

Locavores, Feminism, and the Question of Meat

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A new approach to eating has emerged in America in the last five years; adherents call themselves “locavores” and argue for the value of eating local, sustainably grown food as a better model for both human health and the environment. Although the term locavore was coined recently (in 2006, by Jessica Prentice in her book *Full Moon Feast*), the concept has so appealed to Americans, the label almost immediately took on a life of its own. By 2007, the *New Oxford American Dictionary* chose “locavore” as its word of the year. Since then, the concept of eating locally has gained national attention. But what exactly is a locavore and what does locavorism have to do with feminism? Or, for that matter, with meat?

A brief history and ideological overview of the locavore movement precede this feminist analysis of locally grown (pasture raised, sustainable, grass fed, free range) meat. The question of meat is perhaps the most contested aspect of local eating for several reasons; while there is very little debate about the politics or morality of local fruits or vegetables, local meat has a variety of critics from several different angles, most notably vegans on the one side (who argue that we do not need meat in our diet at all) and industrial apologists on the other (who argue that cheap industrialized meat is necessary to meet consumer demand). Thus, the argument moves in two different directions at the same time. The work of feminist theorists Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway provide a basis

for suggesting that current industrial practices (that produce cheap meat) are unsustainable and deeply problematic; however this does not mean one needs to give up meat and other animal products entirely. Certain forms of feminism offer clear thinking about a middle way, a way that suggests that animals can be raised well, that “killing well” is not only possible, but from some perspectives, it is necessary. Feminist formulations of the relationships between humans, nature, gender, and culture, especially around questions of food and meat, shed a great deal of light on the value of the local farm. Indeed, the conclusion suggests that feminism offers a qualified endorsement of local eating, especially local meat eating; it also offers advice about future directions local food activism should take.

Local Food

Stemming largely from antiglobalization activism efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s, locavores support the revival of small sustainable farms and advocate for vibrant relationships between farmers and eaters. What is distinctive about local food is its appeal to several different types of subcultures, from “health nuts” and “granola people” who seek a more holistic approach to eating, to “foodies” who think that fresh, well

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raised food simply tastes better. It draws in people concerned about the health of topsoil and environmental degradation, people worried about animal welfare, folks interested in human health, and those who just want their food to taste better. The locavore movement is uniting a cross section of Americans who seek a different way of eating; these people are unhappy with the industrialized, monocultural, sanitized, sprayed, antibiotic- and pesticide-ridden, cellophane-wrapped fare offered in grocery stores today. Local eating originates in many different kinds of activism, from ecological sustainability to geographic specificity, from nutritional value to gustatory pleasure. It pushes people to start cooking again and to enjoy the labor involved in a housemade meal. In grouping these disparate subcultures and agendas together, food activism is perhaps the most vibrant social movement in America today. It is not just about food; it is about our connection to animals and the earth and to a way of living not dominated by transnational corporations. Locavorism is connecting Americans with the very basic matter needed to sustain life.

Some definitions of locavorism suggest that humans should only eat food grown within a one-hundred mile radius; others suggest eating by state or region. While these definitions are not wrong, they do not quite capture what is at the heart of this new way of eating. Beyond the rather simplistic formulation of calculating “food miles” or regional eating is the more important theme that emerges from virtually all locavore advocates, and that is this: pursue a different relationship with your food by getting to know the farm where your food comes from and the farmer who grows or raises it. In America today, being a locavore is not just a matter of buying food grown nearby; it is also a question of understanding how it was raised, what chemicals (if any) were involved, what kind of impact the farm has on the environment, what kinds of lives food animals lead. Local eating also endorses, as we shall see, eating more seasonal fruits and vegetables and less meat.

