are trappings for or perks of successful market activity, rather than critical elements in their own right. Typically, it is assumed that “quality of life” will naturally be strengthened through greater investment in economic entrepreneurship and in the application of more regionally sensitive models and technologies for production and consumption. This orientation, I believe, differs from Dahlberg’s notion of a regenerative food system. It is not that he finds economic concerns (or market activity) to be unimportant or unrepresented in all our social endeavors. Rather it is that he finds many other things equally essential—ecology, cultural and biological diversity, power, justice, spirituality among them. In fact, he is extremely wary of reductionism, seeing it as a primary, if not *the* primary, impediment to our ability to analyze and ultimately realize a sustainable system.

Despite many fine projects on behalf of local food—farmers markets, CSAs, urban agriculture, farmer cooperatives, Slow Food, farm to school meals and curriculum, product labels, seed saving, national coalitions—Dahlberg’s cautions still resonate. Years ago he wrote, “[t]oday ... there is the risk that only the language, but little of the substance of sustainability will be adopted. It would be much harder, but healthier for the agricultural

establishments of the world to make a serious effect to reexamine the basis assumptions and structure of conventional systems. ... Conventional approaches still tend to be disciplinary based, reductionist, and employ narrow economic or production and productivity criteria to measure their ‘success’” (Dahlberg 1993, p. 80).

I am concerned that many of these criteria still prevail and that despite its success *or perhaps more accurately because of its success* the local food movement (in the US at least) may be distancing itself from its systemic roots, exchanging rhetoric for the harder work of contextual analysis, which in turn may constrain rather than enable local emancipation. As we pursue and define local so wholeheartedly through the creation of new markets, new products for consumption, and a new consumer consciousness, we tend to overlook how lives are lived in real places. We focus in on discrete and fundable social problems and on effective, reproducible solutions. This frame of reference makes it possible to dismiss the behavioral, particular, and democratic—the community building relationships and processes that hold people to place and to shared responsibility. However, inadvertently, I fear we may be chipping away the bedrock of a regenerative system. The following three emphases within today’s local food movement serve as a cautious and cautionary illustration of my concern.<sup>3</sup>

### The locavore emphasis

In 2007 “locavore”—a person who prefers to eat (or only eats) from within his/her own region or foodshed<sup>4</sup>—

<sup>3</sup> An anonymous reviewer has correctly noted that a wide range of values and goals are embedded within the local food movement today, not all of them consistent or necessarily progressive in nature. The Slow Food Movement, for example, champions indigenous or culturally authentic foods and food ways but has been criticized for its elitist, self-indulgent tendencies. Eating locally, likewise, has become a trope for supporting diversified, small-scale farmers and an agrarian revival that can be parochial, patriarchal, and sanctimonious. To be sure local food and the local food movement have attracted an odd assortment of bedfellows—survivalists, environmentalists, artisans, union labor, the healthy, and the unhealthy alike find answers in the local cause.

What is being argued here is that the concept of local as popularly presented and applied seems to be losing track of its own self-reflexive, and often contradictory and embodied nature. By becoming something that is easy for everyone to swallow, literally and figuratively, it serves the status quo far more keenly than its many adherents. The ease with which it cleaves to the individual, the industrial, and the generic suggests, to this author at least, that the concept, like sustainability and organic before it, may soon be “cut and controlled” (Burke and Ornstein 1995), losing much of its potential for systemic resilience.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the New American Oxford Dictionary definition but a close approximation. The 2007 edition of the dictionary is not yet available either in hard copy or electronic form.

<sup>2</sup> “Civic agriculture is a locally organized system of agricultural and food production characterized by networks of producers who are bound together by place. ... Civic agriculture is fundamentally about problem solving. Taken together, the enterprises that make up and support civic agriculture can [be] seen as a part of a community’s problem solving capacity. ... Civic agriculture is the embedding of local agriculture and food production in the community” (Lyson 2005, p. 92).

became an official part of the American lexicon. Yet even before such recognition (and certainly afterwards) it occupied a central place within the local food movement. It is axiomatic that the more locavores there are, the stronger the movement. While this is hardly a bad thing, it is important to consider a few of the assumptions that underlie the relationship.

