Eating at the Edges: Consumers, Killjoys, and Alternative Food

by

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Introduction

Drawing the Line

Would you happen to have a little paper bag for these? The man across from me gestured to the peaches he’d just bought from our booth at the market. I reached into a bin and pulled out a brown lunch bag. Although they’re more expensive, we keep a small number on hand for customers who request them over our plastic default. I handed him one with a smile. The bag crinkled as he placed it into a large canvas tote bag that said “Kashiwase Farms” on the side. Week after week, people come to the farmers’ market armed with reusable tote bags, often displaying eco-friendly messages, only to request plastic bags, or sometimes paper, to separate out their various purchases.

I have to ask, I said, if we didn’t have any paper bags, would you have taken plastic instead?

Yes, he stated. I’m not a purist; you gotta draw the line somewhere. He paused, then continued: You have to look at the bigger picture. You can’t delude yourself about these things.

You, Me, and the Anthropocene

Welcome to the Anthropocene, the geological epoch (and humanities buzzword) in which human activity is recognized as the defining ecosystemic force. As resources are depleted beyond repair, and our changing climate picks up speed, it’s far from certain whether or not humans will even survive our eponymous epoch, although total extinction seems just slightly far-fetched. The Anthropocene is conceptually loaded and still quite new: at this very moment, a number of smart people are debating whether it started with agriculture, or the Enlightenment or industrialization, or something else entirely. Whatever its etiology, the Anthropocene was not inevitable: “despite the prefix ‘anthropo,’ that is, human, the mess is not a result of our species biology” (Tsing 2015,
It is not the result of our biology, nor is it the consequence of species-wide behaviors. Defaulting to species lines diminishes accountability: the economic activities of a fairly small number of “anthropoi,” undertaken at the direct expense of human and nonhuman others, catalyzed this new era. The word isn’t perfect, but it is catchy, and it seems like it’s here to stay.

This project focuses on the ethics of engagement, on the way lines are drawn and how responsibilities are negotiated in light of the Anthropocene, a “bigger picture” that is impossible to grasp except for in terrifying glimpses. This thesis does not present ethical arguments for or against certain behaviors, nor does it try to establish a code of ethics. Rather, it explores a particular discourse of ethics: ethical consumerism. Ethical consumerism is popularly understood as a way to “vote with your dollar” to impact social, political, or ethical projects. Increasingly, ethical consumerism is tied to sustainability and environmentalism as a way to enact positive changes in our relationship to the environment. What sorts of eco-subjectivities do these discourses produce? How, why, and when did it become “green” to bring a tote bag to the farmers’ market, but irrelevant to use multiple plastic bags to separate out produce? The Kashiwase tote man wasn’t wrong. If you look at the bigger picture, as he told me to do, a plastic bag won’t destroy the planet and a paper or reusable one won’t save it. Why bother at all? In the face of the Anthropocene, what are we to do?

1“Anthropocene” was coined by a U.S. American biologist and popularized by a Dutch atmospheric chemist. Perhaps this accounts for the rational, universalizing neutrality it carries. The term is heavily critiqued, but I invoke it to underscore a sense of urgency and scale rather than to reify its contested meaning(s) and connotations.

2 Who are the “we?” It’s a flexible word, but generally I take it to mean those of us who share, relatively speaking, similar day-to-day circumstances, choices, and options. I speak from and to the “consumer class,” a group assembled around ideologies and habits rather than income bracket alone, though there is a correlation. I speak from and to a “we” who looks at the bigger picture and isn’t sure what to make of it. This is a targeted “we,” one which assumes an urban or suburban lifestyle, consistent access to basic necessities, and an environmental impact several times larger than what is considered “sustainable” or...
I situate ethical consumerism in “the happiness turn,” that is, the heightened attention to happiness as a metric for personal success, and the coinciding economization, marketization, and commodification of good feelings and feeling good (Ahmed 2010b, 3; see also Brown 2015). The self-help industry, the corporatization of “mindfulness,” and the empowerment economy can all be recognized as part of the happiness turn. So, too, can ethical consumerism: we want our commodities, and by extension ourselves, to be good, to do good, and to make us feel good. These are the promises that ethical consumerism makes. It is a project of hope, one that can be understood as a “cruel optimism,” “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 2006, 21). Buy fair trade, shade-grown coffee: it’ll feel and taste better today, and you’ll be doing your part to ensure that the same cup o’ joe will be available for generations to come. Never mind that global coffee production is already being impacted from higher temperatures and water shortages. The Anthropocene is precarious, and this precarity complicates and threatens the hopes and possibilities of the future (Tsing 2015, 20-21). The Anthropocene, and all the urgency and chaos it conjures, is an absent presence in dominant and optimistic discourses of ethical consumerism.

If ethical consumerism is a cruel optimism, then perhaps this thesis can be read as a plug for compassionate pessimism, although even this is too tidy of an inversion. My hope is that my little subversive act might help guide us in how to grapple with “the big picture” without dismissing the many smaller ones. I turn to J.K. Gibson-Graham, whose wisdoms about economy can easily be transferred to ecology:

If capitalism is large, other things appear small and inconsequential. If

"ethical." But, the “we” is shifting as the Anthropocene creates new discursive subjectivities: as J.K. Gibson-Graham write, “we have come to see that the scale of the environmental crisis we are part of is creating a new ‘we’ and convening new publics on this planet” (2011, 1). In this sense, the “we” I use can and should be read open-endedly.
capitalism functions as a unity, it cannot be partially or locally replaced. My intent is to help create the discursive conditions under which socialist or other noncapitalist construction becomes a ‘realistic’ present activity rather than a ludicrous or utopian future goal. To achieve this I must smash Capitalism and see it in a thousand pieces. I must make its unity a fantasy, visible as a denial of diversity and change. In the absence of Capitalism, I might suggest a different object of socialist politics. Perhaps we might be able to focus some of our transformative energies on the exploitation and surplus distribution that go on around us in so many forms and in which we participate in various ways. In the household, in the so-called workplace, in the community, surplus labor is produced, appropriated, and distributed every day by ourselves and others. [1996, 263-4]

**Alternative Food and the Neoliberal Ethical Consumer**

My analysis of ethical consumerism is focused, specifically, on alternative food, agriculture, sustainable eating. I focus on food for a number of reasons. “Next to breathing, eating is perhaps the most essential of all human activities, and one with which much of social life is entwined” (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 102). Even with synthetic foods and factory farms, the act of eating is still one of the most enduring and inalienable relationships we maintain with our environment. It’s what is at stake: as we enter deeper into the Anthropocene, food production as we understand it today will be threatened or rendered impossible. And finally, alternative and sustainable foods are prominent within ethical consumerist discourses.

I differentiate between consumption and consumerism, ethical or otherwise, in the following way: the former is an act, a necessity; the latter is an ideology. As an ideology, ethical consumerism folds collective political projects into the logics and markets of neoliberal capitalism and middle-class consumer and commodity cultures. In the alternative food movement, ethical consumers can increasingly opt for organic, locally-grown, non-GMO, and fair trade commodities in supermarkets across the nation. While some frameworks, such as food justice, assert that sustainably grown, equitable,
and healthy food ought to be a right, ethical consumerism asserts that it ought to be an option.

The idealization of choice, options, and consumer freedom is fundamental to the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market,” with the result that every aspect of our lives is economized (Harvey 2005, 3; Brown 2015). Freedom is the central organizing idea within neoliberalism, since it is only when corporations and firms are free to pursue and develop new markets, and individuals are free to pursue their self interest, that “social good” can be maximized. As such, regulations, state interventions, and social welfare policies and programs have been weakened and rolled back following the post-War era. Capital went in the direction of finance and flexibility, and niche markets proliferated.

Ethical consumerism, as one such niche, has assimilated social, ethical, political, and environmental issues into the framework of “individual freedom” as expressed through consumer choice and personal decisions (Harvey 2005, 65). Individuals can choose to make “ethical” choices by supporting firms that have also chosen to make “ethical” choices. As neoliberal agents, consumers are encouraged to pursue ethical and political projects not just as consumers, but as their own firms, that is, in terms of interests, investments, and returns. Ideally, all aspects of personhood are subsumed into the identity of “consumer” (Brown 2015, 40-41). All *homo economicus*, all the time.

Within neoliberalism, consumers are simultaneously encouraged to pursue ethical commodities as economized market agents, and they are also responsible, with consumer choice as the bottom line, for their own ethics and by extension, the ethical projects of
the free market at large. Food and agricultural scholar Julie Guthman has been especially critical of consumer responsibilization within alternative food:

Projects in opposition to neoliberalizations of the food and agricultural sectors appear to have uncritically taken up ideas of localism, consumer choice, and value capture—ideas which seem standard to neoliberalism. These distinctive aspects of neoliberalization come together in various voluntary labeling schemes that use private organizations to certify particular standards, giving consumer the choice to purchase particular social and environmental qualities as a form of regulation, which putatively shift value to those producers who meet those standards. [2008b, 1174]

In particular, these campaigns and consumers focus on knowledge—knowing what’s in your food, knowing where it comes from, knowing your farmer—rather than on corporate regulation or collective politics (Guthman 2008b, 1175). The emphasis on information assumes that, once informed, consumers will act “rationally” to make the right choice, or the choice that is right for them. Issues of access and affordability are unaddressed. Knowledge3 aids consumers in exercising their choice within the free(d) market: it’s an opt-in moral economy for both consumers and corporations. This is not to say that ethical consumers are, in fact, more ethical than “mainstream” consumers, but that they are coded as such.

The Ethical Elite and Mainstream Alternatives

The freedom to consume “ethically” is not a universal one: “anything that involves the purchase of commodities will necessarily have a class dimension to it” (Szasz 2007, 44). Alternative food is no exception, and actually, it has several class dimensions. Most obviously, it requires money, or economic capital, to purchase commodities, and alternative foods tend to be much more expensive than conventional

3 “Knowledge” is manipulable. A recent study found that 95% of “eco-friendly” made false claims about the environmental impacts of their products (Gelles 2015).
ones. This calls into question both assumptions and principles of the movement, as well as its potential to effect large-scale, structural changes. Additionally, several sociological studies have shown that participating in ethical consumerist foodscape requires a degree of cultural capital: awareness of certain issues (pesticide residue, global food shipments, hormones in dairy products), familiarity with certain terms (local, organic, heirloom, pasture-raised), and a degree of reflexivity about one’s choices are all part of being fluent in sustainable food discourses (Johnston and Baumann 2010; DuPuis 2000, Johnston et al. 2011; Carfagna et al. 2014).

Discursive fluency gestures to habitus, “the taken-for-granted understandings or schemas in any social grouping” (Gould 2009, 33). Habitus is the internalization, embodiment, and performance of cultural capital. You don’t have to “know” what organic means per se, just that it is “better” and then act on that knowledge. So, while ethical consumerism is hardly a collective politic, individual ethical consumers do not come to value or enact these ethics in a vacuum. In other words, it’s individual, but not isolated.° Habitus orients people and groups in certain ways and paths of thinking, feeling, acting, and caring:

A habitus thereby structures individual and collective practices. It is itself also structured by such practices and thus as well by the social conditions that shape people’s dispositions. The habitus concept encapsulates the dialectical relationship between structure and practice: they make, unmake, and remake one another. Social structures do not come into being or survive except through human practices which, while creative and improvisatory, are themselves structured and not reducible to the conscious, willed, independent actions of rational actors in pursuit of their interests. [Gould 2009, 33]

Habitus is embodied and performed; it becomes our own, even though it is shared amongst those living and acting in shared social fields. Ethical consumerism publicly

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° In this thesis, I consider shopping for one’s household to be an “individual” choice, since the nuclear household often acts as and strives to be a self-contained unit within middle class cultures (Szasz 2007).
entangles class and habitus with ethical practices and politics: cultural capital takes an ethical turn, and classed subjectivities are politicized through everyday commodity choices and eating habits. Habitus influences political horizons and the politics of possibility (Gould 2009). In other words, habitus can help us understand how and why lines get drawn, and by whom. More pointedly, how do wealth and privileged access to niche markets, which mark consumer-based environmental movements, shape negotiations between self-interest and ‘the common good’?

Capital not only dictates who participates in ethical consumerism and how, but also, what types of consumption become coded as “ethical” in the first place. Throughout this thesis, I often qualify ethical consumerism, alternative food, and environmentalism using “mainstream,” “dominant,” and “hegemonic” to indicate that these discourses come from and speak to a movement with a core that looks like me: white, educated, and middle- or leisure-class. This can be read as a sort of symbolic capital, which grants its possessors the authority and prestige to set the terms of discourse, or lay out the field of “good” ethical food, so to speak. Though I don’t always use a qualifier, “mainstream” alternative food is mainstream in the sense that it is the main prevailing alternative or framing, both practically and discursively, not that in the sense that it actually includes the masses.

“Sustainability” is another buzzword that has been coded in particular and interesting ways by the mainstream movement. On paper, sustainability is often discussed in terms of “the three E’s:” environment, equity, and economy. This is sometimes also referred to as “the three P’s,” people, planet, profit, or “the triple bottom line.” However, as Johnston (2008) has articulated, there are strong ideological tensions between these three tenets within capitalist and consumerist frameworks of the
mainstream movement. Social justice, economic inequity, indigenous peoples’ and workers’ rights, and the interests of nonhuman others are all too often overlooked or disavowed within hegemonic discourses. Additionally, when consumerist pleasure-seeking and corporate profit-seeking conflict with environmental ethics, the latter is often disregarded without much second thought, resulting in a very flexible self-reflexive ethical framework (Johnston 2008; and Johnston and Baumann 2010). In this thesis, I fluctuate between using “sustainability” in the dominant discursive sense as well as in the more justice-oriented sense.

Victims and Heroes

One tendency of the mainstream alternative food movement is to position consumers as simultaneously victims and heroes (Johnston 2008, 232). Within this narrative, consumers are positioned as being on the frontlines of environmental dangers. In the case of pesticides, for example, it is the consumer’s body that is at risk from pesticide residues, not the body of the worker who endures repeated exposure to high concentrations of these toxins. Concerns over growth hormones in meat and dairy also place consumer safety in the center, rather than questioning why factory farms are injecting livestock with chemicals in the first place. The marketization of risk and victimhood can be seen in the emergence of what anthropologist David McDermott Hughes calls “the victim slot,” an homage to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s “savage slot,” in discourses of cause and accountability within energy-intensive societies. This slot, Hughes suggests, “artificially clarifies an inherently murky moral situation,” with the tendency to uphold binaries of innocence and guilt, and purity and contamination.

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5 See Giovanna Di Chiro (2013) for a discussion of justice-oriented visions and praxes of sustainability
(Hughes 2013, 571). Certain commodities become constructed as “safe” or “pure,” in a phenomenon that sociologist Andrew Szasz (2007) calls “inverted quarantine.” In an inverted quarantine, health, wellness, and safety are seen as exceptional to an unsafe or toxic norm. Certain commodities are thought to protect consumers from this contaminated status quo. E. Melanie DuPuis (2000) charts this as a politics of refusal, with a “not in my body” mentality that echoes the “not in my backyard” politics which circulate through suburbia. The body, as an agent who refuses, situates a consumer’s personal health and safety as a metric for environmental risks and the ability to overcome them. A possessive narrative of self and purity marks consumerist narratives of environmental ethics.

