Something in Our Souls Above Fried Chicken:
On Meaningful Feminist Action in Food Justice Movements

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Something in Our Souls Above Fried Chicken: On Meaningful Feminist Action in Food Justice Movements

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This thesis explores the historical, political, and social intersections of feminism and food justice movements in contemporary America. It connects the work of ecofeminist theorists and feminist activists with that of vegetarian and local foods actors to make the claim that these movements share similar commitments and goals, and that these movements would be more effective through a more conscious partnership. This thesis uses a cross-methods approach, employing theory, history and empirics, to make the deep connections between these movements clear. Ultimately, there is no “one right diet” for feminists, but these movements stand to learn from one another, as they confront many of the same social structures.
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INTRODUCTION

I think this riotous feast which has just passed our doors is the last effort of the institution to dislodge all of us who can be dislodged. They think there is nothing in our souls above fried chicken.

- Lucy Burns, speaking to fellow prisoners during a hunger strike following the 1917 Night of Terror

This project will consider the ethical and practical intersections of feminist and food justice movements in modern America. It will be largely theory driven. I will narrow my considerations of food justice movements to vegetarianism and the emerging local foods movement, or “locavorism.” My goal is to draw comparisons between food justice movements and feminism to demonstrate that they are natural partners. Some questions I will address are: How are the theories, ideologies, worldviews and practices of feminism and food justice movements related? How can the two movements strengthen one another? In what ways are identities like “locavore” or “vegetarian” intersectional with “feminist”? Is there an ideal diet for a feminist, in that it is most consistent with feminist goals? Can one seek women’s justice and not food justice, or a vice versa, without risking hypocrisy? Are the roles of women in either vegetarianism or locavorism essentialized or regressive in some way?

Chapter 1 begins with a review of important feminist vegetarian theory. Recalling the work of theorists like Carol Adams, Josephine Donovan, Joan Dunayer, and Lori Gruen, I root my thesis in ecofeminist theories that explain why women might have a vested interest in food justice. Because ecofeminist commitments see patriarchy as oppressive of animals and nature as well as women, an ecofeminist diet would
incorporate these values by resisting oppressive food systems. This is what makes
ecofeminism the relevant theoretical basis for my work. In this section, I will also discuss
empirical evidence, including surveys and census data, that demonstrates existing
linkages between women and vegetarianism. Women today undoubtedly have the power
to change our food economy, just as they have in the past, since the majority of consumer
choices and daily household concerns fall disproportionately on women. In the past fifty
years, the rise of fast food and processed foods, for example, can be attributed in part to
women increasingly entering the workforce (Rudy 2012). I will develop the idea that
women are uniquely situated to have an impact on the U.S. food system.

I also address the goals, practices, fundamentals, and critiques of feminist
vegetarianism. Why are women so much more likely to be vegetarian? Partially, I express
the claim that women are more likely to choose vegetarianism because it is seen as
“feminine diet.” Politically speaking, the meat industry is tied, through producer
subsidies, to capital accumulation in ways that fruit and vegetable consumption is not.
Feminist vegetarianism is a political resistance to patriarchal, capitalist meat production.
But does vegetarianism, by operating within in the market, ultimately uphold an
oppressive capitalist system? Can continuing to participate in the market really represent
significant resistance? As the vegetarian movement becomes more mainstream, large-
scale companies and retailers are beginning to market products that are antithetical to the
alternative agriculture movement (e.g. a GMO veggie burger). These products are made
from processed food grown on commercial farms and potentially undermine the
agricultural issues vegetarianism seeks to address.
The contemporary vegetarian diet, drawing from a wide variety of foods, is highly dependent on a global food system, which pits vegetarianism against the local food movement. So-called “lifestyle vegetarians,” an emerging group, seem to be motivated by the accumulation of cultural capital and the health benefits associated with vegetarianism rather than the ethical or environmental motivations of traditional vegetarianism. The identity formation effect of trendy vegetarianism is strong, but vegetarianism must continue to be rooted in political activism and intentional actions. Neglecting these goals could result in simply supporting another industrialized, global agri-food system that, though it may accomplish a few goals of vegetarianism, fails to address many of the problems with the current system. Hopefully “lifestyle vegetarians” will eventually find themselves convinced by vegetarianism’s weightier political goals, perhaps through processes of socialization. Morris and Kirwan (2007) advocate for a new vegetarian movement that continues to address issues of animal welfare and factory farming, but also more highly prioritizes locally sourced, unprocessed and natural food products. This project is intended to contribute to realizing this goal.

In Chapter 2, I address feminist locavorism. Since the emergence of the vegetarian and local food movements, they have both reinforced and contradicted one another. They focus on a way of eating and living that is more sustainable, more just and more wholesome. But the local food movement often advocates a closed-circuit method of growing food that views animals as an integral part of agriculture’s circle of life. In this view, eating animals is neither immoral nor cruel. Most vegetarians would probably agree that the locavores’ way of raising animals is, in general, less cruel than factory
farming methods. On a small scale local farm, livestock can generally graze freely, are fed a proper diet, are kept healthy, and are raised in humane ways. But vegetarians, by the nature of the diet, reject the notion that there is a humane way to kill an animal. In this chapter, I use Temra Costa’s Farmer Jane, an anthology of 30 stories of female leaders working to transform U.S. food and agriculture. As the book’s website says, the book is “about the impact that femininity has in changing businesses for the better.” The interviews in this book will provide some of the evidence supporting the idea that a “feminist locavorism” exists.

Carol Adams’ work and feminist vegetarian thought are met with strong critiques by women who are active in the local food movement. Feminist locavores approach ecofeminist food justice from a completely different perspective, shifting focus away from patriarchal consumption and objectification in favor of the return to small scale, ecologically responsible and sustainable farming techniques. For them, the ecofeminist goal of reconnecting with nature, animals, our food and other humans is accomplished at the site of the local farm. Animals are an integral component to sustainable farming, so locavorism presents an explicit challenge to strict vegetarianism. Most locavores advocate for the humane treatment of animals, but only as a part of the agrifood system, and ultimately are meat eaters. Feminist locavores agree that current factory farm practices are unsustainable and problematic, but see the solution as a switch to sustainably raised meat on smaller scales and believe in the possibility of “killing well” (Rudy 2012). Thus, a rift in the ecofeminist movement has developed, with the question of whether to eat meat at its crux.
Though vegetarianism in practice is already decidedly female dominated, comprising seventy percent of the movement, the feminist locavore voice is still being developed. Local food activism would benefit from the feminist conviction that resources, in this case healthful foods, need to be made available and affordable to all people, regardless of class, race or gender. A cross-cultural united feminist front could work to widen sustainable, egalitarian food practices beyond just white, upper-class neighborhoods. This work could consequently significantly improve the conditions of women and children living in poverty. The feminist locavore perspective emphasizes grassroots activism, community building and gender equality at every stage of food production and consumption. The return to small farms to this end means that eating animals not just moral, it is necessary to the success of small scale agriculture.

Chapter 3 reviews the identity politics of differentiated diets and the history of the women’s movements alongside food justice movements. It seeks to show that vegetarianism and locavorism have distinct and important political meanings and that these meanings have developed alongside feminism since the 1960s. The foci of these three movements grew out of the same political and social causes and thus are natural partners.

Just as food activists struggle to answer questions of proper consumer ethics, the feminist answer is equally complicated and varied. Food activists have a plethora of political issues surrounding food upon which to focus – animal rights, local food economies, genetically modified food, designing meaningful organic standards, governmental policy and regulation, fair trade and workers’ rights, to name a few. As
Sandor Katz writes, “[a]ll these crises of our postagrarian, postindustrial, postmodern time converge in the food we eat” (Katz, 2006, p. xix). What connects varied feminist formulations of food politics is a call for ethical consistency. Feminists ask: how can we eat as we live, with a moral concern for egalitarianism and a reverence for natural life? A feminist approach to alternative agriculture should strive to locate women’s position in these movements in a meaningful, morally consistent way. Ultimately, this project seeks to synthesize existing arguments and develop them to improve and heighten the conversation surrounding feminism and food.
CHAPTER 1: FEMINIST VEGETARIANISM

Meat has served as a status symbol since the beginning of human civilization. The availability of meat in the earliest societies represented prosperity and the hunters’ control over a sometimes hostile environment. Protein-rich meat also strengthened the tribe. Today, those ancient associations continue to manifest themselves in the modern world. Contemporary food anthropologists note that high meat consumption is still viewed as a sign of affluence. Only in the past 200 years or so (in the European context, which is most relevant to this study) has meat eating become commonplace and industrialized. The symbolic power of meat is shifting as access to it becomes cheap and easy to come by – no longer is it only the privileged classes that can afford to eat it regularly.

So, when consumers decide not to participate in meat eating, what does that say about them? What does it say about the culture in which they live? Meat is no longer difficult nor expensive to come by. While meat was once a symbol of affluence, the common narrative surrounding fast food and meat eating is that families don’t have the time or money to avoid these types of diets. Recently, though, vegetarianism has grown in popularity, flanked by healthy food and green movements. Recent studies empirically relating vegetarianism and empathy suggest that there is a shift in American food culture from class-based foundations to social identity foundations. I examine the ways that the “meaning of meat” is culturally and symbolically powerful, and that abstaining from its consumption is powerful as well.
Hunting and meat eating, as the story goes, has been around for as long as humans themselves. We imagine our barbaric ancestors to have sat around a fire roasting an animal on a spit, maybe even wearing the hide of the animal. In this canon, man’s dominance of the natural world began with the act of eating other animals. There is an implied sense of triumph to the story. Our depictions of medieval banquets and the way we recall Roman feasts extend the myth. There is a common belief that humans have always eaten meat because we need it and because it is part of our deserved dominance of other species. But there is little evidence that this icon of early humankind has much basis in truth – in fact, up to 80 percent of their diet may have consisted of vegetables (Fiddes, 1991, p. 20). As Nick Fiddes writes, “it can be gleaned that until as recently as the last few centuries animal products were for people probably less pre-eminent than they are today” (Fiddes, 1991, p. 21). These accounts of gluttonous, meat-heavy feasts are, like much of history, biased toward the accounts of the wealthy, and not at all representative of the society as a whole. Meat has been a food of the wealthy since the Middle Ages, and for as long as humans have hunted, it has been a sign of prosperity. Meat, then and now, is a prestige food.

The symbolic meaning of meat extends beyond its associations with affluence, and its powerful status means that other concepts with which it is associated also wield power in our society. Meat is commonly associated with ideas of the life force, animal strength, and energy. It is considered to feed the passions, both sexual and angry. Underlying all of these associations is meat’s connection to masculinity. Meat’s status as the most highly prized food – as the most potent and virile sustenance, the marker of
dominance, strength, and carnality – yields a strong masculine meaning, and its consumption can reinforce ideas of dominance of the natural world. This also means that there has long been a tradition of seeking to reduce the consumption of meat by certain groups of people like children, women, and the sick. It was thought sensible that these groups would eat “down the hierarchy” (Twigg, 1983, p. 24). Just as meat holds strong masculine meaning, vegetables carry the opposite connotation. They are associated with femininity, passivity, and frailty. Eating, as has been commonly remarked, produces a particularly intimate identification with the consumed product: we are what we eat (Twigg, 1983, p. 18). This has important implications for the perception of vegetarians.