First, the concept of locavore privileges the individual. Locavores and would-be locavores (theoretically the public-at-large) are told repeatedly through popular films (e.g., *Supersize Me*, *Fast Food Nation*, *King Corn*, *Fresh, Food, Inc.*), and books (e.g., *Omnivore's Dilemma*, *In Defense of Food*, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*) and media features (e.g., PBS, *NYT*, *Yes!*, *Mother Jones*, *Business Week*) that they—as individuals—can effect change one vegetable, one meal, and one family at a time. It suggests that what is wrong with the world (from monocultural practices, to obesity, to global warming) can be addressed through altered personal behavior. But as Maniates (2002) and Roff (2007) note, individualizing social (or environmental) issues in this manner, effectively displaces or deflects responsibility. It suggests that we still can have it all. We can individually eat our way to health and happiness. And, by doing so, we feel we have been admitted into the ranks of that group of committed individuals, which, according to Margaret Mead, has historically been responsible for changing the world. Ultimately, such rhetoric does more to comfort and accommodate the individual eater (i.e., the locavore) than it does to challenge inequity and existing power structures.

Second, being a locavore suggests that the individual's primary responsibility is to consume—to be a consumer. It is not the role that is being questioned. Rather it is the lack of sufficient knowledge to perform it properly that is seen as problematic.<sup>5</sup> To this end, locavores and would-be locavores are instructed on what and how to eat. Quick lists that set out “10 ways to becoming a locavore” (Maiser 2007), or “8 ways to join the local food movement” (Lovejoy 2009), or “50 easy ways to eat green” (Garvey 2009) abound.<sup>6</sup> Electronic maps and databases likewise inform eaters where they can find recommended foods close to home and conversely help farmers and producers connect with customers. The pervasive and often invasive nature of this campaign has generated some critical backlash with claims of *food chic* or *food fascism* as well as

some quasi-serious, counter-offensives promoting the virtue of long-distance diets (Stein 2008). But even these counter-offensives typically are reacting to the *stuff* being consumed and its elitist pretensions rather than one's identity as a consumer. There is little about the term locavore that speaks to whole persons—people as residents, poets, bus drivers, grandmothers, and neighborhood activists—as people who must practice the complex art of living with each other. Neither does it highlight activities that engage people on the ground and in their communities beyond food procurement (i.e., the market) and a nutritional critique of their dietary options. It is a segmenting and isolating perspective that fosters, however, inadvertently, a sense of *me* rather than a sense of *we*.

Third, reducing the locavore to an individual consumer whose primary identity is mediated through the marketplace feeds liberating rhetoric while starving social or political activism. A familiar argument on behalf of local food is that it provides the consumer with more (and with real) choices. This may be true. Free-range eggs, fresh mixed greens, artisanal products produced by family farmers certainly have much to offer. Still shouldn't local eaters be asking themselves “Why should we be concerned with expanding choice and not with expanding a sense of collective necessity and/or collective responsibility?” Shouldn't local eaters also ask “Why are we so totally concerned with consumers and not community members?” Casting individual choice as equivalent to individual freedom and market participation as equivalent to community participation (and thus the common good) is nothing new. It has been a successful (divisive and manipulative) strategy of our mainstream food system. It is sobering to recognize that the local food movement is now accommodating and indulging (i.e., conveniencing) individual consumers who are too busy to pick up their own CSA shares, or too disinterested to plant or weed their own gardens, but who have sufficient enlightenment and capital (possibly the same thing), to eat local (DeLind 2003; Hamilton 2002). They now have an official name—“lazy locavores”—which, in a regenerative system, can only be a contradiction in terms (TCF 2008; Philpott 2008).

All this, of course, calls into question yet another popular argument—that local food (and the local food movement more generally) allows everyone to vote with his or her dollars. Why aren't eaters being encouraged to ask why a movement rooted in the principles of sustainability identifies voting as the quintessential act of citizenship? Why aren't they being asked to reflect on the fact that “one person, one vote” doesn't apply in the marketplace? The mixing of metaphors, the illusion of equity, and the sense that equity represents fairness salves too many consciences.