When certain commodities are constructed as safe, healthy, or green, purchasing these commodities becomes an enactment of “resistance” that echoes the problematic impulse to be a savior and hero. Ecofeminist Marti Kheel describes heroic ethics as a “truncated narratives,” which “obscure the possibility that the hero may be part of the cause of the larger problem” (Gruen 2015, 12-13). Narratives of heroism seek to avoid implication rather than address the inevitability of it. Like anthropologist Saba Mahmood, “I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance…but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (2001, 203). Those with the power to refuse and the privilege to participate in the “good feelings” of ethical consumerism are encouraged (by the market, by the products, by discourses) to save or protect themselves first and foremost. In doing so, they can rest assured that they are also doing their part to save the __________. (consumer’s choice; fill in the blank).
The Particularities of Place

The word “bioregionalism” pops up in my sustainability news feed from time to time. In popular use, it’s the notion that ecologies, economies, and cultures ought to be considered as existing in dialogue with each other as well as with the places in which they are situated. Bioregionalism suggests that we cannot understand the complexities of ecosystems except on their own particular terms. This idea is not new to anthropologists, who are accustomed to studying the particular and the local to shed light on the general and the global. After all, “the effects of extralocal and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 150). Discourses of sustainability and alternative food, therefore, are best understood in the context of specific spatial, historical, political, and cultural narratives (Isenhour 2010).

The stories I share are situated in the Marin County, a wealthy and scenic suburb just north of San Francisco that I call home, and Sonoma County, where I have worked for the past two summers at a small farm and food justice nonprofit in the southernmost town of Petaluma.6 The setting of these stories is far from coincidental. *California Cuisine and Just Food*, a several hundred-paged history of alternative eating in nation’s food (industry) capital, states “our food story therefore begins in the coastal pastures of Marin County” (Fairfax et al. 2012, 91). Indeed, Marin County has a unique history of agriculture, environmentalism, wealth, and leisure. Together, these situate it neatly at the forefront of ethical consumerism, alternative food and agriculture, and “the happiness turn.”

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6 Petaluma borders rural West Marin. I view it as being in the same “foodshed” as much of Marin.
In the early 20th century, before the Golden Gate Bridge linked San Francisco and Marin County, Marin and Sonoma were for the most part undeveloped. A number of wealthy San Franciscans kept summer homes in Marin, and much of the County’s economy was based on leisure and tourism. Countless brochures and pamphlets from the Victorian and Edwardian eras advertised Marin as a place where urbanites, seeking respite from the rhythms and stresses of the modern(izing) metropolis, could journey to restore their health and good humors. County Judge Thomas J. Lennon writes the following introduction in a 1909 publication titled “The Marin Journal: New Era Edition”:

I cannot, and a trained descriptive writer could not, in the time and space allotted, to justice to the natural beauties of all of Marin county...To appreciate her beauties one must roam from valley to valley, penetrate her secluded nooks and dells, ascend her mountain peaks, and there revel in the things of eternal beauty which Mother Nature presents for the pleasure and edification of her children.

While his language is enough to make modern readers uncomfortable, it is important to recognize the historical and feminized construction of Marin as a place whose biggest asset, or resource, was “her” natural beauty. Drawing on these romanticizations of a “wild” and “pure” nature, a number of conservation groups arose in the early 1900s. These groups worked to establish the local Mount Tamalpais as a state park, and they garnered public support to protect the coastline and other landscapes as scenic resources (Fairfax et al. 2012, 92).

The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, as well as the rise in automobile culture and post-War suburban expansion, made Marin a viable home for San

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7 Prior to Spanish colonization, Marin’s landscapes were hardly “wild.” The Coastal Miwok are thought to have lived here for thousands of years. As Marin transferred from Spanish to Mexican to U.S. American authorities, its indigenous peoples were repeatedly moved and re-moved from their lands and homes. See M. Kat Anderson (2005) for a detailed review of resource management and stewardship in Native Marin.
Francisco’s workforce. Between 1940 and 1960, Marin’s population grew by about 300%, although even this was slow compared to development in other San Francisco suburbs (Fairfax et al. 2012, 93). The County-Wide Chamber of Commerce released a series of lifestyle and real estate pamphlets inviting homebuyers to “Marvelous Marin,” where you can “live where you play.”

![Marvelous Marin Brochure](image)

Figure 1: *Come To Marvelous Marin over the Golden Gate Bridge*. Brochure distributed by the County-Wide Chamber of Commerce, late 1940s. *Private archive.*

Evidently, this invitation was a little bit too tempting. By the end of the 1950s, a number of farmers and ranchers, environmentalists, and citizens were concerned about plans to develop massive swaths of land for residential and commercial use. “Not in my backyard” became the rallying cry of conservationists, ranchers, citizens, and local officials, who felt that development would threaten Marin’s natural beauty. A coalition between ranchers, who sought to maintain their lands and lifestyles, and conservationists, who sought to protect the land and accommodate the culture of outdoor recreation, emerged.

Over the course of several decades, the coalition worked to protect Marin’s open spaces from development while ensuring protections for the existing agricultural sector.
These “working landscapes” were central to the establishment of Point Reyes National Seashore in 1962, The Countywide Plan of 1973, and the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) in 1980, the first farmland trust in the country. As such, Marin’s agricultural sector has always had a unique relationship to sustainability and environmentalism, and Marin’s culture of nature-loving has always intersected with the culture of food. These land policies also laid the groundwork for a politics of refusal: “not in my backyard” sentiments run deep. These anti-development sentiments are in part why Marin’s housing is expensive and in short supply.

As conservationists and ranchers worked to protect Marin’s open spaces against development, real estate prices rose and the liberated, pleasure-seeking attitudes of the 1960s countercultures permeated the county. An influx of affluence merged with a new age-y turn, as described in a 1978 NBC documentary called “I want it all now!” The documentary warns of the wealthy Marinites who, despite having it all, fail to “have it all,” as is evidenced in the high rates of substance abuse and the widespread popularity and marketization of New Age philosophy. (The opening scene of the documentary features a woman who pays $180 dollars to be massaged by naked men with peacock feathers. This practice seems to have died out in the 70s.) The narrator warns: “Marin County is a trendsetter, a cultural springboard…what is happening [there] may soon be happening where you live, unless, that is, it’s happening there already.” This, perhaps, is the starting point of neoliberal “the happiness turn” that Ahmed (2010b) documents.

The Stories We Tell (Ourselves)

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8 See Fairfax et al. (2012, 91-105) and “Love Local Foods & Goods” (2015) for further information.
9 The documentary is available in full on youtube. Many “old-timers” have commented that nobody featured in the film was native to Marin, and that this sort of affluence and hedonism was only found in several small pockets, mostly in the southern parts of the county, in those days.
Closeness to ‘nature’ is an important part of Marin’s cultural legacy. To this day, Marinites love to love nature. In elementary school, we sang songs about recycling, good and bad ozone, and toxic sludge. Field trips to Point Reyes, local ranches, the Audubon Society and the Marine Mammal Center were commonplace, and weekends were for hiking and biking. I grew up learning that nature was here for me to love and enjoy, so long as I did my part and made sure to recycle. My informants echoed these sentiments. One woman I met at the farmers’ market said that hiking with friends was her primary social activity; another expressed that nature was the source of her spirituality.

And yet, a recent study showed that Marin’s carbon footprint was one of the largest of the nine Bay Area counties (Jones and Kammen 2015). While it’s always difficult to quantify something like per capita greenhouse gas emissions, it’s not surprising that Marin ranked highly: affluence is resource-intensive. While Marin performed well in some areas, like recycling, areas such as air travel were much higher than average. Simply put, fast-paced, highly-consumptive, cosmopolitan living is not all that sustainable. Ethical consumerism and alternative food, however, allow for those who can afford it to tell themselves a different story.

Much of my work has been inspired by moments of absurdity that I’ve witnessed, such as placing plastic bags in tote bags, or enacted, such as traveling coast-to-coast by plane these past four years. By focusing on paradoxical and idiosyncratic, I hope to provide readers a chance to engage with absurdity as an entry-point into larger questions and thoughtful critiques of ethics and consumerism. My own tone is often playful and sarcastic, but not dismissive: I urge readers to understand this as part of a discursive critique, and not as ad hominem ethnography. I take seriously Caren Kaplan’s admonition as she picks apart Anita Roddick’s marketing strategies for The Body Shop:
Taking pot shots at ‘Safari’ ads, then, is only meaningful if it does not give us a comfortable feeling of distance from the supposedly vulgar working of low-brow culture. By making links between the ‘world’ in advertising and the ‘world’ in critical practices, we critics begin to locate ourselves as subjects in formation—as consumers, producers, and ambivalent (even ambiguous) participants in contemporary culture. [1995, 48-49]

Throughout my fieldwork, I saw pieces of myself reflected back to me. This thesis is not a disavowal or a long-winded break-up letter. It is, however, a killjoying project: “To kill joy…is to open up a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for change. My aim in this book is to make room” (Ahmed 2010b, 20). As I write, there are many people around the world who are working hard to create and bring to light alternative narratives to mainstream discourses of environmentalism, sustainable food, and ethical engagement. My own thesis-duty, bestowed upon me by the place I call home, is to aid these efforts by poking holes in the narratives that dominate popular discourse. It as a killjoy that I hope to create a little more space, a little more breathing room, for alternative narratives and new subjectivities to take hold as we stand at the edge of the Anthropocene.

**Methods and Project Overview**

This is an ethnography of discursive meanings, of how words and concepts acquire significance and circulate through public and private spaces. My formal fieldwork was conducted mostly between May and September 2015. I made countless trips to farmers’ markets and alternative, upscale supermarkets; attended sustainability lectures and community events; and interviewed employees, customers, activists, and farmers. I also worked on a small, nonprofit farm for the duration of the summer, and sold our produce every Saturday at a small, but high-end, farmers’ market. This gave me the
chance to interact with countless customers, talk to other vendors, and get a “feel” for the market. I followed virtual spaces such as local news sites and blogs, and used community boards and meetup.com to find food and sustainability events in the North Bay. One of my informants was a local historian who graciously gave me access to his personal historical archives, which were immensely helpful in developing a contextual understanding of Marin and Sonoma Counties. I conducted ten formal, full-length interviews, averaging about fifty minutes in length, but have field notes from numerous casual exchanges and unexpected encounters that I could not record. I have used these notes to reconstruct the gist of an exchange or conversation, and I use italics to connote that they are not verbatim. I have changed most of the names and identifying information about my informants to protect their privacies. Some of my ethnography is composite, meaning I have blended several happenings, characters, or encounters to protect privacies and to maintain a sense of fluidity in my vignettes.

In the first chapter, I investigate the words “local” and “organic” and the meanings they come to embody and produce in consumerist spaces. Using these two terms, I trace the history of the Bay Area’s alternative food movement as both a countercultural project and a high-capital gourmet cuisine. I piece together the insights of consumers, farmers, and service industry workers, interspersed with my own experiences in the field(s), to complicate the relationships between formal and informal economic practices, affective and bureaucratic marketing schemes, and consumers’ desire for tasty, sustainable, safe produce.

In the second chapter, I explore veganism as a killjoying project which threatens the assumptions, ethics, and buzzwords of mainstream narratives of sustainability and alternative food. Informed by my own ambivalences about veganism, and my eventual
transition to a plant-based diet, I try to make sense of several highly active North Bay vegan networks in the context of a food movement that encourages individualized and flexible ethics as well as good feelings. I take up the idea of a reflexive, aspirational veganism (Gruen and Jones 2015) to explore the messy, unfinished “becomings” of the vegans I worked with, and how such an approach can reshape popular ideas of self-interest and joy.

In my conclusion, or rather, my concluding thoughts and questions, I return to Marin’s relationship with nature and the environment, suggesting that it, too, is a form of consumption. I share three personal vignettes about landscapes, recreational foraging and native plants, and land history. Using these reflections, I explore the underlying assumptions, constructions, and discourses of nature, environmental ethics, and sustainability that circulate throughout the county. These constructions, I suggest, disavow history and the (often unacknowledged) relationships we have with and to others, past and present. In doing so, they limit the ethico-political horizons of environmentalism and sustainability, seeking to save or protect in a way that underlies and reflects ethical consumerist fantasies and mainstream alternative foodscape.
Chapter 1: Local, Organic, and All That Jazz

California Cuisine

I was sitting in Terminal 2 of San Francisco International Airport one morning, getting ready to fly back to Connecticut for the start of school. The terminal was quiet and empty on this particular morning, except for one counter-service café which had a small crowd assembled around it. I walked over to check it out. It was The Plant Café Organic, and it promised its patrons a fresh, organic, and locally-sourced pre-flight meal. I couldn’t help but laugh at the notion of eating local before departing on a journey of hundreds or even thousands of miles. (*My food shouldn’t travel, but I can.*) And organic? Pesticides are toxic, to be sure, but so is jet fuel. Nonetheless—*solely* in the name of thesis research, I assure you—I ordered a breakfast burrito, no egg no cheese. In all honesty, it was damn good.

What is it about these two words, local and organic, so often paired together, that makes it so easy to feel good about one’s food? In this chapter, I follow these two words through Bay Area foodscapes, tracing their historical contexts, technical definitions, and discursive meanings within the realm of ethical consumerism. Rather than focus on their “real” definitions, I unpack their popular meanings to trace the tense relationships between what they say and what they do, the possibilities and limits of their respective claims, and how this impacts consumers and projects of sustainability.

The ‘locality’ that The Plant advertised in the airport intrigued me enough to look into it some more. I learned that it’s a small chain with eight locations throughout the Bay Area, including one in Marin. Once I was back in California, I decided to go for lunch. The Marin restaurant is right off of 101 North, in an upscale mall designed in the old Spanish mission style: adobe roof tiles, palm trees, and terracotta galore. The Plant is
nestled among spas, boutiques, and a specialty pet food store, and it feels right at home. Inside, the streamlined, contemporary counter-service cafe embodies that casual, upscale California ‘cool.’

I picked up a menu. “The Plant café organic grew from the desire to make healthy, delicious, and organic food affordable and easily available.” The food told a different story: a sixteen-ounce smoothie would be eight dollars minimum. A veggie sandwich? Eleven. Drip coffee? Three. There is little to suggest that “affordable and easily available” food is anything more than a nice idea printed on a menu. I flipped the laminated sheet over. “Our menu is made fresh daily using exclusively 100% organic and local ingredients.” But the menu wasn’t fresh, it was laminated; the exact same meal is available in March, July, and November. Local, but not necessarily seasonal.

