

**Consuming production, producing sustainability:  
The fetish of production in local agri-food activism**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores ways that the category of “production” is used as a fetish in the promotion of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs), and considers how academic work within these networks may provide opportunities for reflexive consideration of the implications of fetishizing production. I explore the idea of production and its significance in the context of institutional dining service sustainability projects, and also the conspicuous consumption of production in the broader alternative agri-food networks in which these projects are situated. Drawing on five years of ethnographic work within AAFNs in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario, the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand, and southern New England, I explore how agency and identity are figured vis-à-vis production and sustainability. The themes of this paper involve, first, the way that agency and identity are figured vis-à-vis production and sustainability, and second, the way that this type of research intervenes with an intent to open up or frame the way that producer identification occurs or that producer subject positions are produced – and particularly the way production becomes a fetish, an ethical black box that, like nature, is

used as an unassailable justification in agri-food decision-making processes. I use a case study to explore how four qualities – natural, local, seasonal, and productive – contribute to the fetish quality of production, and I argue that the fetishistic representation of production presents obstacles to alternative agri-food projects’ engagement in critical and evaluative discourse. As emerging critiques of alternative agri-food activism note, reflexive participatory processes for evaluating AAFN trajectories could help create additional social context for these projects and networks by providing a framework for exploring – and re-embedding in institutional evaluation processes and policy frameworks – the motives driving emphasis on production and the effects of conspicuous production.

### **Consuming production**

Agricultural production – or association with producers or production processes – is a central focus of alternative agri-food work. In addition to producing materials with use, exchange, and educational values, production is used to create identity, agency, and legitimacy. Explorations of production are used in agri-food activism as a way to critique both production and consumption, to engage in pleasurable practices and social activism, and to maintain identity and social relations. Display of producer status or association with producers constitutes a significant part of the demonstration of sustainability in cases such as the institutional agri-food sustainability projects I examine in this paper. I interpret this engagement with production as part of a performance of conspicuous production, and explore ways that the category of “production” is used as a fetish in the promotion of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs). I argue that although production provides many avenues for meeting goals established by alternative agri-food activists, fetishistic focus on production creates problems and may lessen the efficacy of AAFNs in meeting their goals. I situate this argument in the context of the relationship between critical academics and emerging academic agri-food networks, considering how academic work within these networks may provide opportunities for reflexive consideration of the implications that follow from fetishizing production.

Considering alternative agri-food education and procurement projects in university settings, I apply the concept of fetishism to production for several reasons.

Such projects “seek to redefine the producer-consumer relation by giving clear signals as to the origin of the food product,” highlighting supply chains in order to “re-socialize or re-spatialize food, thereby allowing the consumer to make value-judgments about the relative desirability of foods on the basis of their own knowledge, experience or perceived imagery” (Marsden et al. 2000: 425). However, as Marsden and colleagues point out, this emphasis on producer-consumer relationships often emphasizes the value and meaning of the *relationship* being constructed rather than the commodities that move along supply chains. I argue that this emphasis on relatedness between consumers and producers is in part constructed through idealized representations of production that at the same time that they strive to better *relate* consumers and producers serve to *distance* foodservice consumers from the material supply chains with which they are relating. Contemporary interpretations of commodity fetishism refigure the fetish as not only a quality of the commodity form that “veils” the involved social relations, but also as a representational strategy that represents the domain of production and consumption as linked and co-constitutive, and yet linked through what might be thought of as bottlenecks in supply chain relations, so that actors at both ends of the production-consumption relationship may represent each other in symbolic and often totemic ways (Cook et al, 2004, Crang 2001, Goodman & DuPuis 2002, Holloway & Kneafsey 2004, West 2007). In the projects I describe, ideal production practices are associated with particular foods claimed to be more sustainable in part because of their dissociation with long supply chains. The “talismanic” importance (Goodman & Goodman 2007) of qualities like “natural,” “local,” and “seasonal” in constructing sustainability through emphasis on production demonstrates how attempts to decommodify particular foods and to demystify their production process ends up being a selective decommodification (cf Kopytoff 1986): concern with the need to arouse consumers to the practices and relations veiled by the commodity form of foodservice agri-food “product” leads to a parallel veiling of supply chains that do not live up to representations of their sustainability.