Industrial, large scale, monocultural farms (the operations that locavores now reject) emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and increase their profits by

separating animals and plants, growing both on mass scale, largely automated farms. These industrial operations look and function more like factories than traditional farms. In order to grow animals in crowded unnatural conditions, industrial farmers feed the animals a constant supply of hormones and steroids to keep them hungry; to keep them healthy in such conditions requires a steady diet of prophylactic antibiotics, along with corn and soy based feed (which for them is an unnatural diet). On industrial animal farms, animals are subject not only to unnatural food and chemicals, they suffer debeaking, branding, dehorning, tail docking, overcrowding and countless other atrocities, only to be slaughtered at a young age under frightening, painful, and unsafe conditions. The massive amounts of waste from these overcrowded animals are very toxic; whole communities must often evacuate an area when a factory farm moves in. Meanwhile, industrial fruit and vegetable farmers are forced to import nitrogen and petroleum based fertilizers into their farms because they lack animal manure; these synthetic fertilizers are prone to runoff, which pollutes rivers and groundwater. Without animals, these huge farms experience weed and pest problems and must rely on petroleum based herbicides and pesticides, and also genetic modifications. As American pastoralist Wendell Berry sardonically puts it, “Once plants and animals were raised together on the same farm—which therefore neither produced unmanageable surpluses of manure, to be wasted and to pollute the water supply, nor depended on such quantities of commercial fertilizer. The genius of America farm experts is very well demonstrated here: they can take a solution and divide it neatly into two problems” (Berry 62).

The current revival of the small farm puts these two pieces of agriculture back together and practices the kind of sustainable agriculture that has been in existence on the planet for over 12,000 years. Plants and animals occupy the same space at different times; mammals such as pigs, goats, and sheep eat the parts of the plant that we cannot eat (stalks, leaves, vines, etc.), along with many weeds. Poultry thrives on bugs and pests.

Ruminants such as cattle and buffalo graze non-arable land and transform something we cannot eat (grass) into something we can (meat). These animals all excrete a fertilizer that not only nourishes future plants, it also anchors the topsoil and keeps it from running off. The best small farms strive to be “closed system”—meaning they import almost nothing onto the farm (animals reproduce themselves through good husbandry practices, seeds are saved from the strongest plants for next year’s crops, etc.). Such self-sufficiency forms the core of agricultural sustainability.

The evidence that industrial farming is hazardous to the environment is indisputable. Differing sources, including the United Nations report “Livestock’s Long Shadow,” Pew Charitable Trust report “Putting Meat on the Table,” and many others concur that intensive animal farming is responsible for extremely serious degradation. To take a few examples, the release of methane gasses from feedlots has an impact on climate change greater than all transportation. Converting rainforests into farms to grow corn and soy to feed intensively raised animals harms our fragile environment as well. Waste from factory farms is currently the number one source of water pollution on the globe. The use of petroleum to ship meat and other industrialized foods across the globe cannot be sustained much longer. Seepage of steroids, hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides and GMO’s ravages the biodiversity. Conversely, raising fewer animals on small, integrated, closed system farms actually helps the soil sustain its health and integrity. Indeed, from an environmental perspective, removing animals from farms has been devastating. There has never once been a healthy ecosystem on the planet that did not include animals. There has never once in all of human history been a culture that farmed without any animals.

Across America, locavores are responding to the unsustainability of industrial food production through grassroots food activism. These activisms include community gardens, food co-ops, community supported agriculture (CSA’s), farmers markets, seed saving and exchange groups, urban gardening, permaculture, and many other

activities. What counts as local eating is not just a matter of food miles; rather the term is signaling a mindset about shared commitments to various forms of environmental sustainability, community revitalization, human health, and animal welfare. For most locavores, it is not only a question of where one’s food is grown, it is also about who grows it and how. Here in North Carolina, for example, “Smithfield Farms” has confined feeding operations and processing plants within fifty miles of my hometown; these facilities are large scale industrial operations closed to the public. I do not know one locavore here who would consider these “local.” “Local,” then, isn’t really only about location; rather it points to a hope and shared dream that we can regain a balanced relationship with nature through our food choices.