By the eighteenth century, a series of agricultural innovations like new animal feeding practices and the enclosure of land, combined with changing scientific orthodoxy and expanding industrialism and urbanization, shifted the way society perceived the world it inhabited, including a worldview that encouraged, if not extolled, environmental conquest. In the United States, the years between 1880 and 1930 were crucial in shaping the transformation of the American diet. America’s changing geography and infrastructure, flourishing financial and industrial sectors, and growing cities during this time meant great social change, such as the rise of the middle and working classes, the growth of professionalism, and the changing female work force. This was an era of convergence among “material, social, and ideological forces…to shape new ways of eating and new attitudes toward food” (Levenstein, 1988, p. 210). All of these physical and social changes to the American landscape led to significant change in ideas about food and nutrition as well – consider, as an example, the importance placed on meat for
the American soldier’s diet during World War I: the U.S. Navy ration mandated one pound of meat per man per day (Levenstein 1988, p. 199). In fact, meat was diverted from women and children to support this large ration (Ruby, 2012, p. 447). By 1926, the Secretary of Agriculture directed the agricultural sector to follow the lead of industrial manufacturers’ low overhead, mass production model (Gruen, 1994, p. 79). John W. Tyson began selling chickens to Chicago slaughterhouses that same year. Presidential hopeful Herbert Hoover campaigned in 1928 on the slogan “a chicken in every pot.” By the 1940s, antibiotics were introduced to industrial chicken farms, increasing production as well as size, and the factory farming revolution was well underway (Gruen, 1994, p. 80).

Today, the factory farming industry uses 30 percent of Earth’s land mass for its production, has cleared more than 260 million acres of U.S. forest, and is largely responsible for the desertification of our land and the ecological destruction of our oceans. This same industry also uses half the nation’s water supply, while producing chemicals and bacteria responsible for the pollution of groundwater in 17 states. People living near its factories experience immune and neurochemical health complications. The health problems are even worse for the actual consumers of its products – these consumers are at greater risk of heart disease, obesity, cancer, diabetes, impotence, and a shorter life expectancy (six to ten years shorter) (“More Reasons to Go Vegan,” “Vegetarian 101”). This multi-billion dollar industry has fully undermined food’s potential to be transformative, intimate, and life-giving.
Animal rights issues aside, raising animals for food is tremendously inefficient – it takes up to 16 pounds of grain to yield just one pound of flesh, 11 times as much fossil fuel per calorie compared to plant farming, and about 10 times as much water as growing wheat. The Worldwatch Institute states that the high inefficiencies of meat consumption “create competition for grain between affluent meat-eaters and the world’s poor.”

Global meat consumption has never been higher than it is now; the demand has multiplied in recent years, flanked by growing affluence and the spread of factory farms. Americans eat twice the global average of meat while about 800 million people suffer from hunger or malnutrition. Imagine the implications world-wide diffusion of a meat-heavy Western diet would have for resource depletion and pollution of our planet (PETA). A plant-based diet has been touted as the solution to climate change, pollution, unsustainability, health epidemics, and world hunger, indeed, it may be the most significant food movement since the conception of factory and industrial farming itself.

Vegetarianism is a form of political resistance – against irresponsible industry, against human and animal exploitation, against inequality, and against the destruction of our environment.

**Feminist Theory**

Feminist theorists during the second-wave were reconsidering women’s connections to the natural world. Second wave feminism, entwined with peace and environmental movements, gave way to the first “ecofeminist” groups and conferences and clearly articulated theories of ecofeminism. This emerging body of feminist theory provides a theoretical nexus for the seeming disparities between the two movements -
through ecofeminism, it comes clear that food justice movements and women’s movements share the same underlying commitments to power resistance, egalitarianism, justice and the reclamation of the private sphere.

The term ecofeminism was coined by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, in her book *La Feminisme ou la Mort*, when emerging ecofeminist theories were still not yet a cohesive body of work, but rather related theories commenting on the connection between the domination of women and nature (Twine 2001, d’Eaubonne 1974). Feminism’s second wave of the 1970s, entwined with peace and environmental movements, gave way to clearly articulated theories of ecofeminism and the first ecofeminist groups and conferences. By the late 1980s, ecofeminism had taken hold, both as a term and school of thought. Though the body of work is far from homogenous, it can be broadly defined as the argument that Western patriarchal domination of women and the environment are interconnected, and that processes and history of this inferiorization have mutually reinforced each other. (Twine 2001). The feminization of nature, the perceived spiritual connection between women and nature, the reduction of women to bodies and/mothers, and the devaluing of women and nature’s roles outside of the market are typically pointed to as evidence for ecofeminist theory.

Feminist vegetarian\(^1\) critical theory stems from ecofeminism and a long standing tradition of feminist concern with the treatment of animals (Women and Animals). There are many different justifications for and critiques of the connection between women and animals. Historically, the assumed “animality” of women and the way that “from

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\(^1\) The term "vegetarian" will be used to refer to the spectrum of exclusively plant-based diets, including veganism. The distinct politics and ethics of various iterations of vegetarianism are noteworthy, but beyond the scope of this work.
Aristotle on, women’s bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality” have meant that women and animals (as well as nonwhites) became grouped as non-rational, non-members of society (Adams, 1995, p. 1). This paper expands on the school of ecofeminism and feminist vegetarianism associated with scholars like Carol J. Adams, Josephine Donovan, and Lori Gruen.

In 1990, Carol J. Adams published her magnum opus, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, groundbreaking because of the theoretical nexus it builds between feminist and vegetarian thought. *The Sexual Politics of Meat* has been a uniting force in the feminist-vegetarian community. At the heart of Adams’ work is that it is patriarchal society that ultimately oppresses women and animals simultaneously; subjugating, objectifying, dismembering and consuming the “other.” Though many other feminist thinkers have contributed to the field, in an analysis of these interwoven oppressions, Adams is the expert. Adams writes that masculinity “is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies” (Adams, 2000, p. 17). The mythology of equating meat eating with strength means that “our society equates vegetarianism with emasculation or femininity” (Adams, 2000, pp. 19, 25). She notes that in her research she frequently heard women say “I’d be a vegetarian, but my husband needs to eat meat,” suggesting that women feel a sense of failure if they feel they aren’t properly providing for their husbands, and that meat provides this ultimate satisfaction (Adams, 2000, p. 22). Consider the persistent maxim that all a man needs is “good sex and a good steak” – the patriarchal desire to possess and consume the flesh of both woman and animal are a generally accepted part of our culture.
Rosemarie Tong explains the subjugation of women and nature in the Western world as “[having] been shaped by an oppressive patriarchal framework; the purpose of which is to justify relationships of domination and subordination,” specifically by valuing hierarchical, “up-down” thinking, which values what is “up” and not what is “down;” valuing dualisms in which the opposite members are seen as oppositional and exclusive, and that place higher value on one member (e.g., historically, a higher value has been placed on “mind,” “reason,” and “male” than “body,” “emotion,” and “female”); and lastly, valuing a logic of domination, that is to say, “a structure of argumentation that leads to a justification of subordination” (Tong, 2009, p. 237).

Though Tong is not writing expressly about the relationship between feminism and vegetarianism, her explanation of ecofeminism is easily applied to feminist-vegetarian thought: humans are “up” while animals are “down;” humans are given higher value than animals, often justified by the capacity for reason or logic; our culture is rife with justification for why humans should eat, or dominate, animals. As early as the late eighteenth century, feminists began to consider the relationship between meat-eating and patriarchy. As Adams notes, these women “saw vegetarianism as liberating them from cooking fatty foods and laboring over a hot stove;” and feminist sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké wrote that a meat-free diet was “most conducive to health and besides…such an emancipation of woman from the toil of the kitchen” (Adams, 2000, p. 170). In 1852, Anne Denton affirmed that “[w]omen should live for something higher and nobler than cannibal tastes, good appearance, costly furniture or fine equippage,” (Adams, 2000, p. 171) and similarly, Mary Gove Nichols wrote “the new woman of the
nineteenth-century ‘would not be the drudge of isolate household, cooking pork and other edibles for a gluttonous man,’” and instead “is a good physician and a good nurse; she lives purely and simply on vegetable diet; and is a water drinker” (Adams, 2000, p. 171).

In an article addressing this subject, Jane Meyerding writes: “It is a contradiction for feminists to eat animals with whom they have no physical or spiritual relationship except that of exploiter to exploited…I think concern for the lives of all beings is a vital, empowering part of feminist analysis, and I don’t think we can strengthen our feminist struggle against one aspect of patriarchy by ignoring or accepting other aspects” (qtd. in Gruen, 1994, p. 545). Joan Dunayer reinforces Meyerding in her essay “Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots,” in which she observes the semantic manifestations of feminist-vegetarian theory. She writes that, though “human” is nonspeciesist and semantically nonsexist, “Man divides all beings into two contrasting categories: members of our species and nonmembers. At the same time, it semantically assigns men to the first category, women to the second” (Dunayer, 1995, p. 21). Contemporary feminist theorist Marilyn Frye writes that oppression functions like a birdcage – if one chooses to look only at one bar of the cage, one might wonder why the bird cannot just fly around it and be free. But such a narrow focus limits a true understanding of the extent of the bird’s entrapment; many bars are linking together to hold the bird in (Frye 1983). In the case of feminist-vegetarianism theory, the subordinate status of women and animals is only one part of the problem. Objectification – regarding another as a mere instrument for one’s own sexual, or in the case of animals, palatal gratification – plays an equally important role linking feminism and vegetarianism.
As Simone de Beauvoir’s articulates in *The Second Sex*, women are always the “other” sex in a patriarchy; occupying space that is left over by the dominating male sex, always functioning as the object and never the subject. Feminist-vegetarian thought holds that animals and women share this role as “other.” As Gruen notes, “the categories ‘woman’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive “other” in theoretical discourse…has sustained human male dominance. The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used” (Gruen, 1994, p. 538). Cultural norms tell us that a man is most comfortable or satisfied when a beautiful woman is serving him meat, that it is perfectly natural for men to be driven primarily and firstly by carnal instinct, indeed, that a man needs these things.