Certainly the gross inequities of our current food system are growing more visible and are a subject of programmatic

<sup>5</sup> Credit card companies depend on this argument. Under the guise of being sustainable (socially and environmentally responsibility) a recent commercial for a major credit card allowed (and I'm paraphrasing here): “There's so much good stuff in this world. And there's nothing wrong with that. The problem is knowing how to manage it all. We're here to help.”

<sup>6</sup> Typical among their suggestions are things like grow a garden, eat more chocolate, join a CSA, and shop at a farmers market.

concern within the movement—from charity work (plant a row for the hungry, soup kitchens, school lunches) to far deeper, place- and policy-based empowerment (e.g., Growing Power, Added Value, the Hartford Food System, People's Co-op). Still there is a tendency for the local food movement to treat the most successful (colorful and politically correct) projects as poster children. As such they are elevated to “rock star status,” fawned over by progressive NGOs, and used as inspirational models for reproduction in other blighted areas (Herzog 2009). Once discovered they too often legitimate, willingly or not, abstractions and abstracted solutions that override living contexts and the input of those who inhabit them.

The proposed urban farm on Detroit's lower east side is suggestive of this pattern. As publicized, plans are underway to create Hantz Farms which will turn “70 acres of underutilized vacant lands and abandoned properties” into “the leading example of urban farming and ... a destination for fresh, local, and natural foods and ... a major part of the green movement” (Hantz 2009; Gallagher 2009; Huffstutter 2009). As presented, the project—the largest urban farm in Michigan—will use local food production as a catalyst for economic development and urban gentrification. Major players are Hantz Group, Inc, “a full service financial holding company,” Michigan State University, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the City of Detroit. Little or nothing has been said about seeking input from or extending ownership to eastside Detroit residents, the very people who now live there.

Rhetoric aside, all locavores are not created equal. Nor is the eating of local food a social elixir. The movie, *The Garden*, is to this fact. It is time to attend to how such inequity fuels the movement and to come to terms with the “relationality of difference” that exists within it (Kandaswamy 2008).

### The Wal-Mart emphasis

Several years ago the following news story was posted on the Internet.

In an abrupt departure from current practices, the McDonald's Corporation [NYSE: MCD] announced today that its 30,000 franchises will now acquire their entire product from local farmers markets. The shift is expected to generate demand for new farmers markets wherever there is a McDonald's restaurant.

The switch to local suppliers is the first phase of McDonald's new strategic plan, which will be ushered in with the marketing catchphrase “Go Local!”

“We saw the writing on the wall,” said CEO Jim Skinner, “Economies of scale aren't going to cut it anymore. These days, you've got to go local or get out of town.” (Project for Public Spaces 2005).

It was an April fool's spoof sent out by the Project for Public Spaces (PPS). But, it was far more prescient than spoof. Today, Wal-Mart sells what they call locally grown produce (O'Mara 2008). Their reason has far more to do with market competition—“millions of dollars of savings on fuel costs each year”—than it does with a concern for regenerative food systems. Nevertheless, it neatly capitalizes on the locavore challenge, the convenience of one-stop shopping, and the promise of cheap prices. It pairs rhetoric with some of the very conditions the movement was designed to overcome.

While Wal-Mart may be profiling local growers, publicly telling their stories, and photographing their faces and their farms, there is little to suggest that this David and Goliath relationship will grow into anything other than a classic economic rout with a globally dominant corporation dictating standards, varieties, quantities, growing conditions, and ultimately purchase price (Byczynski 2008). In Chicago, for example, Wal-Mart's “Fresh Farmers Market” was seen as a bid to hop on the local food bandwagon and has been criticized for these very reasons. Quite apart from tapping growers of considerable scale and global connection, the wedding of a farmers market ambiance with “Wal-Mart's ‘signature low prices’” was found to be disingenuous, if not outright damaging to small individual producers (Chicagoist 2009). A similar pattern already exists for relatively smaller, more regionally based superstores like Meijers, which constrained by competition, economic efficiencies, and national food safety regulations no longer purchase directly from individual producers (produce buyer, personal communication 2009).