As the local farm is enthusiastically taken up by “foodies,” the raising and slaughtering of food animals is more a part of culture today than anytime in the last sixty years. From major media moguls like Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey, to popular and accessible chefs like Rachel Ray to Mark Bittman, the message is univocal: know firsthand the conditions your food animals are raised in and if you can, butcher (and if possible slaughter) them yourselves. Indeed, Stewart, Ray, and a host of chefs on Food Network regularly visit farms to meet their animals before they become food. Classes in butchery are popping up in many major cities from New York to Seattle. At costs of sometimes \$10,000 per class, foodies are taking local, sustainable agriculture to its extreme by controlling not only what an animal is fed and how well he is exercised, but how he is slaughtered as well.¹

But despite its appeal to environmentalists and foodies alike, local meat has drawn deep criticism from two unrelated (and indeed, opposed) camps. At one extreme, many vegans, vegetarians, and animal rights advocates are outspoken about their critique of what they satirically call “happy meat”; from their perspective, killing animals for human use is always wrong, and whether an animal is raised in a hot overcrowded shed or on a free range farm matters not in the least.² At the other extreme, supporters of industrially

produced meat claim that there is no way local meat production can keep up with America's demand. They suggest that large scale meat operations called CAFO's (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) are necessary for producing the cheap plentiful meat that Americans crave. For them, local meat is an elitist product that most Americans cannot afford.³

In order to intervene on this debate in a fresh way, we need to take a step back from the current conflicts and re-examine more abstract questions about how to think about food in general, and meat specifically. What is the human relationship to nature as seen through the lens of eating? Is it ever right to kill for food? Is eating without killing possible? Do we owe anything to the animals that become our meat and why? Do we owe other humans access to affordable food and affordable meat? Is there a difference between affordable meat and cheap meat? Can we care well for humans and the planet and the animals that become our food?

All food is fuel for living bodies, but it is also much more than that. Over the last four decades, feminists have thought and written about the relationships between eaters and their environments. What follows in this next section, then, examines feminist discourse on food from two different but complementary perspectives. Although very different thinkers, both Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway draw into sharp relief new ways to think about the local farm.

Val Plumwood

Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood's central work rests in disrupting the Cartesian distinction between "subject" and "object." According to her, the centrality of the human subject in the enlightenment functioned to "background" everything else in nature, including other animals. In her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she implores us to think of nature as a political rather than a descriptive category. "Human Reason," she writes, "has been constructed as the privileged

domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him" (Plumwood, *Feminism* 3). Plumwood describes a world in which a twist of philosophy has led to the belief that nature and the nonhuman are stagnant categories less worthy of consideration. As she puts it, "to be defined as "nature" is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the "environment" or invisible background conditions against which the "foreground" achievements of reason or culture take place" (Plumwood, *Feminism* 4).

Plumwood does not want to grant rights to animals to protect them from being used as meat. Instead, she wants to disrupt the human/animal boundary by reminding us that we, too, are animals, that we too are an integral part of nature. Nature and other animals are seen by her as more than background, and humans are seen as just one more species among many prone to the same interconnected forces. She writes, "Once nature is reconceived as capable of agency and intentionality, and human identity is reconceived in less polarized and disembodied ways, the great gulf which Cartesian thought established between the conscious, mindful human sphere and the mindless, clockwork natural one disappears" (Plumwood, *Feminism* 5). For Plumwood, feminism is about shifting the story we have of the world to see nature and other animals as part of our ecology, to see ourselves as embodied vulnerable subjects that stand alongside, not above, other animals.

In terms of meat, Plumwood argues that some formulations of veganism and animal rights advocacy work against the larger feminist goal of embracing embodiment; "vegetarianism involves a deep rejection of embodiment and of animal life itself ... it involves a moral dualism which endorses reductionist assumptions about food, denies evolutionary and ethical continuity, and is deeply incompatible with ecological or species-egalitarian outlook" (Plumwood, "Integrating" 292). Plumwood challenges the current hierarchy

of humans over other animals not by refusing to eat animals, but rather by understanding humans as food for others:

In the human supremacist culture of the west there is a strong effort to deny that we humans ourselves are positioned in the food chain in the same way as other animals...As eaters of others who can never ourselves be eaten in turn by them or even conceive ourselves in edible terms, we take, but do not give, justifying this one way arrangement by the traditional western view of human rights to use earth others as validated by an order of rational meritocracy in which humans emerge as the big winners.