Adams explains the sexual politics of meat and meat’s status as a culturally meaningful item of food as having arisen from patriarchal attitudes “including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked” (Adams, 2000, p. 24). One of the most striking elements of her analysis is her extension of Margaret Homan’s concept of “the absent referent” as it applies to vegetarianism:

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The ‘absent referent’ is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product…to keep something from being seen as having been someone. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that ‘meat,’ meat becomes
unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women’s status as well as animals’. Animals are the absent referent in the act of meat eating; they also become the absent referent in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable (p. 14-15). It is no accident that animals become an absent referent in meat eating. This absence is at the heart of a society’s willingness to oppress – the process of reducing a life to a body or an object is at the core of patriarchy. Beauvoir called this reduction of women to their bodies, an emphasis on essence before existence, the “myth of the eternal feminine.” She pointed to the separation of “woman,” a biological entity, from “femininity,” a social construction, writing that "[w]oman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself” (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 734). Feminist-vegetarian theorists attempt to extend this thinking to the domination of animals. It is not an animal’s nature to be dominated or domesticated; this is a role society constructs. An animal is determined by the manner in which its body is modified through the action of humans. Just as woman’s situation is not a result of her character (complacency and passivity are consequences of subordination, not causes), neither is animal’s situation.

The dismemberment and consumption of women and animals is the third component in Adams’ sexual politics of meat. The meat industry goes to great lengths to shield consumers from what really goes on in factory farms, slaughterhouses, and processing plants. After these animals are killed, the meat is cleaned and packaged, perhaps with a farmhouse on the label, so that consumers do not consider, let alone take
any responsibility for, their choices. As Adams explains, this process of accepting another as being consumable, as something rather than someone, is invisible because it is a part of dominant culture, and also because “the end product of the process – the object of consumption – is available everywhere” (Adams, 2000, p. 16). Women and animals are not only given subordinate status and objectified; they are also seen and valued only for a part of what they were. Whether a woman is posing seductively in a clothing ad, dancing in a music video, or being gawked at on the street, she is being valued only for her body – and not even her entire body. She is, figuratively, dismembered and consumed. This is why the meat industry goes to great lengths to keep the consumer from associating the deli display with living, breathing animals – for the same reason it is easy to objectify a woman without a face or voice, it is easy to eat meat if it has no association to the animal it came from. The difference, of course, is that animals are literally dismembered and consumed, while the consumption of women is less literal, it is supported in society through the same set of patriarchal values. Animals and women are consumed under the pretense that this is necessary to support masculine virility.

Adams writes that “[t]he sexual politics of meat entraps everyone – ‘him,’ ‘you,’ and the animals who are supposed to be consumed” (Adams, 2000, p. 18). In other words, the suppositions made about men in feminist-vegetarian theory can be as offensive as those made about women. The goal of a critical feminist vegetarian perspective is not to denounce men or masculinity, but rather to come to a productive, holistic philosophy through which to value all life and destabilize hierarchy. Men can be effective feminist vegetarians by embracing these goals, too. Feminist vegetarians are concerned with living
lives that evade violence, value human-nature relationships and deconstruct hierarchical barriers. These are goals shared by feminists, farmers, foodies, scholars and pacifists alike. Though these groups may perceive few opportunities to act upon these values in daily life, vegetarianism offers the individual this opportunity for action.

Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has developed theory that is highly critical of feminist vegetarian practice. She argues that, as humans, in our removed position from the food chain, we wrongly assume that edibility is a sign of oppression. She refers to Adams’ thesis as “ontological vegetarianism,” which rests on the assumption that “nothing morally considerable should ever be ontologized as edible or as available for use.” Our culture’s concept of “meat,” of which Adams is such an opponent, is a construction specific to our context. Plumwood argues that the intense “commodification, homogenization, reduction, denial of kinship, and hyper-separation” that is caused by our factory farm system and that Adams denounces is not a necessary condition of meat eating (Plumwood 2000). Rather than assuming that edibility is inherently oppressive, she advocates for a perspective that repositions humans within the food chain and acknowledges our own edibility, rather than extending human-like protections to other animals. Plumwood’s stronger critique of Adams, though, is her admonition that feminist vegetarianism, if not carefully contextualized, can be as hegemonic, ethnocentric and universalizing as the systems of power it aims to challenge. Most potentially problematic is the way that a one-size-fits-all vegetarianism could dismiss the experiences of non-Western indigenous food cultures. Adams would most likely agree with this caveat to her work, but it is not explicitly expressed.
As long as the feminist vegetarian movement acknowledges its own Western perspective, as a response to the intensity of animal cruelty specifically within this society’s context, it escapes devolving into hegemony. After all, if feminist vegetarianism does not have meaning for women in other cultures, it is unlikely that any basis for activism on its behalf would exist in the first place. Vegetarianism also diverts farmland and vital resources away from the highly inefficient process of growing food for animals and makes it available for feeding people directly, and indeed, this is the primary justification for some people to choose a vegetarian diet. This is a response to a growing global food crisis, and in this way vegetarianism does address food concerns far beyond its Western roots.

Lastly, Plumwood warns that vegetarianism risks overemphasis on individual action and “a politics of personal virtue and self-denial” (Plumwood 2000). While she may overstate the extent to which this happens, she is right to point to the need for collective action in feminist ecofeminist approaches. The problem with individual consumer habits is that, though an act consequentialist approach supports the efficacy of such action, it can be overemphasized at the disservice of the development of other forms of political action. An emphasis on collective, grassroots action may be one of feminism’s unique contributions to the vegetarian movement as this voice becomes more developed.

Indeed, Plumwood’s criticisms of feminist vegetarianism have, in many ways, already been answered by the ecofeminist “contextual moral vegetarianism” position, which recognizes that gender, race, class and location make vegetarianism impractical,
unmeaningful, or difficult for some (Gruen, 1994, p. 93). Context can and must be acknowledged as a critical component of diet and its politically transformative potential. Though contextual moral vegetarians are “wary of the cultural imperialism that tends to accompany demands for universal ethical vegetarianism…attention to certain climatic or cultural conditions does not amount to deference to all cultural practices” (Gruen, 1994, p. 93). The choice of what to eat does, inherently, involve some degree of privilege, and there are some good economic, religious, and cultural reasons to eat meat. This is a personal choice. But in most communities around the world, people can make at least a few choices, and contextual moral vegetarians take the position that “in the absence of good reasons, one should refrain from harming those who can be harmed by ignoring their interests and denying them respect” (Gruen, 1994, p. 93). In many contexts, however, the political, social, legal, and economic forces that constrain our diets and our perception of choice are the same forces that uphold irresponsible industry and governance. This is certainly true in America. While vegetarians – especially feminist vegetarians – have a responsibility to avoid sweeping, culturally imperialist statements about universal vegetarianism, this need not impede a vegetarian political movement in the United States specifically. And, as Gruen writes, many of the practices vegetarians aim to undermine “are oppressive not only to other animals, but often also to women and other humans who are thought of as different from those in positions of power and privilege, and who are also usually the ones identifying what practices constitute traditional cultural ones. Ecofeminists urge critical attention to the ways in which power
may be operating to marginalize cultural ‘others,’ whether that means minorities, women, or animals” (Gruen, 1994, p. 94).

**Act Consequentialism**

Ben Almassi’s work on the relevance of act consequentialism to vegetarianism will help illuminate the philosophical assumptions and ideological orientations underpinning the movement. When an individual chooses a vegetarian diet, he or she participates in an active resistance to hegemonic power over animals and women through his or her power as a consumer. Ecofeminist vegetarianism is a moral, ethical, and/or ideological orientation that plays out as a consumer movement. As the logic goes, purchases work like votes to support some products and undermine others. A moral basis for vegetarianism is rooted in consumer power within the market and rests on the act consequentialist assumption that moral choices individually promote moral practice more widely. Vegetarians support more humane agricultural practices in their everyday actions in an attempt to encourage better practices and undercut worse ones – by supporting a company that makes veggie burgers, or choosing not to patronize barbeque restaurants, a vegetarian reasons that these consumer choices will register economically. But vegetarians, as with all ethics-based consumers, face the problem of individual impotency: the unavoidable conclusion that one individual’s dietary choices will not actually affect the production practices s/he means to affect, that the effectiveness of the individual choice on a macro-level of production is negligible at best. This initially seems to deflate the act consequentialist case for vegetarianism, but this individual impotence
problem, or threshold problem, can be overcome by adopting a probabilistic perspective of thresholds and recognizing the importance of both public and private role-modeling.

The threshold problem is a critique of act consequentialist vegetarianism, suggesting that “[t]here must be a series of thresholds, hidden by the market system of distribution, which determine how many factory farms will be in existence. In this case one more person becoming a vegetarian will make no difference at all, unless that individual, added to the others who are already vegetarians, reduces demand below the threshold level at which a new factory farm would have started” (Almassi, 2011, p. 7). This leaves vegetarians with very little chance that their individual action will make any difference in production. Indeed, this feeling of impotency can be a primary dissuasion for those considering vegetarianism. But a probabilistic evaluation of the threshold problem preserves the consequentialist basis for vegetarianism. This evaluation holds that any morally motivated consumer choice, though it may not be the threshold crossing choice, increases the likelihood that this threshold will be reached. So these individual acts, as long as they simply increase the probability that the desired ends will be reached (e.g., more humane agricultural practices), are still legitimate from a consequentialist standpoint. So, though the purchase of one vegetarian meal over a meat dish will not prevent a new factory farm from being opened, since markets are not nearly so sensitive, it nonetheless increases the probability that a factory farm will not be opened, and thus the moral obligation is still legitimate.

Vegetarians may also be challenged with questions of responsibility, such as the suggestion that individuals concerned about animals should focus on social action to
change the immoral production system rather than worrying about individual dietary choices, or that meat producers are morally culpable, not the consumers of their product. These arguments are insightful in that they recognize the multiple levels of responsibility in meat production and consumption, but they invite false dilemmas. The choice is not _either_ social action _or_ vegetarianism, or that _either_ producers take responsibility _or_ consumers do; “while individual choices are no substitute for social action, neither does the need for social action render individual choices morally irrelevant” (p. 4). Whether or not the consumer is primarily responsible for inhumane agricultural practices, they undoubtedly have an important role.

Consequentialist vegetarians can also strive to affect indirect change through their consumption habits. Positive role-modeling is a significant incentive of public vegetarian choices. The phenomenon of social contagion suggests that one action of a particular type makes another action of that type more likely, too. This can work on a personal or interpersonal level. Vegetarians, who hope to improve agricultural practices and promote animal rights, by self-identifying as vegetarian either in discourse or in action, can reasonably expect that their actions and explanations for these actions affect those around them. Vegetarians can be influential in either personally persuading others to make vegetarian choices in the future or by advocating for vegetarian options, say, at a restaurant, and thus making it easier for others to make vegetarian choices. Affecting others’ choices in this way also makes direct change more likely, as it increases the likelihood that the sum of these collective actions will cross a threshold. In this formulation, social contagion through advocacy is not merely an opportunity for
vegetarians, it is a moral obligation. As Almassi writes, “the possible consequences of our acts for others’ acts are a relevant consideration for the threshold argument for vegetarianism and consumer ethics. One implication of this relevance is that the act consequentialists are urged not simply to make vegetarian and consumer ethical choices, but when feasible, to take care to make these choices in positively contagious ways” (p. 16).