When the term “local” is tied in this manner to conventionalizing, scale-inducing, structural inequity (see DeLind and Howard 2008; Gilman 2009), it loses its proclaimed economic advantage—that \$45 of every \$100 spent locally stays in the community (Mitchell 2009). It also easily morphs into a commodity attribute—one of dozens. As a result, an assortment of discrete and frequently superficial qualities or conditions—everything from fresh, to seasonal, to organic, to miles traveled, to time spent traveling, to carbon footprint, to knowing a farmer's name—are used to distinguish local products from their conventional counterparts. That these values themselves can be internally inconsistent and externally contradictory doesn't seem to inhibit their proliferation or use. The campaign to transform Lays<sup>®</sup> potato chips into local fare or to disguise corporate identities behind what appear to be locally owned businesses are cases in point (Severson

2009; Mitchell 2009).<sup>7</sup> Nor is it surprising that the attributes easiest to quantify have become the easiest to promote and manage. If 100 miles and four Marco Polo exceptions are not sufficiently logical or convenient, then 250 miles or 4 h from the nearest warehouse become new measures of local.

The point being made here is that commerce and those who control it increasingly set the popular limits for what is and what isn't reasonably local. What gets lost in the shuffle, for it is neither easy to study nor to quantify, is Dahlberg's notion of contextual analysis and the health of the smallest unit. We are in danger of losing sight of the particular—particular ecologies and the relationships that their populations (humans and others) create over time with each other and their places.

Local is not being defined from within, and local food, diets, or cuisines are not being identified by those who, in Mintz's words, "are [involved in the] ongoing, active producing of food and producing of opinions about food, around which and through which people communicate daily to each other who they are" (1996, p. 98). Such activity gives power to the people and to their own discretion in decision making and problem solving. It gives legitimacy, for example, to Jell-O<sup>®</sup> as a staple of the Midwest potluck. It is open enough to include the hunted and gathered foods that continue to exist below the commercial, and often the legal, radar in places like Presque Isle, Michigan. It is wise enough to recognize as "authentic" those foods valued and re-created for traditional, identity, and survival purposes (Collier 2008; Wilk 2006). The role of fry bread—a non-authentic, nutritionally-poor and identity-rich food—among many American Indians is a politically and culturally charged case in point. As the local food movement grows more popular and more publicly manicured, the local food movement risks ignoring or dismissing diversity, necessity, and cultural pluralism—their messy voices as well as their less-

<sup>7</sup> One way corporations can be "local" is to stock a token amount of locally grown produce, as Wal-Mart has done in some of its supercenters. The chain's local food offerings are usually limited to a few of the main commodity crops of that particular state—peaches in Georgia or potatoes in Maine—and sit amid a sea of industry food and other goods shipped from the far side of the planet. Yet this modest gesture has won Wal-Mart glowing coverage in numerous daily newspapers, few of which have asked the salient question: Does Wal-Mart, which now captures more than one of every five dollars Americans spend on groceries, create more and better opportunities for local farmers than the grocers it replaces?

"Wal-Mart, like other chains, has learned that consumers increasingly support companies they perceive to be acting responsibly, and that tossing around the word 'local' is a far less expensive way to convey civic virtue than the alternatives. 'Local is one of the lower-hanging fruits in terms of sustainability,' explains Barry [senior vice president of the Hartman Group]. 'It's easier for companies to do than to improve how their employees are treated or adopt a specific sustainability practice around their carbon footprint, for example'" (Mitchell 2009).

than-pure existence—upon which a regenerative system depends.

It is worth noting here, that this same gathering in of control and overriding of the particular seems to be occurring within the movement itself. In the rush to win advocates and confront the existing agrifood system, many non-profits, whether foundations, institutional associations, or research entities, are vying for resources (information as well as funding) and authority. Select organizations and individuals serve as consultants or gatekeepers for alternative agrifood projects. The PPS (originator of the aforementioned spoof), for example, is a consultant organization on a majority of USDA farmers market grants. It uses a rather standard business model to assess market potential and to account for successful market management.<sup>8</sup> How large can a market grow? How many shoppers can it attract? What are its consumer demographics? How much revenue is generated for vendors, for the market, for the city? Such an orientation not only selects for quantitative data, but it superimposes a set of externally derived "best practices" (GAP, GHP) on unique social spaces, codifying operations and outcomes. The National Association of Farmers Markets Nutrition Programs assumes a similar position with respect to USDA nutrition programs. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, likewise, promotes through its funding efforts its own politically strategic and scale-worthy brand of food and health-related programming.