(Plumwood, "Integrating" 294)

Instead of locating ourselves outside the food chain, Plumwood calls us to reposition ourselves back inside of it. She wants us to understand ourselves as food for other creatures, and to seek reciprocity with nature not through vegetarianism, but through offering our embodied selves as meat. As she notes, some animals eat other animals in the wild; subscribing to an ideology where humans do not eat animals at all means we must see ourselves as different and/or superior to these carnivorous predators, a move which further solidifies the boundary between humans and animals. She wants to challenge the dualism by collapsing all creatures and plants into one big food chain.

Vegetarian critics of Plumwood might argue that humans have more self determination and control over nature than other animals, especially food animals. After all, they might suggest, we reproduce food animals for our own instrumental desires for meat and animal products; we kill them when they are no longer of any service. Plumwood would like us to see the world a little differently: she argues that the narrative of self determination has caused us to dominate nature in ways that are destroying the planet. Whether through overpopulation, accumulation of wealth, or developments in modern medicine that extend human life beyond any natural limits, the idea that we can control our own lives and our worlds is, for her, the erroneous assumption that needs to be challenged. After all, none of us in any significant way "chooses" to be born, and none of us can escape death. Humans cannot escape the forces of nature, and according to Plumwood, we should stop trying.

The small farm is a great place to examine the question of instrumentalism. In animal rights discourse, instrumentalism means treating other beings in ways that are only about use value, not about connection, care, or love; it marks an inequivalency in power that is corrupt; it means treating animals as objects not subjects. Vegan critics of small farms that include animals suggest that farmers use those animals instrumentally (and should stop). While small farmers do breed and raise animals for meat and other products, the vast majority of farmers in locavorism have a reciprocal and connected relationship with their animals; they name them, they provide care for them, they allow them room to roam outside, they let them live much longer lives than industrial farms, they encourage mothers to care for their young, they feed them well, provide clean and warm shelter (sometimes in the human's home), they often spare those special animals that seek human connection, and mostly they dread slaughter. These farmers are tied to their animals, rarely leave their farms, physically work very hard to provide care, and barely scratch out a living as a result. Granted, not all small farmers achieve this kind of connection to their animals (which is why the locavore movement insists that it is not simply a matter of food miles at stake, but rather that we visit local farms and see firsthand the way animals and the land are treated). With the locavore attention to recovering heritage breeds of many farm animals (breeds rejected by industrial farming because they did not grow well in confinement), coupled with the care, connection, and attention these farmers give to their animals, instrumentalism can be seen as a two way street. Plumwood would like us to see the world outside the Cartesian narrative where humans dominate and control, and understand that underneath that narrative, different forms of interconnection and dependency exist. While farmers are dependent on their animals, they also see their animals as agents who depend on and are connected with human farmers. These farmers do not see themselves as not superior to the animals they raise; they are interdependent and connected beings.⁴

What humans do have is a catalogue of rights protecting them from being seen as part of the food chain, as part of nature. These, Plumwood would argue, are artifacts of Cartesian dualism and must be challenged. Culture and law make it difficult to think of ourselves in this integrated, connected way; they make it hard for us to think of ourselves as meat. A simple example: for the past few years, I have volunteered at a local big cat sanctuary; on weekends, I join teams of folks from the community to build fences or dig trenches for homeless tigers, lions, and other big cats. These obligate carnivores mostly eat meat donated by slaughterhouses and hunters, and occasionally roadkill. Following Plumwood's thinking, I recently asked the director about the possibility of donating my own body (after my death) to become food for the animals. She blanched, then informed me that funeral laws about human body disposal actually prohibit such practices. These laws, along with the zookeeper's response, function to block us from seeing ourselves as meat.

Plumwood insists that such ideology must be challenged. For her, this entails viewing ourselves, other animals, and all living things (including plants), as both food, and also "more than food." Her insistence that all of nature has a sacred quality and that any act of eating, whether of plant or animal or human, participates in that sacredness through the recognition that all our food is more than just food. The ability to comprehend this interconnected, embodied dimension lies at the root of planetary healing for Plumwood.