Finally, vegetarians are left with a choice about how to eat in private settings. If, say, a vegetarian teenager with access to his parents’ refrigerator full of food chooses to make a turkey sandwich when no one else is home, what are the consequences? In this case, the food has already been purchased and his family will continue to buy turkey whether he eats it or not, so the action has no direct effect to the market or to thresholds. No one will find out about this choice, so there is no positive or negative role-modeling opportunity in this situation. But one benefit of making vegetarian choices in private is that it promotes a personally consistent moral action – actions can be contagious for oneself as well as others – conversely, deviations can make future deviations more likely. Consistency means that later, in public action, vegetarians can communicate their choices more clearly and successfully. To be sure, a “clear policy of vegetarianism may be easier to communicate successfully than a complex vegetarian/omnivorous situational ethic easily misunderstood” (p.18).

Act consequentialist vegetarians can reasonably expect that their actions will have some direct effect on production, whether through their own actions or the actions they inspire others to take. Positive role-modeling, whether in public or private, bolsters the
consequentialist argument. Though the costs and benefits – morally, financially, socially, personally, and otherwise – of vegetarianism vary from person to person, nevertheless it is reasonable to “derive clear moral reasons why many of us should be vegetarians and consistently make consumer choices supporting better practices,” and as a developing social movement (p.19). Even when the immediate results seem sparse, the ways individual dietary and consumer actions can be effective, both through social contagion and through Almassi’s probable threshold argument, provide a strong consequentialist reason to maintain morally motivated actions (p. 20).

Socialization and Empirics

Abstaining from eating meat, as feminist-vegetarian scholars have observed, is a form of resistance to power structures that support dominance, violence, and hierarchy. Though it has especially important implications for feminists and the resistance of patriarchy, vegetarianism can also be an act of resistance more generally. Julia Twigg writes that, considering dominant cultural perceptions of power that reside in meat and meat eating, we can observe that “items not eaten reiterate the significance of the hierarchical ordering” (Twigg, 1983, p. 25). Thus, the most strict vegetarian diet, the vegan who eats neither animals nor animal products, eats “down the hierarchy, restricting themselves exclusively to the category furthest from the top” (Twigg, 1983, p. 27). She points out that vegetarianism can be seen as employing an established social language. “What dominant culture has treated with circumspection and cautious approval,” she writes, “vegetarianism, at least in some of its associations, has attempted to pull back from or rise above” (Twigg, 1983, p. 27).
Vegetarianism also promotes and involves more subtle redefinitions of the meaning of meat – it “asserts the existence and importance of a different sort of ‘power’ and ‘vigour’ from that traditionally embodied in meat; the ‘life’ in vegetarian food…in conscious opposition to what is perceived as meat’s embodiment of death, decay, and corruption, and these opposing qualities underwrite a series of political, aesthetic, and moral perceptions” (Twigg, 1983, p. 29). In vegetarian discourse, the very meanings of life and death are reversed from their normal use – vegetables are alive and meat is dead; rather than revering meat as the ultimate symbol of vitality, it becomes the quintessence of death. So, vegetarianism is much more than just the abstinence of meat from dominant diet, it is an active challenge and disruption to the hierarchical arrangement (Twigg, 1983, p. 28).

The relationship between vegetarianism, feminism and social identity has been quantified in scientific research. Indeed, a study done in 2006 by researchers at the University of Southampton found that children’s IQ predicts their likelihood of becoming vegetarians as young adults, possibly indicating a link between intelligence and better health. The researchers also found that vegetarians were more likely to be female, of higher social class, and better educated (Reinberg 2006). This type of demographic profiling on vegetarians is still somewhat new and it is difficult to draw definite conclusions, but existing research suggests a connection between privilege, choice of diet, and health.

In a 2011 study, researchers designed a study to contrast the way vegetarians and omnivores are perceived by others. In the introduction to their article, they write that a
substantial body of research has emerged indicating that “those with healthy diets are seen as more moral, intelligent, and attractive” while meat is “paradoxically the most cherished and most often tabooed category of food and is strongly linked with cultural conceptions of masculinity and power” (Ruby, 2011, p. 447). They note that vegetarians have also been shown to report greater concern for environmental issues than omnivores, to be less likely to endorse social hierarchies, and to “display greater engagement of empathy-related areas of the brain when viewing scenes involving human and animal suffering” (Ruby, 2011, p. 447). They are rated as “good, but weak people” and, not surprisingly, women were more accepting of vegetarians than men (Ruby, 2011, p. 447).

The authors cite a previous study that examined ratings of hypothetical subjects who were said to have specific food preferences such as vegetarian, gourmet, or fast food. The study found that “[p]articipants most consistently described vegetarians as pacifist, weight-conscious, and liberal, whereas they described fast food lovers as patriotic, pro-nuclear, and conservative” (Ruby, 2011, p. 448). These associations have important implications for the way America is perceived – perhaps as a bloodthirsty culture in a quite literal sense – that is beyond the scope of this paper. In a similar study, the vegetarian target was seen as “more fitness-oriented, slender, health-conscious, and intelligent,” while the omnivore was seen as “more likely to party, drink alcohol, be overweight, and be less studious” (Ruby, 2011, p. 448). In short, the existing body of research indicates that vegetarians are perceived to be more virtuous and prosocial, but weaker than omnivores.
The study asked participants to complete a packet in which they were asked to rate the personalities of target persons from a small amount of information. The descriptions and the study itself were designed in such a way that variables like gender and other activities and hobbies were controlled for. The result was that “[b]oth vegetarian and omnivorous participants perceived the implied vegetarian targets…to be significantly more virtuous than the implied omnivorous targets” (Ruby, 2011, p. 449). Interestingly, the effect was more pronounced among vegetarian participants, suggesting that ingroup favoritism and perceived similarity or shared moral code could have played a role (though the effect was still significant among omnivores). In the second part of the study, they found that omnivorous participants consistently rated vegetarian targets as more virtuous than but less similar to themselves, and noted that “[o]nce again, vegetarian men were perceived as less masculine than omnivorous men, underscoring the link between men, meat, and masculinity” (Ruby, 2011, p. 450).

The researchers conclude from their studies and the existing body of research that “people infer a stronger sense of virtue and morality in those who abstain from eating meat” (Ruby, 2011, p. 450). Their conclusion ties the data together with its theoretical framework very effectively. Reflecting on their finding that participants perceived vegetarians as less masculine than omnivores, they write that “masculinity is tenuous and fragile…manhood is earned through social displays, competition, and aggression…[and] is still considered a precarious state, easily lost and requiring constant validation. Through purposefully abstaining from meat, a widely established symbol of power,
status, and masculinity, it seems that the vegetarian man is perceived as more principled, but less manly, than his omnivorous counterpart” (Ruby, 2011, p. 450).

A similar study from 2008 sought to examine the impact of negative affect toward meat in vegetarians. Participants were shown pictures of meat and vegetable entrees as well as desserts and their brain activity was measured during both passive and active viewing conditions. The researchers note that, in humans, “ideational reasoning provide further means determining affective responding,” beyond affective responding according to nutritional need, “potentially overriding the pleasure based on the flavor of selected food items” (Stockburger, 2008, p. 513). Thus, they write, “vegetarianism provides a model system to explore the effects of a hedonic shift from liking to dislike towards specific food items based on ideational reasoning” (Stockburger, 2008, p. 513). The study monitored late positive potential (LPP) amplitudes in the brain, which indicate focused attention. Enlarged LPP amplitudes facilitate approach or avoidance behaviors (Stockburger, 2008, p. 513). The researchers hypothesized that vegetarians would show higher LPP amplitudes than omnivores when viewing pictures of meat. In other words, the researchers expected to find that vegetarians’ brains would react more strongly than omnivores to pictures of meat, indicating that meat triggers a strong avoidance response in vegetarians. The findings of the study supported this hypothesis. The researchers found that meat pictures “elicit a strong avoidance predisposition in vegetarians” (Stockburger, 2008, p. 516). They suggest that, in the case of vegetarianism, “increased attention to meat may foster attitude consistent behaviors by pitting moral reasoning (e.g. treatment
of animals or long-term health risks) higher than biological factors (flavor or nutritional value)” (Stockburger, 2008, p. 516).
CHAPTER 2: FEMINIST LOCAVORISM

Theory

Ecofeminism has generated a body of work concerned with women, environmental sustainability, and place. This scholarship is wide ranging and has received a fair share of criticism, particularly for its potential to be essentializing. But, at its roots, ecofeminism helps explain why the local foods movement has been led by women from the start. This chapter explores the connections between local, organic, and sustainable foodways and ecofeminist thought. Taken together, these two movements can be seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing.

The corporatization and globalization of the food supply chain is responsible for the accelerated degradation of our environment and regard for human and animal health. The industrial food complex churns out homogenous, highly-subsidized, nutrient-poor foods that are cheap to produce and cheap to buy but are immeasurably expensive indirectly through environmental damage, health care costs, government subsidies, and welfare programs. Poor diet and health, in the American context, is closely related to class and racial status. The food justice movement, like ecofeminism, seeks to disrupt systems, institutions, and norms that, through dominatory relations of marginalization, exploitation, and oppression, inhibit “the potential of an individual organism, group, micro or macro landscape to ‘flourish’” (Cudworth, 2005, p. 7).

In the American food system, patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and anthropocentrism interlock and, indeed, the system depends on these structures of domination in order to exist. As Michael Pollan writes: “The cultural contradictions of
capitalism—its tendency to undermine the stabilizing social forms it depends on—are on vivid display at the modern American dinner table” (Pollan 2010). When consumers reject this system in favor of more sustainable, egalitarian methods of growing and consuming food, they are participating in a form of political resistance. Like vegetarianism, the local foods movement is consequentialist; by “voting with their dollars,” the assumption is that these choices will influence the market and, ultimately, precipitate change in economic, social, and political structures. “Developing a deep understanding of the pleasure of food and culture as justice,” Hnin Hnin writes, “is critical to building a united food movement powerful enough to transform the food system…We need all hands on deck to challenge industrial agribusiness’s status quo of a fast food monoculture; environmental degradation; corporate consolidation; race, class, and gender inequities; unjust working conditions … and the list goes on” (Hnin 2012).