Several market managers see this appropriation of local discretion as "a gathering storm" or as the "boiling of a frog one degree at a time" (Michigan farmers market manager, personal communication; Balkin 2009). They are concerned that this move toward greater bureaucratic efficiency and control shows little respect for local wisdom or competence and that it constrains the ability of local institutions and populations to interact freely and self-educate. Not surprisingly, they suggest, that such regularization has the potential to transform embedded markets into commercial ones (Balkin 2009). There is much here to remind us of Audre Lorde's keen and uncompromising observation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984, p. 110). The collapse of many non-profits (as well as for-profits) that believed in Bernie Madoff and in a 20–30% return on their investment might offer us a useful lesson if not a case in point.

### The Pollan emphasis

As noted earlier, the local food movement is becoming a movement of experts and popular heroes—people whose

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Jayson Otto, former manager of the Fulton Street Farmers Market in Grand Rapids, for this observation.

abilities and accomplishments are growing them (willingly or not) into super stars. Currently, the most well known and skillful of these is Michael Pollan. Through well researched and lucidly written books, *NYT* features, public letters, and speaking engagements (at \$20–30,000/engagement), he has made the food system visible and accessible. He has acquainted the public-at-large with US agrifood history, explained the nation's cheap food policy, shown us the structure of the agrifood industry, laid out the connection between US farm and trade policy and personal health (i.e., HFCS), and offered and endorsed alternatives. This is hardly a small accomplishment and for this we owe him considerable thanks.

At the same time, heroes, as Loeb (1999) suggests, can be problematic. They can keep average citizens from assuming the risks and responsibilities of leadership—from fully engaging with the reality of their own backyards.<sup>9</sup> Likewise heroes, like dictators and demigods, can make (or cause to be made) commandment-like statements that become difficult to challenge. In this regard, it is curious to note that in January 2009 Food Democracy Now! Enjoined its subscribers to “Join Michael Pollan’s Army!” (Murphy 2009). This call, however, well intentioned is problematic. Why join Michael Pollan and not the people in our own neighborhood? Why should Michael Pollan have an “army” in the first place and is this really the right metaphor? Are warfare and the recruitment of millions of zealous foot soldiers each chomping on a raw carrot grown within 100 miles of their homes really the way the local food movement will realize its objectives? There is a bit too much autocracy in this rallying cry as well as in the assumption that Pollan’s suggestions for eating more sensibly are *the* answer (a point that will be taken up in a moment). In fact, I am reminded of an old Peanuts<sup>®</sup> cartoon in which Charlie Brown in his classic, dithering style ponders, “Who is to say what’s black and white?” “Who is to say what’s good or bad?” “Who is to say what’s right and wrong?” Lucy, of course, cutting through his reflexive reverie, says, “I will!”

My point here is that as the local food movement grows more popular, it begins to whittle away local ambiguity and redundancy as well as basic local freedoms. The public is being told what it needs to do (and how it needs to think). Pollan’s nine food principles first presented in his (2007) *New York Times* essay, “Unhappy Meals,” and further developed in his book, *In Defense of Food* (2008), are illustrative. (1) Eat food, (2) avoid products bearing health food claims, (3) avoid food products that contain

unfamiliar, unpronounceable, HFCS or an endless list of ingredients, (4) get out of the supermarket to shop, (5) pay more and eat less, (6) eat mostly plants, (7) eat more like the French, (8) cook and, (9) eat like an omnivore are all quite reasonable suggestions. At the same time, the individual eater—the locavore—and what is eaten are the objects of greatest concern. The proposed diet is largely context free and, like magic bullets and self-help manuals, taken to be sufficient, in itself, to generate basic food system reform. Most likely this is not what Pollan had in mind. Nevertheless, his manifesto has become so publicly lionized that it almost single-handedly fills the local food bandwagon, leaving little room for the appreciation or practice of place-based inquiry and innovation. As indicated earlier this absence has divisive, exclusionary, and hegemonic implications.