**Food Miles, Ground Zero**

The San Francisco Bay Area is one of the national centers, if not the epicenter, of the local, seasonal, food ethos. In the 1960s and 70s, activists, hippies, and back-to-the-landers from Santa Cruz up to Sonoma rejected industrialized agriculture and began practicing regenerative farming techniques, laying the framework for what is now called “organic.” Ranchers and environmentalists linked arms in West Marin to protect the coastline. Food co-ops and collectives in San Francisco and Berkeley sold local goods to students, hippies, and activists, and the Black Panthers distributed free breakfasts in Oakland. U.C. Berkeley student Frances Moore Lappé published *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), encouraging readers to think about the global impacts of America’s appetite. But it is Berkeley chef-turned-activist Alice Waters who is credited for making alternative food desirable as *cuisine*—California cuisine. In 1971, she opened the now-legendary
Chez Panisse, a gourmet eatery that featured fresh, local, organically-grown ingredients and a constantly shifting menu. Waters was underwhelmed by the flavors and quality of commercially produced food, so she began sourcing food from backyard gardeners and small-scale local growers, many of whom were in West Marin. (Johnston and Baumann 2010, 131-132; Fairfax et al. 2012, 121-122.) In pursuit of the fresh and flavorful, she found herself at the forefront of a culinary movement that blurred the lines between gourmet and countercultural cuisine; politics flowed from pleasure, and local food doesn’t come cheap.

Ever since, “local” and “quality” have been increasingly entangled in the American culinary psyche. In the past decade, though, local food has become especially prominent, with the Bay Area generating interest at a national and international scale. In 2006, Berkeley journalism professor Michael Pollan took the food world by storm with his bestselling critique of industrialized agriculture, The Omnivore’s Dilemma, which encouraged readers to restore their relationships with local, seasonal foods. In 2007, Oxford University Press deemed “locavore,” a term coined by a group of Marin women, its Word of the Year (“The Birth of Locavore” 2007). And in 2008, Slow Food USA hosted its largest gathering to date: 50,000-plus attendees celebrated slow, local food in front of San Francisco’s City Hall (Severson 2008).

The growing mainstream interest in local food necessitated some sort of way to talk about what is and isn’t local. The idea of “food miles,” or the distance between production and consumption, has gained the most traction. The term first appeared in the New York Times in 2005, and has subsequently appeared 43 times to date. Congress

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10 Food miles only account for a very small portion of a food’s environmental “foodprint.” Delivery from producer to retailer only accounts for about 4% of the total greenhouse gases emitted from food in the U.S. Replacing 2,000 calories worth of red meat or dairy with a vegetarian alternative just one day a week would reduce greenhouse gas emissions more than eating an entirely local diet (Weber and Matthews 2008).
has suggested than anything with less than 400 food miles can reasonably be considered local (Martinez et al. 2010). For some areas of the country, that is a significant number. In the Bay Area, though, a 400-mile radius includes access to most of California’s multi-billion dollar agricultural industry. With so much food grown so close to home, “local” needs to mean much more than just a number for consumers to “buy” it.

**Face Certification**

“Know your farmer, know your food” is a common saying amongst locavores. Knowing your farmer, or at least, knowing who they are, is a way to authenticate one’s food as local by collapsing the distance between the producer and consumer. One Maryland-based farmer Jay Martin calls this “face certification,” a tongue-in-cheek jab at the way consumers have come to expect a government certificate in order to know what it is that they are buying. Martin refuses to get certified on principle. He’d rather his customers look him in the eye and ask questions about how their food was grown. He is his own certificate (“Know Your Farmer” 2015).

Within the alternative food niche, farmers’ markets come to represent “an idealized form of buying and selling,” in which producers and consumers can experience, face to face, a “shared consciousness” (Gagné 2011, 282-283) surrounding the significance of such transactions within an overwhelmingly industrial national foodscape. While farmers’ markets may be a luxury for consumers, they are a necessity for small-scale farmers. Most small farms are simply too small to survive through wholesale marketing or middlemen distributors, so these farmers overwhelmingly rely on direct-
marketing to support themselves.\textsuperscript{11} As local foods have gained popularity, the number of farmers’ markets in California has spiked. In the past two decades alone, the number has grown from 140 to over 800 (Fairfax et al. 2012, 132; Conie 2012). Many farmers are hyper-aware that without devoted locavores, they would not have a market. Whether they like it or not, creating and selling ambience and relationships can be as important as selling the produce itself (Gagné 2011, 283). “Face certification” sets farmers’ markets apart from other spaces of alternative consumerism.

In Marin County alone, there are seventeen farmers’ markets or farmstands (“Farmers’ Markets”). The most prominent—the third largest in California—is the year-round Sunday Market in San Rafael. It’s held in the parking lot of the Marin County Civic Center, in the shadow of the courthouse building that sent Angela Davis to prison. Decades later, a sea of mostly white faces wander in and out of over 200 stalls of produce, meats, dairy, and artisanal goods.

Lola, a stay-at-home mom, goes the Sunday Market every week, where she buys the majority of produce, meats, and eggs for her household of four. However, when we talked, she admitted to me that she doesn’t actually know ‘her’ farmers, she just knows who they are. In other words, she knows their faces, a variation of the idea of “face certification.” I sensed she might be slightly embarrassed about this perceived shortcoming (a “market failure” of sorts), as she was very adamant in telling me that her friends know their farmers:

Unfortunately I am actually not one of the people at the farmers’ market who actually goes up to people and says like ‘hey Paul, how’s the apples today?’ I don’t know why, I’ve been going consistently since we’ve lived here, for ten years... The only person I actually know is the egg lady because she sells out, so you have to get there between 8 and 9. So I

\textsuperscript{11} Fairfax et al. define “small” as farms with less than $50,000 in revenue annually, or under 50 acres (2012, 12-13).
know Kathy. Kathy I know. I know the avocado ladies, I know they’re sisters, but I don’t know their names…But my friends do know. One of my friends knows the fruit people, so that’s the fruit stand I go to. But I don’t [know them]. Different people have different farmers who they know their names, so that’s sort of who I frequent…The die hard farmer market friends, I trust their judgment, so that’s where I go.

If there’s something on her list that her regular vendors don’t have, Lola will walk around and see “what looks more fresh.” Before moving to Marin ten years ago, Lola would go out of her way to buy organic foods for her daughters, now 13 and 16, “and people thought we were crazy.” In Marin, she fit right in: “here, it was more the norm…it’s all so local and so fresh, there’s really no reason not to eat, well, at the farmer’s market.” Though she started off as an “organic-addict,” she now prefers local foods.

If I don’t go to the farmers market and I go to Whole Foods, if I see [berries], if they say local strawberries from blah blah blah [local] farm and then I see organic strawberries from Mexico, I’ll buy the local, even if it doesn’t say organic. But then I feel like I’d rather buy something that was grown close to home versus something that had to be trucked. So that’s always my first priority, local...[because] It’s gonna be fresher, it’s gonna taste better. It does. Like, there’s no comparison, when you buy fruit from the farmers market it just tastes better. The meat, the fish, I mean it all tastes better. We’re lucky that we live where we live and we can buy stuff that’s locally sourced.

For Lola, quality—that is, taste and freshness—trumps tag, and money is not an issue. “Marin,” she jokes, “is like Disneyland for for grown-ups.” So much so that Whole Foods, the holy grail of corporate alternative food and often referred to as “Whole Paycheck,” is simply a backup, just another supermarket.

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12 But Lola is not naïve, and she is troubled by the exclusivity of these markets: “Obviously they’re super expensive. I don’t believe that those of us that have the luxury of shopping at farmers’ markets, I don’t believe we’re making a political statement. Even though we are for ourselves.” While I share her disillusionment, I would soften her critique by adding that luxury is relative: a local, organic apricot might be an indulgence for a consumer, but for small-scale farmers, who often live near or below the poverty line, the business these patrons provide is hardly a luxury.
I feel like Whole Foods is almost like a, [pauses] I mean Whole Foods is definitely super reliable but I still find that Whole Foods is almost more like a Safeway of organic food…sometimes at Whole Foods, I might buy strawberries and they might go bad the next day, or you know, it’s not consistent like that.

Whole Foods is decentered, relegated to being a “Safeway of organic food.” Supermarkets, no matter how organic or expensive, can’t offer the same sort of freshness as a face-certified carton of berries.

#localmeanslocal

As I waited for my lunch back at The Plant, I sat down across from a large chalkboard with a drawing of the greater Bay Area and a number of farms mapped accordingly. *The Plant sources its produce and goods from local Bay Area farms and artisans to take advantage of the great variety Northern California has to offer.*
As I scanned the map, a couple of names jumped out—big names, recognized by farmers as industry hotshots and by consumers as trusted growers. (Lola, for example, mentioned the 350-acre Full Belly Farms. She gets her tomatoes from them.) You can imagine my surprise, then, when one farm stood out more than the rest: the very farm where I had worked for the past two growing seasons. We did not sell to The Plant at any point during summers 2014 and 2015. We aren’t certified organic, first of all. And, with fewer than three acres in production, we’re simply too small to provide major, regular contributions to high-volume restaurants.\[^{13}\] There was a period in 2014 when we sold bouquets to an independent, gourmet grocer in San Francisco once a week—but it was inefficient and expensive for us, and therefore only a short-lived (floral) arrangement. Maybe The Plant had ended up with a couple of our bouquets through \textit{that}? Regardless, it was weird to see our name on the wall.

When I asked an employee about the map, she said she wasn’t exactly sure which farms The Plant partners with at any given time, since they source through Veritable Vegetable, a third-party distributor of certified organic produce. The map, she told me, was several years old, so maybe there had been a partnership before my time. But it “looks cool” so they just left it up. In a boutique, curated environment like The Plant, local looks cool, and looks count for a lot. The map shows customers where their food \textit{might} be coming from. The Plant becomes situated in place, and by eating there, customers are encouraged to feel that they are supporting the same sorts of farms that they might support directly at the farmers’ market. Most people will look at it without thinking twice.

\[^{13}\text{More importantly, as part of a food justice nonprofit, our main focus is on accessibility: grants and other funding allow us to distribute over half of our produce heavily discounted or for free.}\]
In the absence of face certification, companies strive to market localism in a variety of ways. While “local” is certainly a nice idea, it’s far from “an innocent term” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 360). “Local” does not necessarily mean small-scale, family-owned, sustainable, equitable, humane, or organic. These terms have been uncritically taken up in alternative food and ethical consumerist realms and collapsed into each other: one seems to automatically signify the other in a linked chain, where local means all things “good” and global means all things “bad” (Johnston 2009, 511). Because “local” such a loose, flexible term, it’s easy to commodify and market. It takes the form of a feel, which can be produced through a story, a quaint farm image, a map, rustic décor, and so forth (Ibid, 517). Without actually “knowing your farmer,” you can feel like you do.

Many small farmers are not happy about this. One of my informants, Amelia, runs a one-woman flower farm and floristry business on an acre of land just outside of Petaluma. She’s part of the sustainable, slow flower movement, which seeks to reclaim and re-localize flower farming and floristry. The current industry is dominated by imports, which are grown under toxic, exploitative conditions and often require emissions-heavy air transportation to stay fresh. Amelia described to me that many small-scale growers are increasingly frustrated with a San Francisco-based floristry company that uses local, farmy tropes to sell its products. Founded in 2010 by Christina Stembel, Farmgirl Flowers is to floristry what Whole Foods is to supermarkets: it changed the game, but frustrated a lot of people along the way.

Stembel commodifies “the local” in a variety of ways. Just in its name, Farmgirl Flowers invokes tried-and-true American agrarian tropes. *She’s not even a farmer,* Amelia says with a twinge in her laugh. But Farmgirl’s farminess is reiterated through its website,
which lets customers “know” their florists and farmers (and certify that they have faces) virtually: a “Meet Our Farmers” page provides pictures of 20-plus farmers, and a “Team Farmgirl” page includes quirky bios for each of her thirty-plus employees (“Meet Our Farmers” 2016; “Team Farmgirl” 2016). The flowers themselves have a rustic vibe: every arrangement comes wrapped in an upcycled, 100% biodegradable burlap sack, a gimmick Farmgirl has trademarked as Burlap Wrapped Bouquets™ (Burlap Wrapped Bouquet”).

What’s more frustrating for small farmers and farmer-florists like Amelia is Farmgirl’s relationship with small-scale, local growers. While Stembel initially positioned herself and her business as an ally to and patron of local growers, encapsulated in a 2014 blog post, “why local?”, her rapidly-growing company is simply too big to source from smaller, less established farmers such as Amelia. Amelia and other regional farmer-florists share a similar customer base with Farmgirl Flowers: affluent Bay Area customers who, for whatever reason, desire “alternative” flowers. But because Farmgirl is larger, urban, takes orders online, and delivers all over the country, it is able to out-compete many field-to-vase farmer-florists. This makes Farmgirl’s appropriation of the local, farmy, home-grown narrative especially threatening. Furthermore, Stembel no longer sources locally exclusively: to meet customer demands, Farmgirl Flowers, the fourteenth fastest-growing startup in the Bay Area, began sourcing Alaskan peonies in 2014 and now partners with florists all over the country, shipping nation-wide as well (Biztalk 2015; Stembel 2014). Despite this, Stembel continued to market herself and her company as “local.”

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14When a competing San Francisco florist began using burlap to wrap their bouquets, Farmgirl Flowers unsuccessfully sued for trademark infringement. The defendant argued that burlap has a long utilitarian history and holds many environmental benefits over plastic alternatives. According to the lawsuit, “Farmgirl respond[ed], without support, that a product design’s eco-friendliness should not be considered in the functionality analysis” (“Farmgirl Flowers, Inc. v. Bloom That, Inc.”).
Small growers and florists responded to Stembel and Farmgirl’s expansion with an Instagram campaign, #localmeanslocal. Launched by a Pennsylvania grower, the hashtag now has over 1,500 tags. Stembel responded to the campaign in an April 2015 blog post, in which she hoped to “squelch a very unfortunate—I’d even go as far dangerous—social media campaign gaining momentum in our local flower movement community” that is “detrimental to our unified mission” (Stembel 2015). Her response smells of freshly-cut paternalism: she invokes solidarity and even patriotism to dismiss the concerns of the small farmers she has built her brand off of and who are now in competition with her. At the end of the post, she agrees to stop using the word local, but not before redefining it: “local means #Americangrown to me” (Stembel 2015). She argues that if she were to only source locally, it would be unfair to farmers outside of California who have harsher growing conditions and face more import-dominated markets. She does not acknowledge that the farmer who launched the campaign is based in Pennsylvania.