This new food movement – one that, I argue, is decidedly feminist – hopes to redefine the traditional role of the consumer by putting producers and consumers in conversation with one another and by reimagining our purchases as a potential source of power. By letting morals factor into our buying choices, this new food movement encourages us to rethink what constitutes real “value.” For Pollan, this movement represents a new type of civil society, one that draws the line of corporatization of society at the food we eat and carves out “a new social and economic space removed from the influence of big corporations on the one side and government on the other” (Pollan 2012). The intimate space of food and family meals is being reclaimed, and special care is again being given to the foods we select. As a feminist might say: my body, my choice.
Critically, Janet Flammang suggests that the very reason food’s critical role in politics and community-building has gone largely overlooked for so long is the very fact that food work is associated with female domesticity. Moreover, eating is a sensory experience involving touch, smell and taste – senses that “rank lower on the hierarchy of senses than sight and hearing, which are typically thought to give rise to knowledge” (Flammang qtd. in Pollan 2012). The ecofeminist formulation that connects body, emotion, animal, and female, says Flammang, thus rightly should include food, both its preparation and its consumption, as well: something “civilized men have sought to overcome with reason and knowledge” (Flammang qtd. in Pollan 2012). Thus the reclamation of food as a political tool resists dominatory social and political structures that depend on the domination of human “others,” the environment, and animals, and seeks to create new egalitarian, sustainable, and communal spaces through food. The transformative potential of the movement is to be found in “the pleasures and satisfactions of reclaiming an embodied, sensuous encounter with the scents, textures, sounds, feels, and cultural heritages of place through the local food movement, and how such experiences help us resist the culturally vapid and ecosystem-destroying encounters of mass market capitalism” (Mallory, 2011, p. 179).

Today’s advocates of the new food movement are noticing the importance of the sheer pleasure involved in committing to delicious, ethically-grown food. Cooking is increasingly becoming a leisure activity – something women enjoy doing rather than are forced to do. This is perhaps a delayed effect of women’s gains in workplace equality; today, women are returning to the kitchen with a sense of agency. This new feminist food
movement can be understood as a corrective to second-wave feminism, which embraced processed foods as a vehicle to help break women’s shackles to the kitchen. But the T.V. dinners that once seemed liberatory are part of an industrial food complex that actually undermines the commitments of feminism. That growing and preparing food is being reclaimed as significant, worthwhile, and enjoyable may be an indicator of a new wave of feminism altogether. Marguerite Manteau-Rao has articulated a vision for a women’s food movement that emphasizes natural and slow foods. For her, a “Women's Food Movement is about trusting women to hold the answers, collectively, and simply providing them with an organizing community and some tools to turn that knowledge into constructive action” (Manteau-Rao 2008).

Chaone Mallory has explored the intersections of the local foods movement and ecofeminism in the context of her co-op in Philadelphia. Ecofeminism’s ability to address intersecting forms of oppression, she writes, not only helps “understand the reasons for differential participation in local food practices according to race, class, and gender,” but also helps “to construct healthier, more egalitarian encounters with place and food” (Mallory, 2011, p. 176). Understanding the local foods movement as an ecofeminist movement, in other words, reinforces the goals of the movement, but also challenges local food scenes to be more inclusive and diverse. The local foods movement, viewed as ecofeminist practice, can both explain the political significance of a local foods movement and explore the systemic forces that may prevent certain groups from participating. Mallory writes:
Only by interrogating the interconnections – both conceptual and material – between the domination and exploitation of women, people of color, the poor, and the natural world, ecofeminists note, will humans be able to produce the profound shifts in social and institutional practices and individual and collective values needed to bring about a healthy, sustainable, and just relationship among human communities and between humans and the more-than-human world. Ecofeminists hold that in order to ensure the survival and flourishing of all life systems on the planet, the patriarchally identified values of domination, exploitation, and control that condition western attitudes toward nature must be replaced with…feminist values (p. 176).

Thus the sites of local food production and consumption – co-ops, urban gardens, farmers markets, community kitchens, and the like – become important sites of political organizing and resistance; alternative spaces in which to foster identities and relationships that reject traditional mechanisms of control and oppression.

The term “locavore” is often used to describe participants in these local, sustainable foodways. In 2007, the New Oxford American Dictionary named “locavore” its word of the year, citing the growth and popularity of local, seasonal, and organic foods. The word, said an editor for Oxford University press, is “significant in that it brings together eating and ecology in a new way” (“Oxford Word Of The Year,” 2007). But the word is also significant because its coining might be seen as the beginnings of a feminist food movement. In San Francisco in 2005, four women challenged their community to buy, cook, and eat from within a 100-mile radius of the city for the month of August. They
called this month “Celebrate Your Foodshed: Eat Locally” (Wu 2005). Jessica Prentice, a professional chef, was charged with naming the group. “I brainstormed and wrote down ‘local eaters’… ‘women who eat locally,’ and then went online and looked up the Greek and Latin for ‘to eat’ and ‘local’” (Costa, 2010, p. 101). Though she eventually decided on “locavore” (admittedly, it has more of a ring to it than the other options) the word now used to describe an entire food movement was originally synonymous with women who eat locally.

**Empirics**

Studies and census data have demonstrated that vegetarianism is closely associated with women and femininity. A study evaluating the perceptions of participants in other food movements, such as locavores, would be a useful addition to the field. But the results of vegetarian studies perhaps suggest the perceived femininity not only of vegetarianism, but of food justice in general. Locavorism, like vegetarianism, seeks to create an alternative, non-violent, egalitarian marketplace through which to resist environmental destruction and systems of domination. These values, especially combined with the reverence for the natural world that accompanies locavorism, suggest that a study of femininity and locavorism would yield similar results. This is to say nothing of already existing evidence, demonstrating the historical, political and theoretical complementarity of these movements, that locavorism is, and has been, a women’s movement and that this complementarity is playing out in significant and measurable ways. Women dominate food purchasing decisions and are leading organic and sustainable food and agriculture nonprofits and political organizations en masse. In
farming, they are much more likely to be found adopting sustainable and organic practices. Food and farming nonprofits are staffed and led predominantly by women. Women are running successful farms, restaurants, food magazines and blogs (Philpott 2010). American women control 85 percent of household purchasing decisions and fully 93 percent of food purchasing decisions. Mothers, specifically, account for 51 percent of all food purchases (Pontiflex 2010).

Still some of the most remarkable data is to be found in agriculture. The number of female farmers has increased significantly in recent years; the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture showed that the number of women operating farms increased 19 percent, compared to just a 7 percent increase in farmers overall (Philpott 2010). Yet nearly 98 percent of growers of the five major commodity crops – corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice – are male, and a paltry 1.3 percent of board members on these growers’ organizational boards are female. Of note, these commodity crops are the most heavily subsidized – fully 90 percent of federal farm subsidies are paid to growers of this Big Five – and thus most closely tied to traditional power configurations and the state. These monocultures are also most harmful to the environment (Karpf 2013).

Contrast this with membership in the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s Organizational Council – women actually outnumber men, comprising 55 percent of the council. The leaders of three national organics organizations, The Organic Center, the Organic Trade Association and the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), are all women. A study by the OFRF shows that 22 percent of organic farmers are women, that women are 14 percent more likely to grow vegetables and herbs, 16 percent less
likely to grow field crops, and are more likely to manage smaller farms than men. Commodity growers’ lobbies like the National Corn Growers Association are taking notice – the NCGA and the United Soybean Board recently launched their Common Ground campaign, which “will attempt to put a more feminine, friendly and empathetic face on large-scale agriculture by using women farmers to appeal to suburban and urban grocery shoppers – most of whom are women themselves” (Karpf 2013).

The White House vegetable garden, especially First Lady Michelle Obama’s recent work there, highlights some of the gender politics of the organic, local food. A seemingly apolitical space, the White House garden has a surprisingly political legacy dating back to 1800, when President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams planted the first one. Adams’ successor, Thomas Jefferson, then added fruit trees to the garden, which were tended to by slaves. Where the West Wing now stands, tropical fruit trees and flowers once bloomed inside a greenhouse instated by Andrew Jackson. During World War I, Woodrow Wilson and First Lady Edith Wilson used sheep to mow and fertilize the White House lawn as part of the war effort to conserve resources. In 1943, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt planted a large victory garden on the lawn, this time as part of the World War II drive to supplement the food supply. This act prompted millions of Americans to plant their own victory gardens (Parker-Pope 2009). The groundbreaking of Michelle Obama’s vegetable garden in 2009, then, was more accurately an expansion of a long-standing tradition of food production at the White House. Like the slave labor of Jefferson’s groves and the pro-military patriotism of the victory gardens, Michelle
Obama’s work on the White House lawn is marked by today’s political and cultural preoccupations.

Women are the fastest growing group of diversified farmers, control the majority of household spending, and are dominating sustainable non-profits, restaurants, and small businesses (Costa, 2010, p. 6). Women’s roles as caretakers and involvement in children’s health and nutrition have also been an influential factor in women’s participation in the movement. Women are spearheading efforts to partner schools with farms that can provide fresh produce to cafeterias. Children’s health, farm marketing, and food service as fields are dominated by women. At food service-related conventions, roughly 90 percent of participants are women (Costa, 2010, p. 83). Women are also the fastest growing demographic of farm owners and operators, as the number of small farms and farmers markets has experienced dramatic growth in the past decade. Of the top 15 national sustainable agriculture nonprofits, 61.5 percent of employees and 60 percent of executive directors are women (Costa, 2010, p. 9). At the wildly popular Fully Belly Farm in California, farmer Dru Rivers estimates that they have had over 100 interns, of which they get a ten-to-one ratio of female to male applicants (Costa, 2010, p. 31). These data suggest that women are a deep, guiding force behind our food culture, that they are cognizant of this role, and that momentum is building behind a feminist food justice movement.

*Farmer Jane*

These women are leaders of the local and slow food movements, and while Costa’s style is mostly biographical – documenting the careers and lives of successful female farmers, teachers, and entrepreneurs – woven throughout these narratives is evidence of a feminist food movement. My analysis envisions the biographies in *Farmer Jane* as empirical evidence that support the idea that the work of women in food justice is decidedly political, subversive, and feminist. I hope to continue Costa’s project by demonstrating that these 30 women, and indeed, the book itself, are important indications that a feminist food justice movement is well underway.

Food is an access point by which to understand culture, people, and their politics. Every aspect of our politics touches our food – from government subsidies, to the mechanization of slaughterhouses, to food stamps, to international aid. Race, gender, and class all interact with our food politics in meaningful ways. As one of the women in *Farmer Jane*, Claire Hope Cummings put it, “industrial agriculture has been the source of social problems, pollution, poor health, poverty, and the domination of nature. When we realize how fundamental food and farming are to human life, we can begin to see that the way we eat is not just the problem, but also the solution” (p. 62). Thus it is not surprising that, while the food justice movement is political in itself, it also attracts activists from other movements. The overlap of these movements provides some insight into the priorities and goals of the activists involved in food justice, and, I argue, is further evidence that food justice and feminism are closely linked.

Many of the women in *Farmer Jane* trace their interest in sustainable and local food back to anti-war protests. Nancy Vail, a farmer at the popular and successful Pie
Ranch in Pescadero, California, said her volunteer work at a cooperative restaurant during college and her involvement in the protestation of the Gulf War were what originally turned her attention to food politics. Food justice and farming captured her attention as a college student striving to “live in this world in a way that’s hopeful, direct, and authentic” and to “engage in the world in a way that makes sense” (p. 15).