Plumwood understands first-hand what it means to think of herself and her own body as food. In 1985, she was attacked by a wild crocodile, and wrote about this harrowing experience eleven years later in a beautiful essay aptly titled "Being Prey." The attack was quite serious: the crocodile struck repeatedly and pulled her underwater, and she thought she might lose her life. But the experience, and her subsequent writing about it, lends a sense of authenticity to her feminist theory of embodiment. "As I was being ripped apart," she writes,

I thought, This can't be happening to me, I'm a human being. I am more than just food! It was a shocking

reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat. Reflection has persuaded me that not just humans but any creature can make the same claim to be more than just food. We are edible, but we are also much more than edible. Respectful ecological eating must recognize both of these things.

(Plumwood, "Being Prey" 43)

Plumwood forces us to see ourselves, along with other animals and nature itself, as interdependent, connected, and mutually vulnerable. This is finally a call for compassion based not on principals of veganism but on communion with all life.

In her writings, Plumwood extensively addresses the harms associated with factory farming. She objects not only to ecological devastation, but also to the treatment of animals as flesh machines. For her, we cannot rightly consume any food in general (but especially meat) without attending to the "more than food" aspect of the animal or plant, and factory farms (indeed all industrial farms), by their very nature, function to suppress that sacred, interconnected dimension. For Plumwood, the local meat eater

must take personal responsibility for the eaten animal's fate (which would include responsibility for quality of its life as well as for its death), and bearing the blame for any unnecessary suffering. That would mean finding ways to acknowledge fully the animal's "soul" and its kinship, and to express gratitude and reciprocity, that is, to acknowledge a reciprocal availability as food for others.

(Plumwood, "Babe" 30)

The local farmer who offers herself to care for her animals and the locavore who buys that farmer's products are both committed to relationality, gratitude, and reciprocity. From the local perspective, flesh that becomes other flesh and gives way to new life through mutual embodiment stands as a central aspect of creating a nondualistic world; by eating others and working for cultural acceptance of being eaten ourselves, we move to a world that rejects the reason/nature distinction.

Donna Haraway

Feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway takes a different tack on the disruption of

the culture/nature dichotomy. More heavily informed by post-structuralist literary theory, Donna Haraway approaches “culture” a little differently; for her, culture is not equivalent to reason, but rather is a way of seeing and organizing the world, a worldview or language that limits our world but also allows us to think and function. Haraway thus refuses the separation of the two domains through her neologism “natureculture.” By this word she means that we have no access to nature except through the grid of intelligibility culture affords us. The kind of organic, integrated ontology that Plumwood advocates is something of an impossibility for Haraway. For her, everything is produced, constructed, limited, and called forth by this thing called culture.

Where Plumwood helps us see that eating with reciprocity, understanding, and gratitude places us inside a healthy food chain, Haraway incorporates a more robust idea of culture into this picture. For her, nature and food are always mediated by culture, languages, and identities; any narrative about nature is created from within a paradigm that focuses on some things and ignores others. Thus, we can never see nature in any unmediated sense but only through the cultural lenses we borrow and inherit, lenses which make our understanding of nature seem, well, natural. As Haraway puts it, “Nature is given our history, even as our history is made to seem natural because we see ourselves in these animate multiform mirrors” (Haraway, *Primate Visions* 64).

Haraway sees our relationship to food, then, as historically and culturally constructed in ways that are very messy. We cannot simply insert ourselves into a nature based food chain, but instead must tamper with cultural formulations to achieve balance and understanding. As she puts it,

in eating we are most inside the differential relationalities that make us who and what we are There is no way to eat and not to kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence and transcendence or a final peace. Because eating and killing cannot be hygienically separated does not mean that just any way of eating and killing is fine, merely a matter of taste and culture. Multispecies human and non-human ways of living and dying are at stake in practices of eating.

(Haraway, *When Species* 295)

Haraway thus positions herself between the two extremes around meat. At one end she decries the vegan “heroic fantasy of ending all suffering or not causing suffering,” and asks us instead to “remain at risk and in solidarity in instrumental relationships that one does not disavow” (Haraway, *When Species* 70). For Haraway, it is culture itself that calls forth these symbiotic relationships between humans and animals. As she puts it, “I am arguing that instrumental relations of people and animals are not themselves the root of turning animals (or people) into dead things, into machines ... who have no presence, no face. Instrumental intra-action itself is not the enemy; indeed work, use, and instrumentality are intrinsic to bodily webbed mortal earthly being and becoming” (Haraway, *When Species* 71). Thus, the vegan fantasy of not using animals for instrumental human purposes is, for Haraway, a false purity discourse, a sanitized dream. For her, being in relationship with animals, which sometimes includes eating them, is to celebrate the bond across species.