Clearly, ethical branding is integral to Farmgirl’s business model and image. But Stembel’s rebranding of ethics, including “the local,” in accordance with her company’s growth, indicates that it doesn’t matter so much what the ethics are, just so long as there are ethics. Johnston (2008) suggests, using Whole Foods as an ideal-type, that when do-good values clash with business opportunities, expansionist and profit-seeking motivations will win out over politico-moral ones. This certainly seems to be true with Farmgirl Flowers. Similarly, Stembel’s turn to patriotism and her desire to “save” American farmers from the global market mimics Anita Roddick’s “trade not aid” model for The Body Shop:

The Body Shop discourse establishes a complete dichotomy between developed and underdeveloped, between First and Third World, such that any complex distinctions and differentiations within those categories are conveniently suppressed...There are only "natives" and the "West," mediated by the benevolent capitalism of The Body Shop. This is a representational practice that homogenizes through the construction of binary oppositions. [Kaplan 1995, 58]

The actors are different but the plot line is the same. There are only struggling farmers and benevolent florists; the rural and the urban; the victim and the hero. There is no room for farmer-florists like Amelia, or small growers, like the Pennsylvania farmer, who don’t need or want “saving” through Farmgirl’s local-cum-national floristry model. The blog says it all: you’re either with Stembel or you are against the whole “local” movement. After all, she’s only trying to help.

**Know Your Farmer Cashier**

Another technique for marketing “the local” within the corporate setting relies on the social relationships between employees and consumers. Unlike farmers’ markets, where interactions between producers and consumers can foster “the co-construction of local community” (Gagné 2011, 286), in corporate settings, the “community feel” is constructed by higher-level management and marketing experts, and then performed largely through the actions of employees. In an interview with Courtney, a bagger at Whole Foods in Petaluma, the first thing she mentioned was how the store creates a local, community feel:

Whole Foods creates this environment where they make you feel like you’re shopping at a local place, that everything there is local, they do events. They try to give off this feel that you’re supporting some wonderful cause, but in reality, it still is a corporation and its not, I don’t know, if you really wanna make a change in the world then you should be doing things on your own, a co-op, or having your own garden, and being more aware of the items you consume. You can easily do that without being in that kind of corporate environment.
When I asked what she felt creates the local feel, Courtney couldn’t quite pinpoint it: “Just the environment itself. When you walk in there, they just have that local market feel.” I knew what she meant: when I visited myself, I noticed that produce was displayed in crates, as though it was fresh in from the field, and chalkboard-style signs dot the store. But “the local feel” comes from more than just décor:

They try to give really good customer service so that you feel like, I dunno, like a valued customer, unlike any other corporation where if you ask for help they tell you ‘Aisle 4’ or whatever. But also, too, everything they have, like the local cheeses and milks, and everything that they do, they try to make it feel like you are part of a greater cause, that’s more than just what the grocery shopping experience is about.

The “local feel” and the attentive customer service point to a form of emotional labor that infuses consumer experience with politico-moral meaning, the feeling of being “part of a greater cause.” Courtney described to me how new hires at Whole Foods “watch like seven different videos” on quality standards, such as ‘sustainable’ seafood, so that they can both accommodate and educate customers. Good Earth, an independent grocer in Marin, invites guest speakers and leaders of various sustainability movements to store meetings, which is one way employees are educated (and perhaps, indoctrinated) into the store ethos. (They have an annual employee acupuncture clinic, too!) Amber, who works at the recently opened Amy’s Drive Thru, a vegetarian, local, and organic fast-food restaurant, described how employees were initially trained to provide table service for each customer and check in on diners, “so it was more personal” than a regular fast-food restaurant. (For the entire opening month, massive crowds made this nearly impossible—now, a host greets and engages diners, while employees behind the counter call out names over a speaker.) Amber also described, in great detail, the restaurant’s architecture, water and energy systems, building materials, and sustainable
landscaping techniques, all of which she learned in employee training. She remarked that most of Amy’s employees, even the managers, are college students—she said this was a deliberate move to reach out and educate young people on both sides of the counter about sustainability and food.

On paper, Whole Foods is a supermarket, Good Earth is a grocery store, and Amy’s Drive Thru is a fast food restaurant. These are not the personable, face-certified, co-created community spaces of the farmers’ market. But through their respective workforces, each institution tries to cultivate a feeling of being part of a community, of being part of a greater cause. It’s a kumbaya rallying cry that this place, these products, these interactions are different and authentic. In order for this to be successful, the workers must, ideally, be on board. “Community” collapses hierarchies between management, employees, and consumers by saying “we’re all in this together.” A good employee at Whole Foods or Amy’s or Good Earth is one who cares—about the environment, about the company, about the customer—one who allows those hierarchies to collapse and who feels they are part of the greater cause. Educating employees to care about the causes, not just sell the products, is pivotal in each of these institutions’ business models. This is ethical consumerism’s iteration of Hochschild’s and Hardt’s emotional and affective labor (1983; 1999). This is meaning labor. To create and sell meaning to customers, employees are encouraged to find it in their own work.

Of course, educating your employees can be dangerous game, especially when the stakes are so ethical. Many of my informants, when they applied to work at stores like Whole Foods and Good Earth, were simply seeking a job. Once they were hired, though, they found themselves transformed by the information they received, a form of ethical cultural capital, as well as by their work environments. A former Good Earth employee,
who asked to go by the alias Hugh July, described that he “learned so much about food in general, that my overall perspective changed.” (He proceeded to warn me that he’d heard the young coconuts sold at Good Earth are dipped in formaldehyde to stay white while they are shipped from Thailand.) Courtney, too, expressed a similar sentiment:

It’s interesting, because I never really cared, I mean I cared, about where I got my products and stuff, but I’d never been this into it as I have been since I started working at Whole Foods. It kind of awakened this consciousness in me that I’m like ‘Wow, what am I doing? What am I supporting?’

This awakening is twofold: both Courtney and Hugh expressed ambivalence towards Whole Foods and Good Earth respectively. Courtney repeatedly emphasized that Whole Foods is a corporation, something that customers seem to overlook or disavow: “Everything’s about money, but they [the store] cover it with ‘oh you’re saving the planet and you’re helping other countries and you’re going local and going green.”” Hugh July, who is fond of wordplay, joked that the owners of Good Earth are “green minded” in the double sense: they certainly care about environmental causes, but they are rolling in money. In the past several years, the store, which has been around since the 1960s, rebranded itself from hippie hangout to ‘wholier’-than-Whole-Foods. They relocated and expanded, and recently opened a second location. It worked: the clientele is noticeably more affluent, but you can always smell, I mean tell, who the old-timers are.

Both Courtney and Hugh were savvy to the tensions underlying environmental ethics, consumerism, privilege, and profits. Whole Foods and Good Earth often tell consumers they can “have it all” (for the right price), and that sustainability really is as easy as standing in a check out line with grass-fed local steak and a bag of non-GMO chips and an organic mango from Ecuador. Johnston refers to this phenomenon as ecological cornucopianism, the idea that “certain forms of consumption can preserve
and protect the environment while at the same time maintain a cornucopia of available products” (2008, 258). Consumers, in turn, take up a win-win framework of ethical eating, in which politics and pleasure can be simultaneously satisfied without any tension, conflict, or sacrifice (Johnston and Baumann 2010). Employees at these alternative food institutions, especially those who take seriously issues of sustainability, and who can usually not afford to eat their ethics with the same gusto as many customers, occupy a sort-of liminal space: insider-outsiders, in-but-not-of. Like Hugh and Courtney, many feel genuinely transformed by their workspaces but are unable, by virtue of their positions within them, to engage with ethical consumerism and alternative food as uncritically and unreflexively as the consumers they serve.

**Whose Market Is It Anyway?**

My own experience selling alternative food was pretty different than the experiences Courtney, Hugh, and Amber described to me. As a farmhand, I did not need to be educated or trained with videos in order to sell sustainability. I needed to be trained on how to grow food, and my “face certificate” would follow naturally. Of course, some farmers wish they could simply sell their food without also marketizing their relationship to it, but I didn’t hear too many complaints. Overall, the Oak Creek Park Farmers’ Market is a good gig—it’s outside, the hours are reasonable, there’s live music, and it’s a manageable size, about twenty vendors total. (The smaller of Petaluma’s two downtown markets, it serves as a side-market for many farmers.) Shoppers are generally friendly and respectful. Devoted regulars resurface week after week. Many shoppers are avid gardeners themselves, and like to compare notes or get tips.
One Saturday, when I was working alone, a man approached me—white, middle aged, with a short sleeve button down.

_Are you guys organic?_ he asked.

This is perhaps the most common question I received all summer, aside from price-related inquiries. My response is well-rehearsed, and given in one or two long breaths:

_We aren’t technically certified, but we use all-organic practices. No pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, none of that stuff. We’re a small farm and a nonprofit, and certification can be pretty expensive actually, so we are organic, but we just can’t call ourselves that._

I give a longer answer than most are expecting. Our farm part of a larger food justice nonprofit, so education and outreach are an important part of my job. Some customers already know the spiel—they simply wanted to know if we used pesticides or not and use “organic” as shorthand. Others are surprised to learn that the term is “exclusive”: it’s regulated by the USDA and can be costly (and a pain in the ass) to undergo the necessary inspections. This knowledge complicates a seemingly simple question.

_Well I have a question for you_, the button-down man continues.

_Sure!_ I reply.

_How come nobody puts that on their banners? I mean I walk up and down and I’m reading these signs and they just say like the name of the farm or whatever. You don’t even have to call yourselves organic, but can’t you say like ‘all natural’ or ‘more than organic’ or ‘no pesticides’ or something? I mean why doesn’t anybody say that? You’d think people would want to advertise it but I look around and it’s like I can’t get any information from these banners. It’s terrible marketing._

The stall was pretty quiet. If it had been busy, I would not have been able to engage with this man. And if “thesis research” weren’t pinging in the back of my mind, I probably wouldn’t have even bothered to respond to this customer, uncharacteristically rude, with the following:
Well I can’t speak for any other farms, but I’m guessing people choose to communicate the information that is most important for them to get across. Our banner says ‘healthy food for everyone in Petaluma’ because most of our food is sold wholesale or given away to the greater Petaluma community; this market is one of our only exceptions. I guess that when the sign was made, they decided it was more important to communicate our mission than our practices. And a lot of farmers know that these words are either regulated or empty. In a store you need labels because there’s nobody to really talk to, but here you can ask people who’ve grown the produce themselves. It’s the whole ‘know your farmer’ thing, you know.

I didn’t bother to point out the small, handwritten sign at my neighbor’s stall saying “No Pesticides.” Would it have mattered if I did? What I wanted to say was, if you’re looking for marketing, go to Whole Foods. Turn’s out, I didn’t have to.

The man responds in a huff: “Well if they can’t even put useful information on the banner, they lose my interest.” Useful information? About what and for whom? Did I not just explain to him that most labels are use-ess? This man’s ‘interest’ hinged on a remarkable faith in self-advertising and empty labels in the absence of certified, government-stamped authenticity. Putting something in writing doesn’t make it more meaningful! What’s that Graeber piece on bureaucracy making us all a bit stupid-er?

Button-down walked away without spending a dime.

According to the Organic Trade Association, between 1997 and 2014, consumer sales increased from $3.6 billion to over $39 billion, with an 11% increase in sales between 2013 and 2014 alone (“State of the Industry;” “There’s More to Organic Than Meets The Eye”). While the term may be ubiquitous these days, organic farming had rather humble origins 1960s and 70s. (Although all farming was “organic” a hundred years ago.) It started as a fringe movement in the countercultural crowd: back-to-the-landers, hippies, and earth activists began practicing and promoting organic farming in response to the rapid industrialization of American agricultural production in the post-War “green revolution.” Initially, organic agriculture was firmly rooted in the ideologies
of the environmental and social movements that bore it. Small-scale production and low-tech, hands-on growing techniques renegotiated, if only partially, the relationships between farmers, land, food, and consumers. A deep ecological commitment framed organics as a form of agroecology, in which the farm was considered an organism unto itself and treated as such, and not simply as a means to an end (Guthman 1998, 135).

Outside of the countercultural world, the demand for organic food was mostly limited to the health food sector. It wasn’t until the 1980s that organic began “gentrifying,” a trend aided in part by two pesticide food scares in 1986 and 1989 (Guthman 1998, 136). In the 1990s, though, there was an organic “explosion’ in the dairy world (DuPuis 2000). DuPuis chronicles that the rapid rise of organic dairy is fundamentally different than the gradual mainstreaming of organic fruits and vegetables from the countercultural left. The organic dairy sector arose in response to consumer concerns over rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone), especially within middle-class, child-raising suburbia. Organic milk, DuPuis argues, led to the rise of the reflexive consumer, who, as opposed to an ideologically or politically motivated activist, uses one’s body (or one’s child’s body) as a metric for what should and shouldn’t be bought and consumed. “Not in my body” (NIMBo) shopping is a form of politics of refusal that DuPuis argues bears close similarities to the “not in my backyard” sentiment which has historically been a powerful rallying tool for socially- and politically-enfranchised middle-class homeowners protesting hazardous environmental and industrial threats, as well as unwanted development projects and neighbors (2000, 289; Fairfax et al. 2012, 92). The rise of NIMBo in the organic dairy sector has reframed organic food as a whole, and is a part of the reason that mainstream, bureaucratized organics have narrowed, eclipsed, or
co-opted the movement into one of consumer health and safety rather than one of sustainable agroecology.

The rise in consumer concerns over pesticides and hormone exposure parallels the bureaucratization and corporatization of the organics sector. Throughout the 80s and 90s, third-party organic certification groups arose as a way to codify and standardize organic agriculture, with California and ultimately the federal government following suit. While third-party groups—private and non-profit—still often facilitate certification, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is now the regulatory authority per the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 and the establishment of the National Organic Program (NOP) (“National Organic Program; Guthman 1998). The NOP, first published in 2000, outlines guidelines and regulations about things such as land history, pest and weed management, and nutrient cycling. It appears thorough. But almost two decades ago, Guthman warned of the dangers of schematizing organics:

As increasing numbers of conventional agro-food firms appropriate the organic label or, for that matter, as more organic growers start acting like agribusiness firms, it calls into question whether a technical approach to organic production says all that much about sustainability—either socially or ecologically…their overall commitment to sustainability in the broadest sense of the word is quite dubious. How else could we explain the cultivation of high-value produce on monocropped fields, using unorganized migrant wage labor, within vertically integrated grower-shipper complexes, which sell to huge retail establishments—in other words, practices differentiated from industrial agriculture only by the use of “organic” inputs. [Guthman 1998, 143]

And that was twenty years ago! Rather than challenging the conventional agricultural industry, organics have become an agricultural convention within the industry. Sustainability simply cannot be standardized, despite bureaucratic fairytales claiming
otherwise, because…

Sustainable agriculture is simply too complicated to be standardized. Any attempt to bureaucratize and regulate “sustainability” will result in a simplified, schematized solution that overlooks the particularities of place and complexities of ecosystems:

Bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae. Whether it’s a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires, it is always a matter of simplification. [Graber 2015, 75]

These simplifications are hardly benevolent, though. Bureaucracy is a technique of dominance and management, exercised by the masculinist rationalities of the state:

This particular expression of a will to power—domination through regimes of predictability, calculability, and control—appears to be socially masculine in the West insofar as the ultimate value is control, and the uncontrollable as well as that which is to be controlled—external nature or the body politic—are typically gendered female in these discourses. [Brown 1995, 201]

Bureaucracy cultivates and inculcates a “willful blindness” to the violent relationalities that it boths masks and manages (Graeber 2015, 57).