Said a bit differently, there is little in Pollan’s set of eating directives that overtly reinforces Dahlberg’s notion of a multi-layered, regenerative food system, one in which redundancy (maintained through both biological and cultural diversity) sustains the processes and structures of a living system. Nor is there a sense that researchers, activists, or practitioners (like members of any community) are responsible for knowing in multiple, qualitative as well as quantitative ways what is happening on the ground. Likewise, little aboard the bandwagon overtly addresses Dahlberg’s 3-E’s—ecology, ethics, and equity—elements, he cautioned, which should not be eclipsed by the interests of production or market economics. As the local food movement grows more popular, the public-at-large is not being asked to re-connect to context—to the soil, to work (and labor), to history, or to place—but to self-interest and personal appetite.

As a result, we seem to have forgotten (and perhaps are being encouraged to forget) that local food, as part of a regenerative agrifood system, is also about restoring “a public culture of democracy” and engaging in the continual creation, negotiation, and re-creation of identity, memory, and meaning. This is not neat or convenient work, but it can be emancipatory work, allowing all of us to see ourselves less partially and to participate more fully in local problem solving and knowledge production—and thus greater self-reliance (never self-sufficiency). Protecting the commons, recognizing the virtue of necessity (Vitek 1996), assuming and sharing public responsibility, and empowering community residents and sets of interconnected communities all belong to the work of creating local food systems and vice versa. The process of becoming an inhabitant, a process that must certainly involve food also involves the cultivation of a civic “witness.” Ultimately, this is what gives (or should give) local, local food, and the local food system definition and holding power.

<sup>9</sup> Pollan has captured so much personal attention that people twittered about his not being breast fed, a banal revelation made during his appearance on the Colbert Report (<http://www.comedycentral.com/colbertreport/full-episodes/index.jhtml?episodeId=227611>).

### Lansing's Eastside neighborhood

Granted these are not easy concepts to put into practice; they are quite antithetical to our neoliberal comforts and rationales. Still if we, as organic beings and citizens, are serious about sustainability and about deliberative democracy, then we need to find ways to actively engage with them in our work and daily lives. Over the last 20 + years, researchers, advocates, and activists have methodically and successfully transformed local food from a non sequitur into a popular movement. With equal determination it should be possible to de-emphasize the individualism of the locavore, the economics of Wal-Mart, and the prescriptions of Pollan and to re-emphasize the movement's systemic roots—starting with local visibility and empowerment.

I would argue that one way to begin this journey away from the instrumental and toward the contextual is for researchers, advocates, and activists to add new sensibilities and new language(s) to their existing repertoire. There is, I believe, a need for multiple methods and voices. To this end, I offer two suggestions as a way of initiating what I hope will be a lively, on-going conversation and reflexive challenge. The first suggestion is that we might consider giving more of our attention to exploring the integration and reintegration of local food into place-based practice. Can we learn to see and to speak about local food (whether indigenous or introduced) as Esteva (1994) speaks about *comida*—as a meaningful and relational part of daily life. This would shift some of the current emphasis away from quantitative problems and instrumental solutions (i.e., our positivistic orientation) to a deeper, more holistic description of local processes, voices, and landscapes (natural, cultural and political). It would help to reconnect local food to local context and to local ownership. The increased use of ethnography of a kind demonstrated by Basso (1996) in his lyrical exploration of place among the Western Apache or Adelson (2007) in her storied account of the complex ways in which the Cree of northern Quebec understand *miyupimaatsiun* (i.e., to be alive, well) might help us see from within as well as from without. Seeing in this way reasserts the multifunctionality as well as the inconsistency and changeability of real behaviors—without which, as Dahlberg points out, there can be no regenerative system.