Cummings, lawyer and author of *Uncertain Peril: Genetic Engineering and the Future of Seeds*, got her first taste for social activism as a student at UC Berkeley involved in the 1960s peace movement. The perspective she gained from her involvement led her to the back to the land movement a few years later. She became interested in farming, but interestingly notes that she felt she couldn’t become a farmer herself, because “women of [her] generation were not empowered to act on their own dreams” (p. 55). She got her foot in the door by marrying a farmer instead.

Marion Kalb, today a Co-Director of the National Farm to School Network, also cultivated her political awareness and interest in food justice at UC Berkeley, where she became “fascinated by how corrupt political arrangements tie people to lives of poverty” (p. 81). Deborah Madison, chef, award-winning food author, and founder of Greens Restaurant in San Francisco, became involved in the late sixties as well, through her involvement at the San Francisco Zen Center. By the 1970s, she decided that the industrialized food system, and specifically industrialized meat production, was one she refused to participate in. She helped the Zen Center open Greens Restaurant, the country’s first gourmet vegetarian restaurant, in 1979 (pp. 94-97). Iowa farmer and founder of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network Denise O’Brien got her start in
the Bay Area in the 1960s and ‘70s as well. As a high school and college student, her immersion in the “hippie antiwar movement” influenced her path as an activist. In the ‘70s she became involved with a “food conspiracy” – similar to a member-owned food co-op – and moved back home to Iowa and married an organic farmer. By the ‘80s she had become an advocate for family farms, and eventually for female farmers in leadership roles.

The “peace protests-to-food justice” path emerges as a theme throughout Farmer Jane. That so many of these women were inspired to take what they learned and experienced in anti-war protestation and apply to it their careers as farmers, chefs, and food activists is not surprising. What might appear to be an ambling procession through various progressive causes is actually a defined path: one that resists institutionalized violence and domination through the creation of alternative spaces. The political consciousness these women, and those like them, developed during peace protests of the sixties and seventies led them to food justice because it was a natural ideological continuation of a social project concerned with achieving sustainable peace, respect for life and nature, and participatory, egalitarian systems of representation.

Still other women not involved with anti-war protestation found other political routes to food justice. As Elizabeth Henderson, New York farmer and author of Sharing the Harvest said: “When you work to create a more equitable and sustainable food system…you inevitably become an activist – an activist for a new type of food system, one that does not enslave people or commodify or pollute the Earth” (p. 27). After her involvement in the peace movement and her marriage to a farmer, Cummings, a
journalist by trade, began to study the right wing backlash of the Reagan and Bush administrations after the sixties and seventies. Her interest turned to indigenous land rights and anti-biotechnology advocacy. She has focused on the ways that corporations, bolstered by law and policy that favor big agriculture, have come to dominate research institutions, our diets, and the land itself (p. 59).

Beyond their political interests and activism, many of the women in Farmer Jane suggest that their female identity played a role in their initial interest in food justice. These sentiments are consistent with the ecofeminist idea that femininity and nature are intimately connected. In acknowledging these connections, however, there is a risk of essentializing or reducing women to the physical. But, absent a major shift in the ways that women are socialized and constructed, these connections will continue to be significant and genuine. We can recognize, for example, that though women should not be confined to the domestic sphere because of their sex, it is nevertheless true that women are responsible for the majority of household spending and food preparation. A critical feminist lens also makes women likely to identify or relate to other types of injustice, violence, or discrimination. Thus the experience of being a woman is tied to food justice in important ways, and, as they hold personal and social significance, these ties can and should be recognized. This can be done in a way that respects the personal narratives of female activists without being regressive or essentialist.

Judy Wicks, Philadelphian author, restaurateur, and founder of White Dog Community Enterprises, a nonprofit working to build a local and sustainable food system in Philadelphia, writes that our capitalist, industrial society has desensitized consumers to
the suffering it necessitates. “We’re also desensitized by a false idea of masculinity based on control and domination,” Wicks writes. “We need a more feminine, nurturing approach to life to bring forth the goddess in each of us, men and women both, bringing care and compassion to our economy, and peace and harmony to our world” (p. 111). Cummings believes, similarly, that at the heart of sustainable farming and its potential for social change is “a feminine energy of fertility, rebirth, and nurturing” (Costa, 2010, p. 55). Elizabeth Henderson, after being involved in farming for nearly two decades, said her focus on food was renewed when she became a mother. Frightened by long lists of unrecognizable ingredient names, she began gardening to provide healthful food for her son (p. 21). Jesse Ziff Cool, Californian author, chef, and restaurateur, identified a similar responsibility to nourish, but to her restaurant patrons. Cool says the traditional bravado of masculine chefs, which is focused on being impressive, using flashy techniques, and intellectualizing about food, has no place in her kitchen. Her kitchen and her food, she says, “is far more feminine and seeks to nurture people” (p. 119). Her goal is to create wholesome, soulful, nourishing food that she believes is tied to the female experience.

Still others have found that the ways women are able to relate to one another has helped create stronger activist networks and organizations. They believe that the ways women approach activism and network building has lent itself to more egalitarian, lasting organizational structures. Farmer and filmmaker Severine von Tscharner Fleming noticed these dynamics from an early age. Her mother co-founded Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) in the 1980s, and what she observed at their meetings as a child has translated to her own experiences as a farmer and activist. In sustainable agriculture,
she says “women are talking through all the networking and collaboration. It’s non-competitive and non-chauvinistic” (p. 191).

The Women, Food and Agriculture Network, a professional network “linking and empowering women to build food systems and communities that are healthy, just, sustainable, and that promote environmental integrity,” was formed with the notion that women needed their own space in which to collaborate and learn in what was traditionally a male-dominated industry (p. 136). According to Leigh Adcock, WFAN’s executive director, among the group’s key observations are: women conceptualize land as a community resource rather than a commodity; women are highly concerned about environmental stewardship; and, as learners, women prefer informal dialogue and the sharing of best practices over formal presentations or learning from government agencies like the Farm Service Agency. The women of Lideres Campesinas had a similar experience, as they realized that their shared experiences meant that women were able to form “a common alliance based on shared experiences, language, and community culture. The attendees posited that women, as the center of the family, food preparation, and community, are necessarily part of the activating solution in creating a more just and fair food system” (p. 148).
Cuisine reflects social differentiation – societies with greater social differentiation have greater diet differentiation as well. As Wm. Alex McIntosh writes in *Sociologies of Food and Nutrition*, diet differentiation is “principally a hierarchical distinction, the notion of an elite cuisine versus the common meals, dishes, cutlery, and norms regarding deportment of the nonelite” (McIntosh, 1996, p. 22). As vegetarianism and locavorism grow in popularity and influence, the social identity differences between these and non-specialized diets become further striated. Vegetarianism, for example, is a food category that is tied to social group categories, and these distinctions in food are connected to distinctions in hierarchical position, as well as the dichotomy of food/nonfood to the distinction between in-group versus out-group members (Twigg, 1983, p. 19).

Vegetarians resist the power conferred to meat and meat-eating by avoiding it altogether, and thus participate in a disruption of establish social norms. Elective vegetarianism (as opposed to being simply unable to afford meat, for example) reverses the traditional perception of a food hierarchy, with meat at the “top,” and in doing so resists meat’s association with power as well. The social identity of vegetarians, locavores, and other participants in alternate food spaces, then, derives from the social signifiers of the excluded foods and the economic accessibility of the diet.

Julia Twigg writes that “In the west...vegetarianism is very much a product of individual choice, and indeed, requiring one, as it does, to step outside the culturally prescribed forms of eating, depends on the development of a highly individuated sense of
self” (Twigg, 1983, p. 19). Vegetarianism is a new type of social movement, and new social movements differ from the old in several ways, according to McIntosh. “First, more so than social movements of the past, the new movements are value driven,” he writes. “The very appeal of the new social movements is in their ability to connect members of advanced societies with moral and existential questions long repressed by institutions. Their goals – clean environment, sustainable agriculture, and safe food – are not means to some more ultimate end such as greater equity in the class structure but instead are ends in themselves” (McIntosh). Vegetarianism truly presents us with “the relatively rare example in the west of an explicit food ideology,” and asks one of the most “moral and existential questions” of all – how should humans interact with their planet and its inhabitants (Twigg, 1983, p. 18)?

McIntosh writes further that “differences in political, economic, and ideological power lead not only to differential access to foods but also to differential ability to control the definition of what is ‘good to eat’” (McIntosh, 1996, p. 19). Historically, limited resources and limited wealth meant that the poor were forced into plant-based diets, but today groups that choose vegetarianism are vastly different. In fact, today vegetarianism is more likely to be found among the more affluent. As Fiddes observes, “[t]his points to one of the most significant aspects of the rapid recent growth in numbers of people avoiding meat: namely that – perhaps for the first time in history – meat avoidance today is often a matter of choice rather than of necessity and is most prevalent among better off and better informed members of the population” (Fiddes, 1991, p. 29).
Sociologist Donna Maurer, who argues that vegetarianism is a significant and distinct social movement, writes that the process of becoming vegetarian usually involves social interaction with someone who already practices vegetarianism, and found that in one study, 63 percent of vegetarians surveyed said that their decision had been influenced by other vegetarians. Vegetarian organizations, friends, family, and acquaintances can significantly influence a person’s choice to adopt and continue to follow a vegetarian lifestyle (Maurer, 2002, pp. 7-8). “For most,” she writes, “becoming a vegetarian is a gradual process that involves reading vegetarian literature, talking with other vegetarians, and defending their lifestyle to others. This social interaction facilitates the process of learning about vegetarianism” (Maurer, 2002, p. 4). As individuals learn, their own personal motivations shift and commitment can deepen; vegetarianism is not a static state of being, but rather a “process of becoming” (Maurer, 2002, p. 5). The move from a single motivation to a more complex purpose tends to strengthen individual commitment and can lead to social activism (Maurer, 2002, pp. 4-5).

Maurer found that beyond what seemed to be a dietary choice and lifestyle was a meaningful organizational structure and ideology that looks much like a social movement:

Behind the appearance of arbitrary adherence to a common lifestyle exists a structured set of organizations, ideas, and related phenomena: a movement that includes local and national organizations, a body of movement literature, a set of relatively coherent arguments, and a wide range of products and services. A vegetarian ideology – vegetarianism – provides both a critique of meat eating and
the vision of a vegetarian world. The vast majority of vegetarians draw from this ideology to express their personal motivations for adopting this lifestyle. (p. 2)

Recent studies empirically relating vegetarianism and empathy suggest that there is a shift in American food culture from class-based foundations to social identity foundations. Because meat has powerful cultural and symbolic meaning, abstaining from its consumption has powerful social meaning as well. Vegetarians resist the power conferred to meat and meat-eating by avoiding it altogether, and thus participate in a disruption of established social norms. Though the vegetarian movement is still relatively small, the alternative agriculture movements in the U.S. are gaining momentum.