America’s industrial food complex is and always has been predicated on unimaginably violent forms of control and management: from plantations and rancherias to contemporary agribusiness, humans, animals, plants, and the land itself have and continue to be subjected to extreme abuses in the name of profit. Like bureaucratic procedure, violence is a simple and stupid technique of governance:

Violence may well be the only way it is possible for one human being to do something which will have relatively predictable effects on the actions of a person about whom they understand nothing...This is of course why violence is so often the preferred weapon of the stupid [Graeber 2015, 67-68]

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16The Cornucopia Institute, the leading organics watchdog association, published a white paper detailing Big Food’s extensive influences over the NOP (Cornucopia Institute 2012).
Bureaucracy serves to mask the violence through its rationality, neutrality, and organized regulations. Both simplify, rather stupidly, relationships into schemas of power, rather than processes of mutual understanding and recognition.

Organic farming was initially a way to reconceptualize and restore relationships of recognition between humans, land, crops, and animals. In this sense, organic farming was an act of interpretive labor, an attempt to understand other beings on their own terms to foster growth. Interpretive labor is much harder work than violence, as it “requires a constant and often subtle work of imagination, of endlessly trying to see the world from others’ points of view” (Graeber 68, 2015). Organics sought to cede masculinist rationalities of control land in favor of collaboration. The bureaucratization of organics, in its very nature, renders this vision impracticable. I am not saying that certified organic farms have all lost the principles, relationalities, and interpretive labor that used to underlie the practice; rather, if these principles persist, it is in spite of, not because of, the organic label.

While views vary from farmer to farmer, and circumstances from farm to farm, one young farmer I spoke to put the issue rather bluntly. Matt is a graduate of UC Santa Cruz’s Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems, a prestigious farm apprenticeship rooted in holistic, agroecological practices. After completing the program, he spent a few seasons working on a certified organic farm in Watsonville, one of California’s main agricultural regions. The pay was low (but at least hourly, he said), and he was the only one of his twenty-five coworkers who spoke English as a first language. (Alternative food and farming isn’t white; it’s segregated, with racialized labor rendered practically invisible.) The farm was 80 acres, “small” by industry standards but large enough to supply to restaurants, like The Plant, and offer a thousand-person CSA
program. When I asked whether or not the farm was sustainable, he laughed. “Well, it was organic, you know, but nothing that size can really be sustainable.”

Not in MY Body!

Organic practices today often come down to “pesticide free” and building soil without synthetic inputs. While these are both aspects of sustainable agriculture, they are too often mistaken for or promoted as the whole. The first time I visited Good Earth explicitly for research, I was overwhelmed by a number of large signs I hadn’t paid much attention to before: “Rachel’s Organic Café,” “Organic Bakery,” “Organic Ice Cream,” “Hot Organic Vegetarian Food,” “Organic Salad Bar.” No wonder there is such an obsession with organic! The word is everywhere, and yet, it is just one word. In its most basic sense, organic narrows and simplifies sustainability into a matter of certain chemicals, and then narrows and simplifies a matter of chemicals into a matter of the risks they pose to consumers’ bodies. Many of the Oak Creek shoppers asked if we used pesticides; only one woman, who works as a permaculturist at a sustainability nonprofit, ever asked about our soil management.

Few would deny that agricultural toxins are worth fighting against: Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) revealed the devastating impacts of DDT on public and ecological health; César Chávez and the United Farm Workers rallied against pesticides in the midst of the Grape Strikes Boycotts of the late 1960s (Gordon 1999); and agricultural communities continue to fight the toxic effects on pesticide exposure (Harrison 2007). The overuse of synthetic nitrogen fertilizers releases nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas almost 300 times more powerful than carbon dioxide, into the
atmosphere at alarming rates, and agricultural toxins have been implicated in the rapid
die-off of pollinator bees, which seriously threatens national food security (Briggs 2015).

But the barrage of customers who, Saturday after Saturday, asked me are these
organic? or sometimes do you use pesticides? seemed to place a lot of faith in a label that, to
date, does very little to address anything but the most individualized of consumer
anxieties. I’m sure organic produce is “safer,” but the risks posed to consumers must be
located within a much larger picture. The personal may be the political, but the
individual(ized) self rarely is. The privatization of issues such as fresh produce or toxin-
free foods disavows the structural nature of these problems and the collective, unjust
impacts they have (Szasz 2007). The framing of health, exposure, and toxicity as an
individual or household problem privileges people, such as Lola, who can allocate time
and money to seek out alternatives as “responsibilized” neoliberal consumer-subjects
(Guthman 2008b; Brown 2015).

Before having kids, I never cared about organic, non-organic, ever. Definitely bought all of our stuff when we lived on the East Coast from Shop Rite, didn’t care if it was processed, packaged, it didn’t bother me at all… I guess probably once I became pregnant, and I realized that whatever I eat, the baby was gonna get…that’s when I started to change. But I didn’t really change until Ana started having to eat food. And once she had to start having milk and dairy products…at the time, there was a lot of research that girls in the U.S. were developing sooner than European counterparts because our milk and cheese had hormones in it. So from the beginning, I only gave her organic dairy products. And [eventually] I was like, well if I’m gonna give her organic dairy products, why wouldn’t I give her organic fruit and organic vegetables?

The bureaucratization of “organic” functions as a sort of protection code. Consumers
seek protection from the very same institutions—the USDA, the government at large—
which have created, enabled, and rewarded the very conditions that are problematic.
Wendy Brown asserts that statist “protection codes are thus key technologies in
regulating [the] privileged... as well as in intensifying the vulnerability and degradation of
those on the unprotected side of the constructed divide” (Brown 1995, 189). Indeed, it is
the privileged few who seek protection through the organic sticker, a sticker issued by
the very institution that has helped create the problem. The unprotected are those who
do not have access (economic and spatial) for organic foods and the farm workers and
agricultural communities who are exposed to amounts of pesticides beyond the
imagination of consumer hypochondria. The unprotected are also creatures like bees, for
whom even trace amounts can be detrimental, mycorrhizal networks, which are
repeatedly eradicated through conventional soil management practices, and all other
beings and systems that are disenfranchised from American political and economic life.

Understanding organics as a protection code helps account for why health is so
prominent in the alternative food realm. For Lola, pregnancy moved her to re-evaluate
her own consumption and adopt many of the values and praxes of ethical consumerism.
Organics became a way of protecting her daughter, first from growth hormones in dairy
and then from toxins in other foods. Now, though, she seeks protection herself:

I’m definitely much more conscious of [these days], it started off that I
wanted my kids to be healthy, and I guess as I’m aging, I want to make
sure that, you know…[trails off]. You know it’s interesting because my
two friends who have cancer were also like super farmers’ market,
organic…even though they ate healthy, they didn’t not get cancer. So…I
don’t think eating organic prevents you from getting cancer because
obviously people get cancer. It’s more just that I want to make sure that
my kidneys, my liver, at least my organs are working well, all my
digestion. Try to keep it as clean as possible.

It’s tempting to portray wealthier, organic-oriented locavores as being narrowly self-
serving or hopelessly clueless, but to do so would overlook the complexities of
overlapping subjectivities and all the grey areas these produce, as well as betray
anthropology’s most basic humanistic impulses. The quotes and insights from Lola that
were featured in this chapter were excerpted from a much longer interview; much was
left out. How does ethical consumerism account for a woman trying to make sense of two close friends with cancer, a disease immune to the way the market advertises organic and local food as a prevention and a panacea?

In critiquing the discursive subjectivities of alternative food and ethical consumerism, it is unfair to see subjects in relation to only one discourse. Who among us is so singular, so static? Lola is an upper class ethical consumer, but she is also an over-committed mom who wants to devote more time and energy to sustainability, to volunteer more, to grow a garden, but she doesn’t have the time. *In five years*, she kept telling me, once her youngest is out of the house. She is a woman who deplores the excesses and disposability of American consumer culture: she has seen people put clothes in the trash can, for example, and removed them, adding them to the ongoing pile of donations and hand-me-downs she takes with her to Nicaragua when she visits her family every year. She is idiosyncratic, thoughtful, and funny in a grounded sort of way. Her family “let it mellow” long before the drought made it socially acceptable. While she acknowledges that her household relies heavily on cars and air travel, she also told me how, on a recent trip to Texas, she flew home with empty plastic water bottles in her suitcase—there had been no recycling in Texas. The bottles don’t offset the flight, empirically, but they certainly add nuance and symbolism. How does a framework of ethical consumerism account for a woman who takes water bottles and clothes out of the garbage and flies them across state and national borders in order to repurpose them?
Chapter 2: Vegan Killjoys

An Awkward Introduction

“So, how long have you been vegan?” the woman sitting across from me asked, making small talk. I could feel half a dozen eyes on me, smiling, eager for a response. It suddenly clicked: I was surrounded by vegans. I stuttered. “Well, uh, uh, actually I’m not totally vegan. I’ve been vegetarian since I was thirteen, though! I’d say maybe half my meals are vegan…so I’m a half-gan?” A half-gan? I sounded ridiculous. But I was caught off guard and felt put on the spot. I didn’t want a lecture, or to be judged. My mind raced as I tried to downplay my love for eggs, cheese, and yoghurt. “Oh, ok. Cool!” If the vegans were judging me, I was the last to know.

There are countless stereotypes about vegans, most of them negative. Preachy, self-righteous, puritanical, and so on. British sociologists Matthew Cole and Karen Morgan (2011) call this “vegaphobia,” a fear of or distaste for vegetarians and vegans, but mostly vegans. In their study of the terms “vegan” and “veganism” in British newspapers, the two tease out a number of tropes: the ridiculous vegan, the ascetic vegan, the faddist vegan, the oversensitive vegan, the cheating ‘vegan,’ the hostile vegan. Cole and Morgan argue that these tropes, circulated by and for a meat-eating mainstream, serve to reproduce the omnivorous norm by trivializing those who challenge it. Dismissing vegans, they suggest, saves meat-eaters the trouble of actually engaging with the moral issues ‘at steak.’

My awkward introduction to the Marin’s vegan community happened last May at a meetup.com event organized by the 350Marin Climate-Diet Connection Team. The group was a subcommittee—the most active one, too—of 350Marin, a regional chapter
of 350.org, one of the leading anti-climate change nonprofits.\(^{17}\) The event description only read as follows:

> We’ll have a delicious vegan dinner, great conversation and connect with others who “get” or want to know more about the climate-diet connection.\(^{18}\)

When I realized that everyone was vegan, I had a moment of vegaphobia. I didn’t want to them to judge me, and I especially didn’t want them to try to convert me. They didn’t; it worked. Lactose aside, I soon realized that I shared many of the same interests, values, and concerns with members of the Climate-Diet team. When I talked about my thesis, for example, one woman gave me reading recommendations. Another raised questions about food access. One couple worked quite a bit with Lauren Ornelas, a renowned vegan justice activist whose organization, the Food Empowerment Project, draws connections veganism and social justice issues. The couple was having dinner with her the following evening, and offered to put me in touch. I took them up on it. Somebody passed out stickers that read “eat your ethics.” I took one, intrigued.

Over the course of the summer, I bought less and less cheese and stopped eating ice cream. I only used eggs that I’d bartered for at the farmers’ market. I began buying Straus milk, the most environmentally-friendly option on the market, which was so expensive I had no choice but to drastically reduce my consumption.\(^{19}\) And my beloved

\(^{17}\) The “350” of 350.org refers to 350 parts per million, the maximum concentration of carbon dioxide our atmosphere can absorb for a healthy planet. We are currently at over 400 parts per million, adding about 2 ppm each year (“The Science”).

\(^{18}\) The climate-diet connection references a 2006 U.N. report which calculated that globally, animal agriculture accounted for 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions, with all transportation emissions accounting for just 13% in comparison. Animal agriculture (including growing feed crops) is the leading use of land and fresh water, and the number one cause of deforestation and species extinction. I got this data from cowspiracy.com/facts, which lists a number of livestock studies and reports, some of which contradict one another. These sorts of statistical analyses are useful, but not absolute.

\(^{19}\) The dairy is powered by methane. The electricity generated from manure is enough to cover all operating needs, charge the owner’s car, and sell some back to the grid.
FAGE yoghurt started to lose its appeal as each bite went from tangy to sour: how much did this really cost? How much did it conceal?

By the end of the summer, I was vegan.

**Definitional Difficulties**

This chapter focuses on the ways that veganism allows for alternative ways of thinking about the personal and the political as they relate to consumption and consumerist ideologies. But what is veganism? Early in this process, my advisor asked to define, even if loosely, veganism. -Isms tend to indicate overarching ideology, she said, so what is veganism’s? Well, a vegan, in the broadest sense, is one who rejects and abstains from the exploitative use of animals for food products and other goods, usually on a moral basis. Seems simple enough. But even this simple resolution is easily, and inevitably, complicated by the messy ethics of living: if a piece of meat is about to be thrown out, should you eat it? Is it better to buy a second-hand leather jacket that will last a lifetime, or a new pleather one, synthesized from fossil flues and sewn together in a sweatshop, that will disintegrate in a few short years? And if it’s made by sweatshop labor, is it be vegan? Humans are animals too, no? Can anything be vegan?

If the most fundamental action of avoiding animal products can raise such complex questions, trying to pin down the -ism is even harder. Vegans are not a homogenous group; veganism is not a unified whole. I am critical of any reference to veganism, by both vegans and omnivores, which seeks to essentialize or universalize it as
such. Constructing Veganism with a capital V overlooks the diversity of personalities, cultures, and interests, and political ideologies represented within the movement, and flattens the hierarchies and dynamics of power enacted within vegan circuits. Veganism can be a powerful critique of oppression, domination, and exploitation, one that connects anti-speciesism to feminism, decolonization, environmental justice, racial justice, public health, and anti-capitalism, and seeks to dismantle them all (Gruen 1993).

At the same time, though, vegans and some vegan organizations—often white, middle-class, and single-issue—continue to use sexism, racism, classism, body-policing, and ableism to promote their version of veganism.

This chapter, however, does not seek to define veganism or present a case for what it should be. Rather, I explore how veganism, as one part of Marin’s alternative foodscapes, allows for different ways of thinking about the personal and the political as they relate to consumption and consumerist ideologies. In the first section of the chapter, I take up Sara Ahmed’s notion of the killjoy to understand the ways that vegans disrupt the feel-good culture of labels, buzzwords, and omnivorous ethical consumerism. The second part of the chapter focuses on veganism as a “world-making project,” one that finds joy through reflexivity and constant becomings (“feministkilljoys”). Taking up Gruen and Jones’ (2015) notion of aspirational veganism, I share the insights of reflexive vegans who continually renegotiate agency and their relationship to “the bigger picture” by erasing the lines we think of as drawn.