A second suggestion closely related to the first is to give ourselves permission to speak from our own felt experiences as well as to admit multiple forms of expression into our narratives of the local food system. We do ourselves a disservice, I think, when we continually separate ourselves from the subject of our inquiry and turn the objects of our concern into abstractions—once again privileging dichotomies. Barlett (2009) talks about the power of enchantment (e.g., wonder, awe, and emotion) for bringing academics to terms with sustainability and for allowing them to absorb

the concept, physically as well as mentally. She notes that feeling (not just intellectualizing) our connection to the natural world and to a particular place within it is transformative. Nabhan (2004) similarly argues for the marriage of science and poetry. He warns that scientific facts and linear cause and effect relationships are impoverished without metaphor and that the internal meanings of poetry can disappear without the support of science. Far from being two distinct and disassociated awarenesses, they expand and complete each other.

Let me end this essay with a brief and hopefully useful story. It is based on my participation in the emerging food system on Lansing's Eastside—a diverse, vibrant, economically challenged neighborhood of some 8,500 urban households. I provide this story to show that the local food system is bound into and inseparable from the spirit of the Eastside, from the way Eastsiders relate to each other and live their lives. I use it to show that they are not locavores but whole, complex, and often artful inhabitants. Their daily negotiations are a mixture of wisdom, mistakes, and discovering (the marriage of science and poetry to use Nabhan's metaphor) that lead to a sense of collective responsibility and ownership—and to diversity. They understand themselves as belonging to a place, simultaneously creating it and being created by it. What they eat, where they eat, when they eat, how they eat can only be part of who they are—a very important part to be sure but still just a part. As decision makers and context builders they are hardly passive, more than rational, and definitely connected. I use this story to keep these particular people and their voices visible and audible. They are unique, but not exceptional. They are not experts, which is why we have much to learn from them. The Eastside neighborhood, its people, and institutions have taught me a great deal about the meaning of local and of its potential power to sustain them.

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On Wednesdays from May through October, brightly painted nylon flags mark the perimeter of a small asphalt parking lot on Lansing's Eastside. They officially announce the Allen Street Farmers Market (ASFM), but there is nothing uniform or professional about them. They were made by neighbors (I've made a couple myself) and paint drips and crooked seams attest to their spontaneity and their ownership. They belong to the Eastside and vice versa, and they serve as metaphors for much of what happens there.

Initially the market was begun as a way to address the Eastside's status as a food desert. Under the auspices of the Allen Neighborhood Center (ANC), a non-profit dedicated to neighborhood development, the market was (and still is) less about business management than it is about local capacity building. The needs and assets of the Eastside



neighbors are carefully balanced with the economic realities of keeping a market viable, though the former, according to the market manager, must always take precedence. This dance of accommodation has allowed neighbors and farmers to become sensitive to the needs of each other. Over the years, hundreds of residents have volunteered thousands of hours, setting up tents, assisting farmers, playing with children, providing music, advertising market days, packing up equipment, consulting on policy, and partying with area farmer and artisan collaborators. Farmers come because they are supported, physically, emotionally, and politically as well as financially.

With space set aside for community organizations, for homegrown entertainment, and for eating and schmoozing, the market has become “as comfortable as an old shoe.” It is an Eastside commons, one among many that are emerging. As a commons, it is anchored in and contributes to diverse and overlapping public purposes. It was the first market in the state to have EBT (now Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP) capabilities. Health care (from women’s breast health to smoking cessation), childcare (from lead testing to after school activities), homeowner education (from flood insurance to foreclosure counseling) are prominently featured at the market. Market vouchers are offered for self-monitored walks around nearby Hunter Park—\$2.00 for 15 miles, \$20.00 for 120 miles. Still the market does not stand alone; it is only one piece of an inclusive and organically evolving urban agrifood program currently orchestrated by ANC.