The conviction that we are enmeshed in the world with other animals, however, does not mean that we can do anything we want when it comes to eating animals. As Haraway writes, “This is not saying that nature is red in tooth and claw and so anything goes. This naturalistic fallacy is the mirror image misstep to transcendental humanism” (Haraway, *When Species* 79). On the other end of the spectrum, then, Haraway calls us to pay attention to the animals that become our food in ways that echo Plumwood’s formulation that “we are all food and more than food.” In *When Species Meet*, she develops a notion of “killing well” that prompts us to take responsibility for our meat, that prompts us to share in the common intertwined reality of bodily existence. This, for her, is central to any feminist project, i.e., “honoring the entangled labor of humans and animals together ... in animal husbandry right up to the table” (Haraway, *When Species* 80). For Haraway, this means rejecting the “meat-industrial complex” (i.e., factory farms), in favor of a “struggle for a viable modern agropastoralism” (Haraway, *When Species* 295). By locating herself

within the complex world of culture, she is able to find for herself models of “killing well” that escape the fantasy of purity on one end and the hideousness of the animal industrial complex on the other. Haraway’s agropastoralism is of course the small, closed system, free range, grass fed farm.

What Haraway’s insights add to this discussion are sustained resistance to the idea that neither meat eating or veganism can ever be seen as fully “natural.” Thinking through her term “natureculture,” whatever we posit as natural is always done so through the lens of culture. We have no access to a true or ideal world where animals do or do not eat other animals; we only have the cultural lenses that allow us to make sense of the world in some ways, while simultaneously overlooking aspects to which we are blind. When it comes to meat then, Haraway’s endorsement of agropastoralism comes out of her cultural entanglement with many different kinds of eating, and indeed with many different kinds of animals. She locates her sense of ethics in “killing well,” which stands inside the entanglements we inherit through culture.

In reading Plumwood’s work, we can support meat eating only inside a balanced food chain that subjects humans to natural and ecological forces. Her work implores us to see ourselves as meat, and along with all other living creatures, as more than meat as well. Haraway’s work gives us a different way of thinking about meat. She calls us to remember native cultures and their spiritual connection to the hunt; she prompts us to consider the instrumental ways that domesticated animals use us (alongside the ways we use them); she lifts up different class and race practices around the historical consumption of meat; she helps us to notice how we live in a meat obsessed culture with TV channels, magazines, books and movies filled with images of meat as delectable; and she forces us to witness the suffering of animals that become cheap, industrialized meat. These insights and images (and many others) swirl around and construct us, and inside this tangled, messy web of culture, Haraway stakes her claim that some use of certain kinds of animals is acceptable. For her,

while we cannot remove ourselves from culture by fiat, we can act within it responsibly. For Haraway, there are no knockdown ethical arguments that defeat all other positions and practices; there is only the hope that through extended conversation we can muddle our way through the messiness of culture to discover the most responsible choices we can make about food at any given time.

Feminism and Locavorism

But what about one’s responsibility to other humans, especially humans who either lack access to farmers markets and CSA’s, or who lack the financial means to buy more expensive free range local meat? The locavore movement is in its infancy in terms of benefiting from feminist insights, but it is exactly at this point that feminist thinking has much to offer. Central to most feminist interventions in the last forty years has been the conviction that we must attend to the lives of all women, not just white middle- and upper-class women. This conviction must be incorporated into the small farm movement. Local food, especially local meat, eggs and dairy, are hard to find and often only available at farmer’s markets, high end grocery stores, and community supported agriculture drop off sites. For people living in poorer neighborhoods without transportation, getting to these sources is sometimes impossible. Local farmers and feminist community workers need to develop ways to get local products into America’s “food deserts” (where the only current options for buying food are fastfood outlets and convenience stores). A feminist perspective encourages helping to establish community gardens and reaching out to women of all classes and races to join in resisting agricultural practices that are destroying the planet.⁵