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20I frequently refer to veganism as a movement. I like the term because it connotes dynamism. I don’t mean to suggest it is unified.
21For a discussion of feminism and anti-speciesism, see The Sexual Politics of Meat (Adams 2015). For the intersections of race, gender, social justice, and veganism, see Sistah Vegan (Harper 2010). For explorations of anti-speciesism and human-animal relationships, see Entangled Empathy (Gruen 2015), Eating Animals (Foer 2009) and Animal Liberation (Singer 1975). For the relationship between public health, dietary disease, and animal agriculture, see The China Study (Campbell and Campbell, 2006).
22Single-issue vegans are those whose ethical platforms revolve around or prioritize a single issue, usually anti-speciesism or environmentalism, as opposed to an interconnected or intersectional platform.
The Vegan Killjoy

Not to long ago, my housemate hosted a friend for the weekend. From my room, I could hear the two of them looking through our fridge for something to eat. “One of my housemates is vegan,” my housemate says out of nowhere.23 Our houseguest replied, all the vegans I know are unfriendly. I have never met the houseguest; he doesn’t even know my name. But he already knows me as a trope: The Unfriendly Vegan.

There are a number of niche diets, like raw or paleo, which involve dietary regimens more complicated and frequently more expensive than veganism.24 None, however, seem to stir quite the same response—vegaphobia—from the mainstream food realm as veganism. The mere suggestion of veganism can get people angry, or at least, defensive. Food, even when alternative, is supposed to be about “personal choice.” But veganism—despite being more accessible than other “extreme” diets—breaks this code. “Eat Your Ethics,” challenges the sticker. Veganism disrupts the consumerist narrative of personal choice. Enter the vegan killjoy.

Happiness is a political feeling, writes Sarah Ahmed, “a social order, which is protected as a moral order” (2010). The killjoy, in Ahmed’s description, sits at a happy table but becomes unseated—alienated—by their inability to partake in the normative happy affects being served and circulated. Those who are excluded from a certain order of happiness call it into question, willfully create discomfort, and pose a threat: “to be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it” (Ahmed 2010). The presence of a single body—in

23 Actually, two of us are vegan now!
24 Paleo advocates for wild salmon and grass-fed beef, for example, both of which are extremely expensive.
Ahmed’s piece, a feminist at the patriarchal table, a black feminist in a room of white feminists—can alter the affects of that space, can create tension by disrupting cohesion, by puncturing happiness.

It is not just that feelings are ‘in tension,’ but that the tension is located somewhere: in being felt by some bodies, it is attributed as caused by another body, who comes to be felt as apart from the group, as getting in the way of its enjoyment and solidarity. [Ahmed 2010].

The analogy between the feminist killjoy and the vegan is not perfect, and the two should not be conflated. Vegan killjoys do not reclaim denied status or invert oppressive stereotypes. We are not discriminated against, oppressed, or marginalized on the basis of eating a vegan diet. Yet vegans are willful subjects: we disrupt literal tables as well as kitchens, family recipes, birthday dinners, classrooms with snacks, and even, apparently, refrigerators. In my absence, lentils, polenta, and nut milk transmit these disruptive killjoy affects, threatening the omnivorous houseguest’s happiness. I become unfriendly. I am an absent presence, but my vegan foods—all of which are popular amongst omnivores, I might add—create me. I am a vegan killjoy.

Understanding vegans as killjoys can help account for the degree of ridicule, or “vegaphobia,” that pops up, unprovoked, in the most unexpected places. When I applied for a job at an environmental nonprofit, for example, one of the employees took a jab at veganism while we interviewed. I laughed along, then let him know with a grin that I was vegan. Later in the day, I overheard a different employee tell a coworker that he had been vegetarian himself for a few years, “but then I grew up.”

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2I came across a piece called “Killjoys At the Table” (Twine 2014), which is essentially a one-to-one comparison that creates vegan killjoys in the exact image of Ahmed’s feminist killjoy. I do not think this accurately reflects how we ought to think of willful vegan subjects. Vegan killjoys are closer to McGrory’s (2014) vision of allyship, in which a good ally forfeits comfort or some sense of belonging by acting in a way that violates the normative codes of their own social grouping.
Contextualizing the Willful Subject

Before I began my fieldwork, I was wary of the ways in which vegan self-righteousness might play out in Marin County’s white, bourgeois foodie culture as a form of moralized status-seeking. “Marin Vegans” conjures images of, well, you know…skinny white women who worship Gwyneth Paltrow and show up to vegan brunch in expensive linen pants—*pajama chic*.

When I arrived at the local *chaat* place for that first vegan event, admittedly not really knowing it was a vegan event, I was greeted by a table of twelve or so people of various body types, ages, and educational and class backgrounds, and cultures. So much for tropes! One woman had come over from Oakland; a man had come down from Santa Rosa. The conversation was easy. Many were just as frustrated with environmental elitism as I was, and when Whole Foods was mentioned, eyes rolled. “We all know the real problem is capitalism,” one woman with a graduate degree in public health quipped. Others nodded in agreement. Many were actively involved in local campaigns and activisms. How had I not crossed paths with these people beforehand? What did it mean to have a group of anti-capitalist, collectivist, and direct-action vegans in the context of a foodscape that is so corporatized, individualistic, and private?

The next Climate-Diet event was at the Sunday Farmers’ Market up at the Civic Center. By the time I arrived, some of the team had been there for an hour or so, distributing fliers and leaflets from a makeshift table, which was actually a portable ironing board. Other members were busy setting up for our picnic. I jumped in and
helped gather signatures for a petition for environmental impact reports for West Marin’s ranches and dairies.26

One woman who walked past our table took some literature on resource use and animal agriculture in passing. Awesome, Thanks! she said, as she kept on walking. She turned over her shoulder and added: I’m very conscious of the environmental stuff. I only buy local grass-fed beef and milk, you know! As she continued into marketplace, the vegans exchanged looks of blended horror, disbelief, and amusement.

One of the vegans turned to me and said, Well she’s in for quite a surprise.

Why’s that? I asked. I had always assumed that local, organic, grass-fed beef was at least more sustainable than grain-fed alternatives. He was prepared for my question:

Grass-fed beef requires so much more land that even if it’s better for the cattle, it can be disastrous for the environment. People don’t realize that Americans eat so much meat that if everyone switched to grass-fed, the entire country and then some would have to be converted to pasture. And grass-fed cattle grow more slowly than their grain-fed counterparts so it takes over twice as long to fatten to market weight, which is just that much for resources and emissions going into and out of the cattle. I mean, it’s a better life for the cattle of course, but then it’s like, they’re still raised to be killed at the end of the day.

It had just never occurred to me that the postcard image of West Marin’s rolling, cow-dotted hills could be unsustainable. As we sat down for our picnic, someone nodded towards the courthouse building. Angela Davis is vegan, you know. I didn’t.

Animal products are produced through enactments of extreme violence, primarily to the animal, but violence is never self-contained. Vegans do not wish to

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26 There is concern that the majority of West Marin’s ranchers, whose initial leases have long expired, are not being held accountable for the environmental impacts of their businesses. In February of 2016, three conservationist groups filed a federal lawsuit against the National Parks Service, alleging that it has neglected to update its decades-old management plan and enforce environmental standards (Center for Biological Diversity, 2016; Rogers 2016).
disavow this violence, or to “grow up” into the system which normalizes it. As such, vegans, even the single-issue ones, are inherently at odds with the marketized narratives of omnivorous ethical consumerism. The culture of labeled reassurance and bureaucratic schemas, which seek to mask or deny all kinds of violence (Graeber 2015), does not work so smoothly: “cage-free,” “humanely raised,” “free-range,” and “grass-fed,” not to mention “organic” and “local,” all of which mean very little in general, mean even less to vegans. Milk cartons with smiling cows are nothing more than cartoons.27 Vegans do not simply disrupt the happy affects of narratives, but challenge the bureaucratic forms of knowledge and affects as a whole by foregrounding a sort of violence that cannot be labeled into oblivion. If bureaucracy and marketing labels seek to mask violence, vegans, even as a mere idea or absent presence, help to peel off those labels.

Figure 3: “Outstanding in her Field.” The happy cow is surrounded by the following labels from left to right: North Coast Excellence Certified, American Humane Certified, Made Local Sonoma County, SBI Seal of Sustainability.” Red Hill Safeway, 2016.

There are nonetheless labels—namely “certified vegan” and “cruelty free”—which many use to ensure that a product does not contain animal products or byproducts and has not been tested on animals. These labels are useful as a baseline for avoiding animal products, but as Aimee Harper, founder of the Sistah Vegan Project, describes, “constructing vegan commodities as ‘cruelty-free’ is itself an act of discursive violence because it encourages the concealment of an exploitative commodity chain” (Harper 2013, 49). The vegans I worked with this summer seemed well aware of this, perhaps due to the overlapping spheres of the Climate-Diet Team and Lauren Ornelas’ Food Empowerment Project. (It’s a big-small vegan world.) Ornelas works within a “vegan food justice” framework, and has staged a number of interventions in mainstream discourses of veganism to point out that “cruelty free” does not actually mean cruelty free. She has organized campaigns and raised awareness about social and environmental justice issues, and has problematized many vegan foods such as bananas, palm oil, Coke, coffee, chocolates, and Driscoll’s Berries for labor abuses and environmental exploitation (“Food Empowerment Project,” Harper 2013). Vegans, especially those who are single-issue, don’t always make the connections between different forms of violence and oppression. But when I sat down with Lauren for an interview, she sounded hopeful that the framework for an expanded ethical project is in place:

I try and think that when I talk to animal rights people about that they get it, because they know that organic milk doesn’t mean the cow is treated any better. So they should understand that organic doesn’t mean it’s much better for the farmworkers lives either.

Ornelas is at the forefront of a movement to reshape what it means to participate in
vegan discourses without buying into the myth of “cruelty free.” By killjoying “cruelty free,” she opens up a world of critiques, boycotts, and ethico-political projects. I felt the resonances of her work over the course of the summer.

The vegan killjoy, as willful subject, must consider who sets the table, who else is seated, and what kinds of foods are being shared. Power dynamics are in flux; context is everything. The North Bay herbivores seemed to understand veganism is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and veganism cannot simply be superimposed onto a broken food system. “Access to it is a huge barrier. I think money, because of the costs sometimes of not eating junk food,” a one vegan told me when we talked. In addition to working with the 350Marin group, vegans I met dedicated time to housing reform, food and supply drives, and environmental justice campaigns such as the People’s Climate March and Idle No More SF Bay Area. Lauren Ornelas’ Food Empowerment Project garnered vegan support for a (small) Driscoll’s Berries protest I attended, in solidarity with the demands of Familias Unidas por la Justicia. One woman told me she regularly donates to the local food bank, with the request that her donations go to fresh produce instead of processed, nutrient-poor foods.

**Yeah, yeah, yeah, but some vegans really ARE annoying**

The killjoy accounts for the unprovoked or disproportionate negativity placed onto vegans and veganisms. But it seems that some vegans really ARE just annoying, and thus the killjoy ceases to be a useful theoretical tool. During one of my interviews, I

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28In August, brought some of the protest literature to Good Earth, which stocks Driscoll’s organics. The manager assured me the store was already looking into the claims and encouraged me to leave literature for the owners, which I did. As of March 2016, Good Earth still stocks Driscoll’s, despite the ongoing boycott. Familias Unidas is currently on a month-long West Coast tour to spread awareness and promote the boycott.
told an informant that I had been pleasantly surprised at how down-to-earth and welcoming the North Bay vegan networks had been. He agreed, but quickly reminded me that I’d had a certain degree of luck:

You also have ethical vegans who are like, absolutely intolerant of people who aren’t vegan, and won’t eat with them, although I’m not saying it’s pleasant, I’m just saying that, family members, they’ll disassociate with their families, and they’ll scream at people, and stuff like that. You’ve got the wide spectrum of ethical vegans as well. You just got a good batch.

These “absolutely intolerant” vegans are what Lori Gruen and Robert Jones (2015) refer to as “identity” or “lifestyle” vegans: identity vegans, those who see veganism as a rigid and static identifier, believe that “the only ethical way to live is to adopt a vegan lifestyle…If followed strictly and universally, [it] is thought to keep one’s hands clean” (156). These are the exact vegans I’m talking about—the ones who aren’t killjoys, just annoying. But rather than Gruen and Jones’ description of these people as “lifestyle” or “identity” vegans, I will refer to them as “purity” vegans.29

Purity vegans claim clean hands, and thereby disavow other forms of systemic exploitation, violence, or suffering. This form of veganism is an elaborate and misguided ethical quarantine, a form of purity politics that disavows the most basic principle of life: it is linked to death, and sometimes that’s not pretty. I don’t mean to normalize a culture of meat, though; I just mean that even in a “perfect world,” short of being able to photosynthesize for ourselves, we rely on others, plant or animal, for energy. Global capitalism, of which animal agriculture is one aspect, augments our reliance on others

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29 After all, lifestyle and identity can encompass a reflexive, unresolved ethical platform. As I describe later in the chapter, there are many vegans I met who reject purity politics in favor of reflexivity and ongoing ethical contemplation. This unresolved messiness is an essential part of their vegan identities and lifestyles.
(for food and labor) through violence and exploitation, and muffles these violences through a process of othering, systematizing, and masking. As Gruen and Jones remind us, “all aspects of consumption in late capitalism involve harming others, human and nonhuman” (2015, 157). Nobody’s hands are clean from the suffering of humans, nonhuman animals, and others. To claim purity or demand it from others disavows the messy realities of our world.

Purity veganism reinforces, therefore, the hierarchies of existence it supposedly seeks to dismantle. Take, for example, the following blog post by Gary Francione, an animal rights theorist, legal scholar, and author, titled “Is Veganism Elitist? No. But Nonveganism Is!”:

What complete nonsense. Elitism involves promoting a perceived superiority of some sort. It involves the idea of according less moral value to the ‘inferior’…Nonvegans believe in the ‘inferiority’ of animals. It is they who embrace elitism. [Francione 2015]

Perhaps if Francione replaced “veganism” with “anti-speciesism” and “non-veganism” with “speciesism,” there wouldn’t be such an issue. Anti-/speciesism is an ideology, but veganism is resistance enacted against the status quo. In advocating for anti-speciesism by way of veganism, Francione disavows elitism as it pertains to intra-species, that is the human, realms. The result is a flattened socio-political landscape that fails to recognize the uneven distribution of privilege, power, and resources along racial, economic, and geographic lines, as well as the often-ethnocentric assumptions of (white) mainstream veganism. Enactments, particularly those of resistance, require agency, so resistance must be acknowledged as “a diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990). Power itself shapes the rivers of resistance; there is no room for purity or universalism.
A more subtle form of purity has crept in, too. Amongst the gourmets, the foodies, and the flavor-chasers, veganism has been “gentrified,” from the inside and out, as a rather glamorous way of life, or at least, one with cultural capital that is validated by omnivores. “Vegans in L.A., I should say certain parts of L.A., are just a lot different than Northern California,” one vegan tells me, playing up the age-old NorCal-SoCal rivalry. While Los Angeles has more than its fair share of vegan celebrities and high-brow vegan cuisine, glam veganism is everywhere. (Marin’s only vegan restaurant is an upscale counter-service chain called The Veggie Grill, with prices slightly less expensive than The Plant.) Popular and gourmet vegan restaurants have proliferated in urban centers across the country (Gordinier 2012) and a recent New York Times article and slideshow makes ample references to “youthful” looks and “the vegan glow” (Gordinier 2015; Dickerson 2015). Times-columnist-turned-food-startup-techie Mark Bittman popularized the notion of flexitarianism—or part-time “veganism”—through his VB6 (vegan before six) and “vegan for a day” diets (Bittman 2013). But who does this new vegan image represent? Who does it speak to? As veganism becomes integrated into mainstream discourses of ethical consumerism, discussions of justice seem few and far between. Purity veganism, whether through ‘absolute intolerance’ or the distinction that some vegans claim as a form of cultural capital, reaffirms the power of the white middle and upper classes to set the terms of mainstream veganism and then benefit from them, and forecloses the more radical, inspiring, and joyful elements of veganism as an ethico-political project.