Vegetarians are overwhelmingly middle class. When people with lower socioeconomic status become upwardly mobile, they increase food spending, especially on meat. Meat’s ancient roots as a status symbol seem to still hold the most meaning for those just emerging from the lower class. In contrast, middle and upper class people may adopt vegetarian diets “in part to differentiate themselves from other social groups” (Maurer, 2002, p. 9). Maurer writes that people who become vegetarians by choice typically use diet as a form of self-expression and creativity (Maurer, 2002, p. 2). The proliferation of choice when it comes to food means that vegetarianism designates a structured set of norms that represents one’s own self-concept and enhances status identification as “different” from others (Maurer, 2002, p. 9). Ethnicity and gender can also be strong predictors of an individual’s likelihood to be vegetarian. Seventy percent of vegetarians are female, while less than one percent of African Americans are vegetarian, for example (Maurer, 2002, p. 9-11).
As the vegetarian movement becomes more mainstream, large-scale companies and retailers are beginning to market products that are antithetical to the alternative agriculture movement. These products are made from processed food grown on commercial farms and thus undermine the agricultural issues vegetarianism seeks to address. The contemporary vegetarian diet, drawing from a wide variety of foods, is highly dependent on a global food system, which pits vegetarianism against the local food movement. So-called “lifestyle vegetarians,” an emerging group, seem to be motivated by the accumulation of cultural capital and the health benefits associated with vegetarianism rather than the ethical or environmental motivations of traditional vegetarianism.

Indeed, most women express that health concerns were the motivating factor in becoming vegetarian. This might seem to discredit the idea that vegetarianism is a political act. But even those who do not see their vegetarianism as political are participating in undermining the conventional food system. “Personal health vegetarianism” is still a direct response to a food system that has valued cheap, unhealthy food while degrading the environment, animals, and consumers. It’s no coincidence that a capitalist, patriarchal society created a food system that overemphasizes meat-eating. In a just and sustainable food system, vegetarianism would have little meaning. Thus personal health vegetarianism is still a part of the feminist vegetarian framework. The consequences their diets have on the food system is the same, of course, but “the impacts may be superficial and short-lived as lifestyle vegetarianism may not represent a
permanent shift in dietary practice, it being susceptible, like other lifestyle choices, to the vagaries of fashion” (Maurer qtd. in Morris and Kirwan, 2007, p. 140).

The caveat Morris and Kirwan offer is an important one: the vegetarian and local food movements need to continue to be rooted in political activism and intentional actions. Neglecting these motivations could result in simply supporting another industrialized, global agri-food system, sans factory farms, that nonetheless fails to address many of the problems with the current system. Hopefully “lifestyle vegetarians” will eventually find themselves convinced by vegetarianism’s weightier political goals, perhaps through the processes of socialization Maurer describes. Morris and Kirwan advocate for new vegetarian movement that continues to address issues of animal welfare and factory farming, but also more highly prioritizes locally sourced, unprocessed and natural food products.

Women’s Liberation and Back-to-the-Land

Food justice movements and women’s rights movements have deeply entwined histories. The 1960s marked the beginning of second wave feminism and the first murmurings of a food movement. Both began as responses to the same political conditions – women were entering the workforce and the supermarket supply chain, churning out highly-processed and frozen foods, was longer than ever (McArdle 2013). The sixties were a fertile breeding ground for the leaders of these counter-movements, who would challenge their parents’ extreme consumerist sensibilities leftover from the forties and fifties.
Feminism’s second wave is generally considered to have begun in 1963, with the release of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. The bestseller was widely influential, articulating the frustrations of American women who felt under-appreciated and bored. The book was a response to the nuclear family model, a relic of decades past, ubiquitous in the media, advertising, and every American suburb, which relegated women to the private sphere and men to the public. In a society obsessed with capital accumulation and consumption, women and domestic work were entirely excluded from the market, and thus rendered worthless. Friedan’s book gave voice to the disenfranchisement women felt by being limited to these roles. Second-wave feminism lasted through the early 1980s, encompassing a broad range of women’s liberation issues including sexuality, workplace equality, reproductive rights, domestic violence, rape laws, and pornography. The movement was widely successful, achieving many significant legislative and judicial victories including Title IX, affirmative action, and *Roe v. Wade*. In 1970, second-wavers re-introduced the Equal Rights Amendment (first introduced in 1923 by Alice Paul), which would have made sex discrimination unlawful under the Constitution. The amendment passed easily in Congress but was never ratified by the states, and eventually expired, marking the movement’s foremost defeat.

Meanwhile, a “back-to-the-land” movement was taking shape as public concerns with environmental health and food safety increased. The early local food movement began in hippie communities that wanted to destabilize American mainstream culture. They opened cooperative, natural foods stores, established farmers markets, and lived in communes. The organic movement of this era was a response to federally-subsidized
industrial agriculture that harmed the environment and produced unhealthy, low-quality food en masse. By the 1970s, these concerns reached a wider audience as a series of successful books, critical of the American food system, and a sharp rise in food prices forced many Americans to think critically about the food on their tables (Pollan 2010).

So while second-wave feminists united under the battle cry “the personal is political,” early locavores were campaigning to “vote with your fork.” The two movements grew as responses to the same political conditions. Early feminists and locavores weren’t buying what capitalists were selling – neither the nuclear family that left women unfulfilled and under-realized, nor the shrink-wrapped, impersonal products of industrial agriculture. The system they rejected valued capital accumulation, homogeneity, and regulation. It preferred efficiency to nourishment, industry to nature, corporations to independent producers, and women-as-wives to women-as-agents. Both movements’ mantras are a call to action to reimagine intimate, individual, and seemingly benign experiences as potential acts of political action and resistance.

Yet, for their shared political concerns and aspirations, early locavores and second-wave feminists diverged sharply in their methods. While the organic-hippie faction moved into communes to escape the mainstream, feminists (at least, liberal feminists) worked to be included in it. As the wisdom goes, the highly-processed, ready-to-microwave frozen food provided by industrial agriculture, which dramatically cut down kitchen time, actually contributed to women’s liberation. With the advent of frozen dinners, women could finally have it all – a full-time job and a happy husband and children. Thus, in many ways, early locavores and slow foodies and feminists were
opposing forces fighting for the same cause – one rejecting the market, the other embracing it; one refocusing on “slow food” and nutrition, the other fighting to escape from it.

Today, feminist and food justice movements are more closely tied in practice. That feminism has changed so much while food justice looks mostly the same is a testament to the political gains women have made in the last 50 years. The food system 1960s hippies rejected persists today – and, in fact, is more politically entrenched, lucrative, violent and destructive than ever – while the condition of women has greatly improved post-second- (and third, and fourth) wave feminism. That is not to say feminism is not still necessary; there is still a great deal of work to be done. But it is significant to notice that while feminism has invented and majorly reinvented itself (at least) three times since the sixties, the food justice movement is still fighting against the same industry and the same political forces as its progenitors. Is this because food justice is a radical movement, seeking change in alternative markets without ever affecting the masses? Is it simply because women represent half of the population and could more easily make their voices heard than food activists? Is it, perhaps, that food movements have struggled to make people care – that convenience and habit simply trump other food-related concerns? Or perhaps it is that alternative food movements are fighting against some of the most powerful corporations and interest groups in the world.

The back to the land movement that exists today is still radical and politically disruptive, but is not necessarily politically left-leaning. Vegetarianism and slow food movements, with their anti-cruelty, “green,” organic foci, are generally associated with
liberal progressives. But rural farmers and homesteaders vary widely in their political associations, among these “far-right ethnic exclusivism,” as Wilbur also notes, and “militant libertarianism” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 150).

The very concept of “back-to-the-land” evokes an idea of reclamation of the agrarianism of the past. That we perceive farming and rural life as “behind” us is part of a modernist, materialist perspective in which the population prefers urban to rural areas and will move to cities as quality of life improves, as “practices of self-sufficiency are subsumed by capitalist accumulation” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 151). This privileging of urban over rural is part of a series of dualisms – “urban/rural, developed/backward, progressive/reactionary, rational/superstitious” (Wilbur, 2013, p. 151) – that undermine rural people and spaces. Interestingly, Wilbur finds that the political power of “radical ruralism” is undermined or complicated by the separate, sometimes isolated lifestyles of farmers. The rural space, in other words, does not have one fixed political or social meaning. In discussing farming and local foods, we must be careful in grouping together all farmers, growers, and eaters. Their motivations and politics of vary widely, as with any other group, and are not necessarily conducive to a women’s movement. This is a critical point for building a meaningful alliance.

Narrative and Feminism: The Personal is Political

Personal narrative has been an important component of feminism and women’s studies since the 1960s, when second wavers realized that the dissatisfaction they felt in their lives, though it felt isolating and solitary, was actually a shared phenomenon – housewife syndrome, or, to use Friedan’s phrase, “the problem that has no name”
(Friedan 1963). It was the acknowledgment that the isolation and boredom women felt privately, in their individual lives, was actually a shared symptom of women’s oppression more widely, that opened up a space for collective action. The liberal-democratic notion that public and private spheres are separate and distinct had, since the Enlightenment, justified the exclusion of women from both the workforce and politics. Thus a major contribution of second wave feminism was to bring the private sphere into focus, acknowledge its political importance, and give women a united voice with which to speak about their disenfranchisement. “The personal is political” became a rallying cry for feminists as they realized this themselves – that the locus of women’s oppression was in their private lives, many times beyond the reach of liberal thought or action.

For food movements, the politics of personal narrative are equally important. Counterculture movements of the 1960s and ‘70s New Left were united by the idea that individual action could foster social change. On farms and cooperatives, individual action was focused on the production and consumption of food as a way to resist big agriculture, big government, and dominatory social relations and institutions (Haydu, 2011, p. 479). By the early 1970’s, “organic” was marketed as a lifestyle to young consumers. These food choices remained a set of consumption patterns that were politically and individually significant, but also were also slowly transforming into a set of signifiers through which to become part of a social identity group, simply by purchasing them. This shift, notes Haydu, “may have been a sign of things to come: demonstrating personal virtue while pursuing social change through individual consumption choices helped set
the stage for the evolution of organic food into safely commercialized ‘yuppie chow’” (Haydu, 2011, p. 479).

Today, “organic” has more meaning in the grocery checkout than in a picket line. Its political importance has declined as labels like “organic” and “fair trade” have become co-opted by agriculture and food retail giants, obscuring and stretching the meanings of these labels to the point that they have hardly any meaning at all. Maurer’s concerns about modern, mainstream vegetarianism (see Ch. 1) bear repeating here. Dietary trends – as “organic” undoubtedly is today – “may not represent a permanent shift in dietary practice, it being susceptible, like other lifestyle choices, to the vagaries of fashion” (Maurer qtd. in Morris and Kirwan 2007).