Feminism argues that all need to be more active not only in figuring out ways to get healthy food to all sectors of society, but also to make it affordable. While the prices of in-season local fruits and

vegetables often compete with grocery store fare, the price of meat, dairy, and eggs is almost always much higher, sometimes by a factor of four or five. Much has been written about how meat, dairy, and eggs can be so cheap, and while it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully review the complexities behind these prices, virtually all commentators agree that the problem rests in subsidies given to industrialized corporate growers. Monocultural farming of both plants and animals is heavily subsidized by tax dollars and produces an unfair playing field for local farmers. Unsustainable practices that destroy topsoil, cause animal suffering, and actually grow less food than closed system farms are successful solely due to government financial support. Feminist food activism requires us to shift these subsidies away from unsustainable monocultural operations and toward integrated closed system small farms. Doing so could help small farmers get their food into wider sectors of society. It could also radically change the nutritional lives of women and children living in poverty.

Additionally, feminist analysis can be used to challenge our Western meat dominated diet. Virtually everyone is in agreement that most Americans eat too much meat. The USDA recommends two to four servings of meat and dairy per day; even though virtually all nutritionists find this to be an exorbitant amount, the meat industry so dominates our thinking that we often end up in a deluded mindset that tells us it is really not a meal without meat. As explained above, corporations maximized their profits by taking animals off of the land, feeding them unnatural diets, and obscuring the process of slaughter from our vision. Somewhere in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of these shifts, Americans found ourselves living in a meat obsessed culture with TV channels, magazines, books and movies filled with images of meat as so delectable it is necessary at every meal; a once very connected process of living with animals, raising them for food, slaughtering them swiftly, and being grateful for their sacrifice has turned into an industry that treats animals like profit producing flesh machines.

Eating (much) less meat will go a long way in addressing the higher costs of local, sustainably grown meat. As we educate ourselves about healthful vegetarian options, meat can be consumed in much smaller quantities, and can be used to mark special occasions and holidays (which is basically the way meat was consumed through most parts of the world for thousands of years). No truly sustainable farmer can consume meat three times a day; doing so would require herds or flocks bigger than any small farm can manage. Consumers must follow suit and reduce meat consumption to reflect this reality. Johns Hopkins' recent campaign for Meatless Mondays seems to be enjoying great success nationwide. We need to push this even further. Michael Pollan suggests "treating meat as a flavoring or special occasion food" (Pollan 53). In other words, locavorism is not simply interested in replicating most contemporary diets by replacing global processed food with local products. The proportion of meat to vegetables and whole grains must also shift. In other words, it is as much what is on the plate as it is about where it comes from. Meals must include less meat. Local meat costs more because it is worth more; it is better for human health, better for the environment, and better for animals. As the hidden costs of cheap meat are increasingly revealed, locavorism suggests that although people pay more for pastured meat, they should also eat less of it.

Feminists have noted for decades that the reproduction of everyday life disproportionately falls on women.⁶ Feminism mandates better resources for educating ourselves about balanced nutrition and better ways of addressing the labor of the consumer in this equation. Fast food, processed food, and prepared food emerged in the last fifty years due in large part to the fact that women were leaving the home for outside, paid positions and could no longer shop and cook at the same rates. The new local farm movement must develop strategies that do not put the burden of cooking organic foods on women; there need to be representations about who ought to cook up all this food that challenge "women as homemakers." Preparing fresh food takes time,

energy, and creativity. Feminism needs to help create new options for sharing and preparing good food such that food buying, preparation, and clean up are equitable.