Killing Joy with Joy

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“I do it for joy. That’s my response. It’s the best way to answer the question, and it’s one hundred percent true. Veganism brings me joy.” Charlie, at a young 56, has white hair, a wry smile, contagious energy, and a tie-dye shirt. He is sitting in the corner of Riverside Café, where he hosts Vej Group, a monthly gathering for “vegans, vegetarians, and the veg-curious.” It’s August, their second meeting ever. The opening topic for today is how to deal with the question “why?”

I first met Charlie at the Oak Creek Park Farmers’ Market in Petaluma: he sold hand-made chocolates and vegan fruit-and-nut energy bars right across from the stall where I worked. He would often roam around the market offering other vendors and passersby free samples of his newest concoctions, always in tie dye, and with one ear bud in place, half dancing. He is his own brand, a walking advertisement, but his products speak for themselves. He’s a craftsman, too: his booth is a hand-built rolling hut, made entirely from salvaged materials. Compared to the white tents that surround it, it’s a work of art, with scrap wood for the walls, window frame, and display shelves, and corrugated tin for an A-frame roof. It reminds me of Professor Marvel’s wagon from The Wizard of Oz, perhaps by design. Inside, Charlie’s wife, Kim, sits behind the scenes, for support and to hang out, as she says. I am surprised to learn that this is more of a hobby for them than a full-time job. The chocolates and energy bars are nothing short of superb.

One day, when he was making the rounds, he handed me a flyer for the inaugural meeting of his monthly Vej Group. I couldn’t make that first meeting, but I told Charlie of my recent decision to go vegan and he was overjoyed. It would be fun and feel good, he promised, and he told me that I’d look back and wonder why I hadn’t done it sooner. (He was right.) He gave me extra chocolates that day, and a CD audiobook of Dr. Will
Tuttle’s “Living in Harmony With All Life: A Discourse on The World Peace Diet,” which he keeps on display at his booth, as a gift. I listened to it over the next few days. Dr. Tuttle’s worldview didn’t quite resonate with me personally: I believe there can be peaceful, or peace-making, ways of eating other beings, for example, and I do not believe a world without meat would automatically be a peaceful one. I nonetheless appreciated the gift. If anything, it was a reminder that vegan ideologies are varied, and that there is plenty of room for dialogue between them.

At the Vej Group, we discussed how to talk about veganism in a way that is inviting to those who are not vegan. Charlie’s strategy is to focus on joy, especially when asked the all-too-familiar question, *why are you vegan?* Invoking his personal joy is a way to destigmatize his chosen lifestyle by focusing on the positive, the beneficial, gain. Charlie explains to the Veg Group that when a vegan brings up exploitation, the environment, global hunger, or speciesism as the answer to the “why” question, many people get defensive. (Especially in Petaluma, which has a lot of pride for its poultry history.) Whether we like it or not, he says, slaughterhouse images and unpleasant environmental statistics can turn people off by subtle or not so subtle accusation that they are complicit in an industry that is harmful and unnecessary. *Eating vegan is unnatural,* one person might say. Another might retort: *well that’s fine, but I don’t want anyone telling me what I can and can’t eat,* as though vegans have that power. Some, more sympathetic, confess their pleasures guiltily: *Good for you, but I just love cheese too much to give it up.* (That was me not too long ago.) Too often, it feels as though people ask why you’re vegan in order to share why they are not. Joy is a trump card. It’s almost unexpected. For Charlie, joy is a positive way to frame the boycott—a hook, if you will, to get people intrigued rather than
defensive. And when your neighborhood vegan is a tie-dye clad chocolatier, it’s hard not to be just a little bit curious.

Charlie has been vegan for four years, and was vegetarian for four years prior to that. He cites climate change, animal welfare, and philosophical concerns about exploitation, consent, and commodification as driving factors in becoming vegetarian and then vegan. Since the transition, he describes joy, improved health, and a sense of fulfillment from living more in alignment with his ethics. When talking to omnivores or the “veg curious,” he frames veganism in relation personal gain and self-interest, but not the same old, same old kind. In doing so, he situates veganism in terms that are more inviting to those accustomed to mainstream, individualistic consumption narratives. The joyful vegan is assuredly not the annoyingly puritanical, austere, holier-than-thou vegan. The image of the relatable and normal vegan disrupts the notion that one must be self-sacrificing in order to pursue more ethical choices, and renders ordinary, without glamorizing, what many consider an extreme or unappetizing lifestyle.

But joy is more than just a ‘hook.’ It is the crux of Charlie’s relationship to veganism. Charlie and others I worked with this summer are consumers who challenge consumerism, akin to what feminist philosopher Kate Soper calls “alternative hedonism” (2004; 2007). Veganism indicates a “consumer disaffection” in which mainstream consumerist pleasures (such as animal products) are both “compromised by their negative byproducts, and…pre-emptive of other enjoyments” (Soper 2007, 212). Vegans I spoke with confirmed this disaffection: at a certain point of awareness, milk starts to taste sour, sour enough to spoil a whole meal. Most Americans have some sense of the violent exploitation that occurs on factory farms; many are aware that cattle and dairy industries have disastrous environmental consequences. But it is not until these (usually) abstract
ethical concerns become embodied and internalized that most people change. The change can be instantaneous: one woman described how she was stopped late at night at a traffic signal and the only other vehicle in sight was a poultry truck. For me, it was a slow, creeping discomfort, years in the making, which was then catalyzed by my ethnographic work with the North Bay vegan community.\textsuperscript{31}

Abstract arguments, both ethical and statistical, too often overlook the varieties and complexities of desire, meaning, and agency we each experience in daily life. While I can’t say why or for whom or when that milk turns sour, or consumer disaffection sets in, alternative hedonism seeks to reinsert self-interest, pleasure, and \textit{hedonism} into abstract ethical arguments that tend to overlook that we are embodied subjects who are embedded into larger structures of feeling. If veganism felt bad, people would cease to be vegans (and some do, for that reason). But for Charlie and countless others, myself included, veganism feels good, even if it isn’t always convenient or easy. Reframing veganism as joyful, rather than bland or self-sacrificing, allows self-interest and a common good to be intertwined rather than opposed. While it’s counterintuitive that vegans, as consumers, \textit{choose} to limit our choices, drawing the line in such a way can allow the personal, political, and pleasurable to reconfigure in a new way.

Groups like Charlie’s help create spaces for reframing and reclaiming joy, for reformulating embedded meanings and embodied feelings in a social, rather than solitary, context. Meaning can make or break an ethical platform:

If moral requirements are such that our moral decisions and actions always detach us from those things that make our lives meaningful, then it is likely that most people will simply ignore moral requirements.

\textsuperscript{31} My first semester at Wesleyan, I took a class on ecofeminism taught by Lori Gruen, and I wrote at least one paper echoing theoretical ethical arguments for veganism. But I never seriously considered actually going vegan until last summer. It’s funny how that works.
Alternative hedonism reclaims the production of meaning, wrestling it from the commodities, valuations, relationalities, and rhythms—and their dark undersides—which uphold dominant structures of meaning within late capitalist life. Vegan groups, such as Charlie’s, create spaces to share stories, to connect with others, to enjoy a meal, all of which help to create and circulate meanings, discourses, affects, and pleasures.

It follows that as consumers, [alternative hedonists] will opt wherever possible for fair trade and more environmentally friendly goods or services, to spend time cooking rather than use fast food, to walk or cycle rather than to drive. And they will do so, because of the intrinsic pleasures these afford, and their wider and longer term social and environmental benefits… It…presents the consumer as a reflexive and relatively autonomous agent whose self-interested needs can also come to encompass collective. [Soper 2004, 113]

As alternative hedonists, vegans enjoy the intrinsic pleasure of veganism and vegan collectivities. There is no shortage of this enjoyment: every week, I receive multiple event notifications for any number of vegan lunches, dinners, potlucks, book clubs, drink-ups and game nights, in addition to protests, boycotts, workshops, and lectures.

**Health and Self**

Health and pleasure are important aspects of alternative hedonism, but there is a danger in focusing too much on certain kinds of health-seeking. As glam veganism continues to generate interest, terms like “vegan glow” get tossed around, sharing strong undercurrents with the narratives of agency, self-empowerment, and victim-heroism that underlie mainstream ethical consumerist discourses. One of my informants, who
identified strongly as an ethical vegan, was wary of the movement becoming too focused on certain narratives of personal health and wellness:

I think there’s definitely benefits for us not consuming animal products…I think that eating more fruits and vegetables is healthy for you. Do I think that it therefore cures everything and you’re healthy no matter what? Absolutely not, and I’m upset by that type of vegan rhetoric, because all it does is actually hurt other vegans, and makes other vegans feel bad if they’re sick. And a lot of things aren’t caused by diet, genetics is a huge thing [citing breast cancer], and there’s also environmental factors. When you are living in a toxic waste area or you got BPA in your bloodstream and stuff like that. So there’s a lot of other issues. So I think veganism is definitely healthy, but I think we step over the line when we act like you’re gonna live forever and be the healthiest and you’re gonna look young. I don’t think that’s fair. And there’s a lot of that stuff that’s so much about, um, physical appearance. Which is, you know, ugh!

Too often, these narratives of health are thinly veiled articulations white beauty standards, youthfulness, fat-shaming, and ableism. They overlook that some diseases cannot simply be consumed away, and that a healthy lifestyle (access to healthy foods, a clean and livable environment) is an indicator of class and racial privilege, not just individual agency.

But alternative hedonism can provide alternative ways of framing “health” that step away from these more problematic discourses. Soper suggests that the way we frame our choices matters: “it is one thing to avoid fast food because it tastes awful or is bad for one’s health, another to do so out of concern for animal welfare, or agricultural malpractice or exploitation of the workers involved in the industry” (2007, 213). But she also warns that these are “strained oppositions,” and both conceptually and in practice, we ought to stop thinking in binaries of self-ish versus self-less concerns. Carson, a
vegetarian and professional massage therapist, expressed an interesting renegotiation of self and health:

[Health] is one of my top values…I eat mainly seasonal local organic whole foods…I would say [my] main emphasis is more on health, the health of our planet. Being more aware of our day to day choices and the cumulative effects of just very small, our daily, small choices, that it can impact [the planet]…I take a commuter bus into the city for work, I eat seasonally which I think is an important thing, little things like reusing my plastic bags, washing them and drying them until they’re, you know, basically falling apart. Stuff like that, doing as much bulk shopping as I can. Not eating processed foods, paying attention to packaging, body care products, on and on…I’ve been thinking about how I drive to the farmers’ market, which is about, I think its about 15 miles drive. It’s the big one, on Sundays, so there’s something there that isn’t quite right.

Within the mainstream alternative food realm, local, organic, and whole foods are valued for quality, purity (no pesticides!), and healthfulness. Traditional processed foods are avoided on the grounds that they are unhealthy (sometimes a euphemism for déclassé), although a large number of healthy and organic processed snack foods are on the market. But Carson was more concerned with the packaging of processed foods, a health risk primarily to “our planet.” I thought it was interesting that she was ambivalent about her trips to the farmers’ market, the place where she buys her healthy foods, saying that something about driving there “isn’t quite right.”

(Un)Becomings

Joy is often conceived of, at least colloquially, as static, an endpoint. Because of this, Charlie’s emphasis on joy initially made me uneasy. Once joyful, do we simply call it a day and go home? But Charlie made it clear that for him, joy is just the beginning, an
enactment rather than an achievement. Despite the sense of happiness and fulfillment he experiences from being vegan, he is not disillusioned. “There is no such thing as a perfect vegan,” he says over and over at the Vej Group meeting. Charlie is his own personal killjoy, and yet, he’s still joyful, bubbly, and tie-dye clad! In his own words, he urges each of us to kill our own ‘joys,’ but also to find new ones.

Acknowledging imperfection and unfinished business grounds veganism as an ongoing ethico-political project rather than an abstract ideology. Gruen and Jones suggest that we reconsider veganism as an aspiration, “a process of doing the best one can to minimize violence, domination, and exploitation,” and “part of a larger resistance to such harm and desctruction” (2015, 155). Far from a dystopian, Sisyphian undertaking, though, joy is not reserved for the completion of an impossible goal, but for striving to do one’s best in spite of that very impossibility. It is a joy of avowal, one that comes not from the outcome but the process. Charlie’s joy comes from trying, from doing the best he can, and then redrawing the line to do even more. That Charlie, inherently imperfect but always aspiring, can kill his own joy whilst feeling joyful, suggests something powerful about his ideopraxis: veganism is a process of becoming.

It is this aspirational element, I believe, that opens up veganism as a radical platform for reconsidering ourselves as individuals within systems and networks. VINE Sanctuary describes the following:

**Vegan Means All Animals:** Any high school biology student can tell you: People are animals. So, if veganism means avoiding products that cause or are the result of animal exploitation or suffering, going vegan means avoiding sweatshop-sewn shoes and slave-harvested chocolate in addition to shunning meat, dairy, and eggs. Similarly, if we believe in the humane treatment of animals and we remember that people are animals, we must work to end all forms of social injustice…
Going Vegan Is Ongoing: Veganism is a process, not an accomplishment. In this world of globalized capitalistic competition, it's virtually impossible to pass a single day without causing injury to some ecosystem or (human or nonhuman) animal. Hence, we refrain from proudly proclaiming ourselves to be vegan and instead encourage everyone to go vegan and go further. [“About Us”]

The acronym VINE stands for two things: Veganism Is the Next Evolution and Veganism Is Not Enough. Together, they articulate the reflexive, aspirational nature of the movement. What motivates Carson to eliminate packaging and wash and re-use her plastic bags over and over? Why was Charlie moved to create a Vej Group? “To act in the spirit of ‘alternative hedonism is in this sense to acknowledge how minimal one’s power is as an individual consumer—and then to use it nonetheless” (Soper 2007, 215). Utilizing this minimal power so wholeheartedly perhaps describes why, every week, I receive event multiple emails from North Bay vegan groups promoting protests, marches, boycotts, workshops, and lectures, as well as drink-ups, lunches, dinners, and game nights.