The beginnings of second-wave feminism and the back-to-the-land movement, then, can be traced to the very same political and social moment. They sought to disrupt dominatory social pattern in public and private life through the empowerment of the individual. Yet, their trajectories were nearly opposite. While the liberal feminist movement was perceived, at first, as too radical, they were successful in passing key legislation and changing social paradigms. The ideas of second-wave feminists hardly seem radical today. Still, modern feminists continue to fight against the negative stigma of feminists as a group and face considerable political backlash in women’s rights campaigns. In other words, they have been politically successful, but never “mainstream.” Back-to-the-landers have experienced the opposite. While eating organic, vegetarian, local and/or slow foods has certainly become mainstream, these food movements have seen very little political success. The political salience of these types of
foods has been almost entirely eschewed by the corporate giants the movement sought to protest, and efforts to regulate the industry are quickly squashed by their powerful lobbies.

The major difference of course is that feminists were (and are) fighting against social conventions first and foremost, while food activists were fighting against corporations. These social conventions and corporations were both bolstered by government policies, or the lack thereof. But patriarchy does not have a lobby the same way that, say, corn does. Feminists were fighting to pass legislation; they were focused on the public sector. Food activists were essentially leading a boycott; this was market-focused. While feminists could fight to elect representatives, push bills through Congress, and increase voter turnout, food activists never sought to change big agriculture from within; they wanted to bypass and subvert it by setting up another market altogether. Essentially, food activism tried to remain radical until its goals were completely subsumed by the system it fought against.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Food Movements

Through history, theory and empirical research, the deep connections between food justice and feminism are borne out. The fact that women are now taking the lead in these movements, and in fact are associated with food justice even on an abstract level, as in the studies of Ruby et al., demonstrates the deeply transformative political and social power of women’s involvement in this movement. Just as food activists struggle to answer questions of proper consumer ethics, the feminist answer is complicated and varied. Food activists have a plethora of political issues surrounding food upon which to
focus – animal rights, local food economies, genetically modified food, designing meaningful organic standards, governmental policy and regulation, fair trade and workers’ rights, to name a few. The solutions will necessarily be as multi-faceted as the problems themselves.

If the feminist-locavore voice is less developed than the feminist-vegetarian, it is because the project of building local food networks is not only labor and resource intensive, but also accompanied by potentially regressive social values. The return to a romanticized pastoral is not the egalitarian panacea it may seem, as it often precipitates a return to gender conservatism and traditional role reversion. In a small, local farm configuration, men become farmers and physical laborers and women, as a group, are chided for having “left the kitchen” in the first place.

Emily Oakley, a Farmer Jane farmer from Three Oaks Farm in Oklahoma, honestly addresses the gendered division of labor between her and her partner, Mike. While she says that she does not want to “believe” this division happens, she admits that she is typically in charge of administration, communication, marketing, and customer interaction, while Mike tends to manage tasks requiring physical strength. “It’s such a stereotype,” she admits. “But there are many truths, such as, if we send Mike to the market alone, we sell less. You have to smile, be approachable and friendly” (Costa, 2010, p. 39).

For critics, there is reason to doubt locavorism’s effectiveness as an anti-cruelty movement. The locavore emphasis on meat from local farms and humane standards for slaughter are noble goals, but buying into these standards ultimately represents the
abandonment of core principles of animal welfare in exchange for oxymoronic “humane killing.” This so-called “happy meat” has been the meat industry’s strategic response to growing consumer demand, but has ultimately just resulted in “better treatment of animals within the paradigm of exploitation” – so not only are animals being killed, a new culture of meat eaters is created that believes it has been absolved of ethical responsibility. Ultimately, a locally based meat economy will never be able to support anywhere close to the levels of meat we consume today, and even if this were possible, the resulting size of these farms would undermine their sustainability, their meaning for the communities and thus their purpose for existing at all. This represents a dangerous degradation of meaningful food activism, especially within a nonviolent feminist framework (Lama 2006).

Another potential problem with a locavore perspective is that it focuses on the local not only inconsistently, but also at the expense of the global. As Vasile Stănescu put it: “If the locavore movement seems to be a dubious ally of feminism, it also seems uncomfortably close to nativist strands in the American discourse of race and nationhood.” The result is “an idealized, unrealistic, and, at times, distressingly sexist and xenophobic literary pastoral” that romanticizes small farms yet lacks “ethical consistency, reality, or ultimately an awareness of animals themselves” (Stănescu 2009). An emphasis on local food can mask strains of conservatism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, turning focus inwards to local economies and discouraging the support of global products produced in other countries and ingredients from around the world used in ethnic foods. Entirely local food economies have the potential to alienate
communities that rely on imported goods. Indeed, especially in big cities, small ethnic grocery stores are often the one line of defense in neighborhoods that would otherwise be considered food deserts. A locavore discourse is difficult to contextualize in these communities.

Locavorism, in its focus on “food miles,” also neglects to consider total energy use – a consideration that discredits many of the claims made by local food advocates. A recent study by Carnegie-Mellon found, for example, that shifting less than one day’s worth of calories from meat products to plant foods reduces a household’s food related climate footprint more substantially than buying exclusively locally sourced food (Weber and Matthews 2008). This is because the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions is produced during food production rather than transportation. The environmental advantages of locavorism are, in this way, overstated.

But all this is not to say that the feminist-locavore project should be abandoned. In fact, the chief critiques of the local food movement reinforce the notion that ecofeminism is a helpful supplement to its approach. Chaone Mallory writes:

[I]f we are to avoid cementing the myopia of privileged white liberal identity; if we are to avoid reinscribing traditional, sexist versions of masculinity and femininity; if we are to change the way in which class is a dominant factor in determining who gets access to good food, who feels welcome and at home growing, procuring, and preparing fresh, local, organic foods…then we must introduce certain perspectives into the local foods movement, such as
ecofeminism, that confront these issues head-on, and understand environmental and social exclusions and oppressions to be inextricably related (p. 187).

In other words, the dangers of local food economies – in their potential to be overly-romantic, exclusionary, and/or role regressive – can be addressed effectively by a feminist perspective. Ecofeminism’s voice can and will help guide the local food movement as it grows; the theoretical perspective of ecofeminism is a perfect complement to the embodied, quickly-evolving local food world.
CONCLUSION

The meaning of “feminist” continues to evolve as the societal backdrop for the movement is evolving itself. Feminists must work carefully not to fall too far into any one of the camps it straddles: academia, radical activism, and political organizing. Too much time in the ivory tower separates feminists from lived femininity; too much time organizing risks propelling forward a platform that is not self-evaluative, inclusive, or ethically rigorous. Food politics is a natural partner for feminism because it provides both clear practice and intellectual fodder. The shared commitments of these movements makes them not only natural partners, but correctives to one another. Food movements need

The values that have created big agriculture and factory farms are in direct opposition to feminism. Food activists and feminists can work together to reclaim alternative markets, open up conversations about food, and build community around food. Food activists need feminists because feminism has learned from experience. Feminists are learning how to be inclusive, non-essentializing, and effective political actors. Feminists have learned how to bring radical ideas to the mainstream and affect legislative change. Feminists know how to envision their movement as overlapping with many other, related groups and political causes. Feminists know how to be allies.

Future research could come from a variety of disciplines. Feminist literature on food – beyond diet as it relates to body image – is fairly sparse. This is likely because food as a women’s issue still feels like a minefield – the kitchen, despite its potential to be political and progressive, still holds its traditional significance as the space of the
unrealized housewife. It seems that feminist scholars are wary of suggesting that food production and consumption might be intimately tied to the feminist project. But the lesson feminists have learned in general applies here – any feminist claim must be carefully contextualized. Of course it would be problematic to suggest that all women should eat one way or another or that all women should be involved in food production in the same way. Diet is highly individual, and one’s individual identity is as important a factor in the politics of diet as the food itself. But feminism has been successful in better recognizing the privileged position from which many feminist academics write, and today’s feminism is much more intersectional and less prescriptive. A greater conversation about food and feminism would open up a space for women to discuss their experiences with food in a meaningful way. As it stands, the conversation is limited mostly to women like those in Farmer Jane and similar texts, who are professionally successful in the food world. This leaves little to no room for women’s everyday experiences with food. Without this conversation, the role that women play as the provider of food is completely erased. The message that food is not a worthy topic of discussion, unless one thrives professionally, is made loud and clear.

One of the most interesting yet rarely addressed topics within food and feminism is food in American non-white cultures. These women are not only the sole preparer and purchaser of food for their household; they are also tasked with preserving another culture through the food they serve. Further research into the role of food in non-white households would contribute greatly to the study of food politics as a whole. When the global supermarket makes many familiar products available, what does it mean to eat
locally? What does vegetarianism mean to a family that, before moving to the U.S., had never heard of a factory farm? The whiteness associated with vegetarianism and local foods will certainly need to be explored further over time, as the arc of these movements comes more clearly into focus.

The ability to shop selectively, to actively choose one’s diet, is of course a product of a certain level of economic privilege. Though are countless ambitious programs across the country aimed at combating the interrelatedness of economic strife and the lack of fresh, healthful foods – namely in schools and by reclaiming urban spaces as gardens – the fact remains that both vegetarian and local foods diets are virtually exclusive the upper and middle classes. This is a particularly difficult hurdle for these movements, since their main objective is to create thriving alternative markets. When the government subsidizes unhealthy food and also provides food assistance that makes affording healthful foods difficult, the task of alternative food markets to compete with this cost differential is nearly insurmountable. On this front, further work is needed by policymakers and researchers to demonstrate that healthful food benefits underprivileged communities holistically, including in healthcare costs and in school attendance and performance.

Temra Costa writes that “[i]n so many ways…industrial agriculture has been the source of social problems, pollution, poor health, poverty, and the domination of nature. When we realize how fundamental food and farming are to human life, we can begin to see that the way we eat is not just the problem, but also the solution. By changing just this one aspect of our lives – how we feed ourselves – we can restore our personal and
planetary health, the integrity of the natural world, and our right relation to it” (Costa, 2010, pp. 61-2). This author believes that this is a task better suited for a united feminist-food activist front. As alternative agriculture movements grow in popularity and success, feminist scholars are concerned with best feminist practice in these varied approaches. Women today undoubtedly have the power to change our food economy, just as they have in the past. A feminist approach to alternative agriculture should strive to locate women’s position in these movements in a meaningful, morally and ethically consistent way.

The answer to the various formulations of food activism may be a feminist approach. Though each side of the debate approaches issues of justice imperfectly, both are striving for meaningful and moral change. Women are at the helm of the alternative agriculture movement and a strong feminist voice will continue to guide the agrifood world in its new focus on equality and integrity. As the movements continue to evolve, perhaps their feminist threads can reunite them. A meaningful feminist food movement will strive to make healthful food economically accessible to all, contextualized, non-essentializing, non-hegemonic, holistic, and realistic. Let us locate the best of food justice movements have to offer and reach a compromise that will encompass sound moral philosophy, individual identity and action, a collective social movement foundation, and activism with clear purpose and direction. To strive for true sustainability is to sustain and nurture our souls, our communities, the condition of our planet, and our deepest moral and philosophical commitments. Let us position women at the forefront of this crusade.
REFERENCES