A new movement is arising inside feminism called “radical homemakers.” Radical homemakers are feminists opting out of corporate careers in order to live more healthfully on less. As Shannon Hayes expresses it, “eating local, organic, sustainably raised, nutrient dense food was possible for every American [before industrial farming], not just for wealthy gourmets or self-reliant organic farmers. But to do it again, we need to bring back the homemaker” (Hayes 12). Basing her analysis on feminist principles, Hayes and other radical homemakers call us to resist the corporate takeover of our food supply. While some feminists might view a return to kitchen labor as a step backward, Hayes reminds us that a central tenet of feminism has always been self-sufficiency. She persuasively argues that dependency on corporate, processed, and fast food is more harmful in the long run (for human health and environmental sustainability), even than dependency on a spouse’s income. Hayes and others argue that both genders take up the work of resisting overconsumption through cooking with whole, fresh, seasonal foods. While many of us—men and women—may not relish the thought of learning to cook, doing so seems like important feminist work as our health, the wellbeing of animals, and the future of the planet may depend on it.

Related to this, a sustained feminist voice in locavorism will force us to think about the gender politics of the old fashioned “family” farm. Locavores often sound like they want to go backwards in time and defend an early twentieth-century way of life defined by male-dominated households. Many media images of locavorism are male-dominated. While a return to earlier methods of sustainable farming might be good for the soil, for the animals, and for human health, it might not be the best development for women. Traditional farm wives often have triple duty of growing, harvesting, and cooking, along with all the other labor women provide for households. This labor, as feminists have chronicled for dec-

ades, is often rendered invisible by sexism in society; indeed, women are rarely thought of as farmers, but often as “farmers’ wives.” We need to address the burdens of labor and not import conservative gender roles in our return to small sustainable farming.

Put boldly, we need to reconfigure the “family” in the small family farm. At the level of representation in books, magazines, and films, there are virtually no images of alternative kin structures in the public portrayal of the family farm. As Vasile Stanescu states,

locavores engage in the construction of “a literary pastoral,” a desire to return to a nonexistent past, which falsely romanticizes the ideals of a local based lifestyle. They therefore gloss over the issues of sexism, racism, speciesism, homophobia, and anti-immigration which an emphasis on only the local, as opposed to the global, can entail.

(1)

These concerns and others prompt Stanescu to critique and abandon the idea of locavorism in favor of what he sees as a more justice-oriented global food culture. The idea of the small farm in the locavore movement is unquestionably heteronormative, but instead of abandoning the small farm, feminism, queer theory, and other progressive ethnic and race-based social movements need to help transform it.

While there are undoubtedly many women run farms, gay run farms, collective and communally run farms across the country, they are not adequately reflected in any media. It is not the case, of course, that straight white men cannot grow really good food, or that gender or sexual preference matters to the plants or animals. Instead, it is who grows our food that matters, and young women, gays, and sexually different people are much less likely to embark on sustainable farming careers if they do not see themselves well reflected in food activism. Feminism needs to advocate for more books and films on small “alternative family” farms. We do not need to return to the male dominated small “family” farms of midtwentieth century America, we need to push through to a new way of farming that is not based on the nuclear family but supports many different kinds of lifestyles.

In her foundational feminist text, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams astutely noted that “Men’s protein needs are less than those of pregnant and nursing women, and the disproportionate distribution of the main protein source occurs when women’s need for protein is the greatest... People with power have always eaten meat” (36–37). Although Adams herself argues that veganism is the only moral response, a different version of feminist locavorism will recognize that sexism can be fought at least in part by noting the gender dynamics in meat consumption, as well as the gender politics of food more generally. Meatless Mondays, using meat to mark special occasions or as a flavoring, using all parts of the animal rather than just prime cuts, and reducing our dependency on corporations to produce our food can help us achieve not only better balance between the sexes, but also a better balance between humans and the natural world. As Plumwood and Haraway point out, working toward a culture that honors nature, and attending well to the animals whose flesh we eat, ought to be central to be central aspects in the future of our food.

Notes

1. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/fashion/25meat.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed August 2, 2011)
2. See Bauston, Friedrich, Lama.
3. See Horowitz.
4. There are many examples of such connection. See Friend, Katz.
5. 2008 MacArthur Foundation Award winner Will Allen is a grand proponent of such community gardens, for example. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/magazine/05allen-t.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed August 2, 2011). See also the documentary film “Fresh” (<http://www.freshthemovie.com/>).
6. See, for example, Schenone.

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