This constant reflexivity and willingness to kill joy also allows vegans to be more honest with themselves about hegemony within the movement, even when it means calling out or protesting other vegans or checking one’s privilege(s). Take, for example, the bestselling vegan cookbook Thug Kitchen: The Official Cookbook: Eat Like You Give a F*ck. When it was revealed that the elusive authors were white and middle-class, many—people of color, including vegans, allies, and white vegans—were outraged. (To me, the authors sound a bit more like frat bros with ‘roid rage, but I suppose that’s not as marketable.) People of color, including vegans, and allies were outraged. Within vegan networks, the widely-publicized controversy only amplified the racism, classism, sexism, body-policing, fat-shaming, and cis/heteronormativity that is performed and too often,
unchallenged, within dominant narratives of veganism. When I brought up Thug Kitchen and equally cringe-worthy Skinny Bitch in an interview, my informant assured me “there’s a lot of us who call that stuff for the crap that it is.” I then learned that, when the Thug Kitchen authors were scheduled to come to San Francisco, vegans of color and allies tried to get the event cancelled. Unsuccessful, they organized a protest with the following statement:

The ethical vegans of the Bay Area stand with the owners of Hella Vegan Eats. We stand with the people of color that are speaking up and out against this kind of racism via appropriation. We want to promote justice and compassion for all sentient beings. We care about the needless suffering of non-human animals, but we are unwilling to say marginalized humans must be hurt, offended, insulted, mocked, used, and belittled in service of the struggle for animal liberation. Ethical vegans are not racist vegans. These suburban white thugs are not ethical vegans… Racism is not a tool for promoting justice.

While some vegans were scandalized—how could you protest a bestselling book that popularizes veganism and therefore saves animal lives—others responded differently, justly. The threat of protest was enough for the writers to cancel the tour stop, but vegans of color, low-income vegans, and other vegans outside of the hegemonic mainstream continue to be marginalized within dominant vegan discourses, especially when and where anti-speciesism or environmentalism is prioritized over other issues, or at their expense. The tag line for the blog Vegans of Color reads: “because we don’t have the luxury of being single-issue.”

A Changing (Vegan) Climate

32 See Gruen and Joness for a response to the claim to be “saving animal lives” (2015, 166).
As I began transitioning away from animal products, countless vegans asked me if I had seen *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*, and, when I said no, promptly told me I should. It wasn’t until October, several months after I’d stopped eating animal products, that I finally watched the 2014 documentary. The director, after learning that animal agriculture is one of the single leading causes of climate change, and the de facto leading cause of most other forms of ecological devastation, tracks down representatives of environmental nonprofits and asks why they do not advocate strongly for plant-based foods but will recommend little things like unplugging your phone charger. Aided by *Cowspiracy*’s popularity, the omnivorous mainstream, particularly within environmental movements, is becoming increasingly receptive to the notion that Americans must eliminate or drastically reduce the production and consumption of animals and their products. This is good, right?

I have to wonder, though, if the surge in climate veganism will end up changing the climate of veganism. *Cowspiracy* presents a rationalized, statistical argument for veganism, one which makes little reference to the broader ethical concerns and critiques that veganism has to offer. The film was overwhelmingly white and masculine; it’s aesthetic and rallying cry were undoubtedly directed at an urban middle class. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a film that raises important issues. However, its widespread popularity and the attention it has received speak to the sorts of vegan media and arguments that are most marketable. Single-issue veganism leaves large gaps in its ethical considerations and commitments; climate veganism is vulnerable to these same limits, as well as mainstream environmentalism’s desire for silver-bullet solutions. Single-issue climate veganism, especially if bolstered by statistics without reference to justice, intersections, and entanglements, may fortify the existing hegemonies within the vegan world and reinforce
the notion that veganism is a static and finished project. Aspirational vegans everywhere would do well to killjoy climate veganism, so that numbers don’t overtake ongoing reflexive becomings, and so that rationality does not trump affective embodied praxes.
Concluding Thoughts

Consuming Nature, or Revisiting the Particularities of Place

Two Decembers ago, a group text chain between me and my high school friends was reactivated:

*Kinda wanna go foraging for herbs today if anyone wants to join.*

I said I was down to hang out, and asked where they were heading. Most of my high school friends live in the city (that is, San Francisco), and I was hoping they might be coming up to Marin, to my neck of the woods, for, well, the woods.

*Somewhere in Marin, final destination yet to be decided.*

Within hours, we were piled into a station wagon driving northwest on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. *The Drake,* as locals call it, is an artery through Marin, snaking from San Quentin in the east, past my house, and all the way out west to Point Reyes, the edge of the continent.

We passed over White’s Hill and into San Geronimo Valley, *the Valley,* which is the gateway to rural West Marin. *Pull over!* I said on a whim as we approached a town called Forest Knolls. We parked on the same street where I learned to drive stick and got out of the car. My friends asked me where we were going. I didn’t have a spot in mind—I figured we’d just walk around and see what we came across. I had never been foraging before, but I’ll admit I was pleased that my friends seemed to think I was some sort of expert. I’d volunteered at a native plant nursery in the Valley on-and-off for several years, and I’d picked up a little knowledge about regional ecologies and native plants. As a volunteer, I’d been on several seed collecting expeditions, where we simply walked along roads and paths and collected the seeds of native specimens we came across.
When collecting seeds, we never strayed far from a path, or veered off of a trail. Plants are everywhere. Why go searching for what is right in front of us?

My friends and I started up a residential street that wound up the side of a hill. The street was lined with trees, shrubs, grasses, and herbs, and a house or driveway every couple hundred feet. We gathered some California Bay Laurel leaves, thrice as potent as the Mediterranean bay leaves sold for seasoning, and spotted a hazelnut tree that was stripped of its nuts. But aside from a few Bay leaves, we were empty handed. It was the middle of December and very, very dry (from the drought). We didn’t know what we were looking for, and we didn’t know what we wanted. My friends didn’t have any particular forage in mind; they just wanted to go foraging. Our trip, therefore, was pretty unsuccessful, and for some reason, I felt relieved. My friends, on the other hand were underwhelmed.

It didn’t occur to me until we reached the end of the street that my friends, who had come up from the City, had been looking for an off-trail adventure, or a hike, and that walking up a paved, residential street didn’t really make the cut. I felt self conscious—Marin kids are supposed to know all the cool spots. We still would have come back empty-handed, I think, but at least we would have been more “in nature.” And while I, too, was seduced by the notion of foraging, the thought of us going into an open space or a meadow, that is, into ‘nature,’ taking some plants, and leaving was uncomfortable. Did we really want to forage, or did we want to be foragers? It felt like we were more invested in an identity, a status, than the plants themselves and our relationships to them.
It started to get chilly, and we loaded into the car. The shadows were long and growing faint as we followed Sir Francis Drake Boulevard back to my house, the foraging excursion complete.

Sir Francis Drake Boulevard

The Drake was named for Sir Francis Drake, slave trader, captain, navigator, and pirate who circumnavigated the Americas and sailed up the coast of California. He allegedly landed in Drake’s Bay in Point Reyes in 1579, the first European to make contact with the region, naming it Nova Albion, or New Britain. Of course, there was nothing “new” about the region he had discovered. By the time Drake arrived, the Coast Miwok had lived in what is now referred to as Marin and southern Sonoma County for thousands of years. Spanish missionary colonization and Gold Rush-era settlement killed and displaced the majority of the native peoples, and I had grown up with the notion that the Miwok were no more. Like most Californians, my exposure to indigenous cultures was standardized. Bureaucratized. The core curriculum for California public schools relegates indigenous history to the third grade history and social sciences:

Students study the American Indians who lived in the local region, how they used the resources of this region, and in what ways they modified the natural environment. American Indians who lived in the region are presented authentically; students learn about the Indians’ tribal identity; their social organization and customs; the location of their villages and the reasons for the tribe’s locale; the structures they built and the relationship of these structures to the climate; their methods of getting food, clothing, tools, and utensils and whether they traded with others for any of those things; and their art and folklore. Museums that specialize in California Indian cultures are a rich source of publications, pictures, and artifacts that can help students appreciate the daily lives and the adaptation of these cultures to the environment of the region. [California Department of Education 2005]
Indeed, my third grade year was filled with a museum-ified and mythical history of the Miwok Indians: we learned about folklore, arrowheads, and basket weaving, and we took field trips to Kule Loklo, or Bear Village, where rangers, those trustees of nature and apparently, indigeneity, showed us traditional housing and crafts. (Kule Loklo is a recreated Miwok village and cultural center in Point Reyes run by the National Parks Service). I did not, however, learn until much later that the Miwok still exist as part of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, whose federal status was terminated in 1958 and re-recognized only in the year 2000. The California Core Curriculum references nothing about contemporary issues or perspectives; settler-colonialism is only referenced in broad, rational gestures. The legacy of colonization is the elephant in the classroom, or on the hiking trail. Daily relics—Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, San Geronimo Valley, even Marin—are forgotten and normalized vestiges of the original price paid to live here.

Food From the Sleeping Lady

On June 7th, 2015, six months after that foraging failure, I found myself standing on the side of the local Mount Tamalpais, often referred to as the Sleeping Lady, on a guided foraging walk. It’s a mere seven days after California’s statewide mandatory water cutbacks went into effect. Our leaders, the buff, energetic man and the petite, lululemon-clad woman, have been encouraging us to look to nature for ways to cure or easy chronic ailments such as fatigue, stress, anxiety, and tension, conditions often associated with the stresses of modernity. I have been taking notes, partly for research and partly just for me: bitter greens help detox the liver; feral plums are low in sugar; and wild radish is goitrigenic, or “thyroid inhibiting.” It’s 2015, but the way they’re talking about nature,
leisure, healing, and recreation makes me feel like I am living in one of those old Marin leisure brochures from 1915.

We passed a patch of huckleberry bushes, which we learned were a close cousin of the blueberry. Once the berries ripen, they told us, they are delicious source of antioxidants, and they’re free! The leaves on the shrub looked kind of red to me. I jotted down “reddish leaves” as an identifying feature. It wasn’t until later on that I learned the red is a sign of drought stress (Barney 1999, 4). Under stress, most plants will go into survival mode, compromising their flower and fruit production. As fruits, nuts, and other forage become scarce, survival mode is easily and inevitably transferred up the food chain. Removed from these food chains, hikers can recreationally enjoy free huckleberries from stressed plants to ease our own stresses.

Capitalist modes of extraction, production, and consumption are often cited as the causes of current ecological precarity, so much so that the Anthropocene is sometimes referred to as the Capitalocene. And it is capitalism, too, that is implicated in the hollowed-out ethics and ideologies of niches such as alternative food. Rightfully so. But an afternoon two foraging excursions and a close reading of the road signs while en route home suggests a different, or alternative, story. My closing thoughts are far from conclusions; this project is ongoing. I am left with some messy un-/becomings and questions. The first is, what happens to our environmental ethics once we are in “the environment,” a space that is reserved for recreation, leisure, and rejuvenation? Do we protect just so that we can enjoy? The second is, just what construction of “the environment” underlies our notion of environmental ethics, and how can these ethics account for the erasures they conceal? What sorts of discourses and subjectivities might allow us to confront and avow these things?
Sustainability, from Discourses to Roots

Throughout Marin’s recent history, “nature” has been constructed as a negation: that which is not civilization. “Nature” has long been synonymous with “Marin.” It was the focal point of the leisure economy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the first wave of conservation in the 1920s and 30s, the second wave in response to the post-War development boom, and persists in our current culture of outdoor recreation. The desire to protect, conserve, preserve, and section-off the landscapes we call “nature” have guided the County’s sense of environmental ethics, and co-created regional discourses of ethical consumerism. Today’s culture of outdoor recreation and loving nature is authenticated in part through an “eco-habitus” in which ethical consumerism and sustainable food serve as both ideology and aesthetic. One informant told me that hiking and being in nature was the source of her spirituality. When I asked what she meant by “nature,” she replied: “Well, when you can’t hear traffic. When there’s not garbage. And when there’s the potential for not seeing other humans.” Nature is the space that’s been uncontaminated by “us.”

It’s well-documented that nature is an inherently colonial project, yet these ideas are absent from or upheld by popular discourses, even though we engage with these histories every day through the names of the schools we attend, the roads we drive down, the streets we live on. The very idea of nature or wilderness is a “historically specific concept” which has been universalized and superimposed onto our understandings of space (Walley 2004, 143). But this concept, the notion of nature contains the power to decide what is nature and what is not, and which groups of people fit in where, and who gets to control it and benefit from it and how. This is what Arturo
Escobar calls “the coloniality of nature” (Escobar 2008, 120). The dominant discourses of environmentalism and sustainability, and the ethical narratives they produce, are undoubtedly problematic. But the problems are more than just discursive. They are embedded and reflected in the very language of discourse itself.

Take, for example, the word “environment.” While it has come to mean nature or the natural world, it’s cognate, *environ*, means to surround or enclose. The Old French etymology of both words indicates an encircling, even an entrapment. The environment, in its most innocuous etymological sense, is simply something that surrounds us, just a space we’re in. It’s passive. More insidiously, though, it something that confines us, an encirclement that infringes upon some freedom or choice we might otherwise exercise, a border we must push up against. The notion of the Anthropocene, of climate chaos, forces us to recognize that the border can, does, will push back.

“Sustainability” is hardly much better. It comes from the Latin *sustinere*, which can mean to maintain, preserve, support, or protect, but also to restrain, control, or endure. (Its root, *tenere*, most commonly means to hold, but can also mean to possess, control, or grasp.) Common critiques of sustainability discourses are indeed embodied in the dual nature of its etymology. Whose world, whose life-ways, ought to be sustained when we talk about sustainability? Nothing is meant to last forever, so how does sustainability allow us to let go? At what cost can a privileged “we” maintain our current patterns of life? Sustainability assumes a degree of affluence, a middle class sensibility, a lifeway deemed worthy of holding onto, or controlling. Who are the trustees, the ones with the grasp and the power to control? It’s telling, perhaps, that sustainability first entered the environmental discourse through the notion of sustainable development, which hinges on ecological capital and masculinist and colonialist notions of trusteeship.
No wonder sustainability’s third “e,” equity, keeps getting swept under the rug within the mainstream! It has always been more an afterthought than a tenet.

A new lexicon may help, but a shift in terminology will not yield the purity, the innocence, the silver bullet that consumerism encourages us to seek. Moving into the Anthropocene, the questions we ask must stop seeking narratives of perfection, purity, or Progress in their answers. I leave you with the image of the cyborg, who “is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (Haraway 192). The marketized desire to “return to dust” has always been a nostalgic fantasy, a cruel optimism. A post-purity, post-savior, reflexive politic has the potential to make public the impossibility of this fantasy, and to make space for discourses of ethico-political compassion where drawn lines are seen as starting, and not finishing, points.
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