Hunter Park, a 30A green space recently revitalized with a Michigan Cool Cities grant, is also a commons. In addition to walking trails, playground equipment, and a pool, it houses a 30' × 90' Garden House where neighborhood groups tend raised bed gardens, built by 12–16 year olds—all members of ANC’s Youth Service Corps (YSC). YSC members sell their produce (“grown by kids”) at the ASFM to help fund additional projects, an annual trip to the Peace Jam among them. At the Jam their community work is connected to global issues and to Nobel Peace Prize recipients (e.g., Desmond Tutu, Jody Williams). But, the Garden House is also the site of informal Saturday drumming sessions and afternoon teas as well as cooking demonstrations and urban gardening certificate classes. Graduates of the latter are asked to contribute 40 h back into the maintenance of the Garden House. In similar fashion, surplus produce becomes part of ANC’s weekly Bread Basket distributions.

Garden in a Box, another YSC project, places 2' × 2' boxed gardens in neighbors’ front, side and backyards. Older neighbors, handicapped neighbors, and first time gardeners are given priority, and YSC members accordingly make regular visits to check on garden boxes and box holders. The result has been new skills, intergenerational trust, a few vegetables, and considerable story telling. Box holders have

gone from “being allergic to the sun” to “wanting to get outside and check on my babies.” Many have expanded their home gardens, taken the certificate course, and worked with their block associations to create pocket parks—reclaiming and beautifying abandoned spaces. A neighborhood-wide food forum and the establishment of an Eastside food advisory committee are being planned for 2009.

All this is background to the place-building that is happening on the Eastside and a way of indicating the thickening of relationships around neighborhood-based, food-related activities (quite separate from the number of acres planted, the sales generated, or the volume of vegetables produced or eaten). These projects together with others concerned with housing and safety, labor and education, wellness and childcare have cultivated democratic participation, collective ownership, and an increasingly empowered citizenry—with no one program independent of the others and no one program totally independent of connections to the world beyond the neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

The strength of this identity and self-reliance—the holding power of the values and relationships that define this particular urban neighborhood—were recently tested by a tragic incident. In late March, there was a homicide in Hunter Park. On a Sunday afternoon only a few yards from the Garden House, a fistfight escalated into a gun fight that left one young man dead and another wounded. How would the Eastside respond? Would there be fear, hate-filled anger, calls for more security cameras, or the abandonment of this newly reclaimed commons?

As chilling as this incident was, the response also gave me chills—and quite literally made me cry. The first neighborhood response was a poem. With just a few simple words it spoke for sorrow, for risk taking, for courage, for connection, and for the common good.

#### **For Hunter Park**

By Debbie Diesen (2009)

“Stay away,” says the fear.

“Please come back,” says the breeze.

“They had *guns*,” says the fear.

<sup>10</sup> Having said this, it is interesting to note that the Eastside has an identity, a sense of self and self-protection that is not available for the taking by outside agencies or bureaucratic structures. ANC pursues and receives many grants, large and small, public and private, on behalf of the Eastside. At the same time, it resists (and controls) the endless, invasive surveys and other accountability measures required by officials and funders. ANC has turned back funding for just such reasons. As important as economic resources are to this modest community non-profit, they are not seen as synonymous with, nor are they permitted to trump, the common good. As the market master has said, “The USDA (or any other organization) is welcome to visit the market as a *guest* of the Eastside. We welcome their programs and their assistance, but they are not welcome to appropriate what belongs to all Eastsiders” (DeLind 2008, pp. 12–13).

“I have birds,” say the trees.

“There was blood,” says the fear.

“I’ve got sun,” says the sky.

“Someone *died*,” says the fear.

And there is no reply.

“But I’m *scared*,” says the fear.

“My complacency’s gone.”

“Yes, it is,” says the park,

“Now come back, and walk on.”

I would submit that this poem is as much about local food and the local food movement on the Eastside as it is about the art of place-making and community building. We cannot mistake one for the other (or assume the one will automatically generate the other). Rather, we need to find ways to keep them both connected and vital, ways to marry poetry and science. At the moment, we need more of this personal, poetic, and emancipated language—which is not currently the voice of locavores, Wal-Mart, or even Michael Pollan. Yet, it is the voice (both its content and form) of small places; it is the voice and power of small and brilliant people—and of redundancy and resilience. We would be wise to hitch our wagon to these stars as they are the ground and the firmament of a local food movement and a regenerative food system.

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