Privileging an empirical case over theoretical details of the implications of the fetish as a strategy that may be used to bridge academic and activist perspectives, I concentrate in this paper on examples of how production functions as a heuristic, as a proxy for other qualities associated with sustainability, as an aesthetic, and as a set of

material processes that are related to a set of representational practices. I situate this paper in relation to critiques of emphasis on production in academic work, and of related problems in agri-food activism, such as defensive localism (DuPuis & Goodman 2005, Winter 2003), and in the context of growing interest in the possibilities, representations, and material practices that make consumption sustainable (Soper 2006, Soper & Trentmann 2007), and that emphasize sustainability as a domain of institutional practice and process, rather than an achieved label (Redclift 1997, Goodman & Goodman 2007). My case study has emerged out of engagement as an academic and activist with university and lifestyle amenity migrants' agri-food projects. The concept of *producing something* is an important part of the way that both groups define themselves, and university alternative food projects are a site where these groups meet, as many of the farmers in the cases I discuss are also fringe amenity migrants. For both groups, production can be likened to a type of conspicuous consumption, in which production itself is consumed as a lifestyle choice, source of distinction, and domain of identity and movement politics. Appropriating and reinventing producer practices (Ploeg, J. D. van der et al. 2000), participants in these projects connect (or purport to “reconnect” to, Kneafsey et al. 2004, Soper & Trentmann 2007) practices and ideologies, engaging in what academics describe (as they are also often involved in such projects) as *praxis* (Watson & Shove 2006, Wakefield 2007) – but also both performing and consuming representations of production as they have been translated along supply chains and across academic–activist discourses.

I explore production's significance as it is produced and consumed in institutional alternative agri-food projects emphasizing paradigms of sustainability, where production takes on particular significance. In these projects, and also in the broader alternative agri-food networks (and sustainability initiatives) in which these projects are situated, production is represented and reproduced as part of a normative project to educate consumers about processes that support everyday life as important and as domains for critical engagement and decision making. As it is represented in the cases I describe, production emphasizes the production of agricultural foodstuffs, usually distinct from *processing* or *preparing*. With more or less captive consumers, high demands for institutional transparency, and growing emphasis on competitive sustainability, university

alternative agri-food projects display particularly visible politics and mechanics in their efforts to shift to more sustainable procurement (Allen & Hinrichs 2007). For one thing, unlike smaller scale AAFNs, they are by and large *not* “removed from the conventional chains associated with the provision of bulk food commodities to complex food chains” (Marsden et al. 2000: 427); instead, they are hybrid overlays on very conventional food systems. This hybridity offers an exploratory middle ground for the reconsideration of alternative food projects as something conceived as being in between politicized radical movements for the restructuring of the global food system or “marginal activities taking up specialist niche markets in the interstices of a powerful, globalized agro-food industry,” and allows for a consideration of the relationship between such projects’ *promise* and the political ecologies they are producing (Holloway & Kneafsey 2004: 265, Goodman & Goodman 2007).

The degree to which these institutions mediate the relationship between producers and consumers also allows for a close examination of the relation between representation and practice. Exploring this mediation, I consider what functions the fetishization of production performs for actors in these projects, and how these functions might be “followed” and made more explicit in the service of better communication between academics and project activists and administrators (Cook et al. 2004). Before I describe the case, a few caveats. First, I acknowledge that although the binary categories I use of “academics” and “activists and administrators” describe positions that often approach projects differently, they are also considerably more complicated and intertwined in actually existing AAFNs. Second, this paper is written to these two categories as audiences, and tensions remain between public and specialized academic language. Third, and following from these tensions, my conceptualization of fetishism, sustainability (which I allow to be roughly equated with alternative, but see Maxey 2007), and the domain of production-consumption are abbreviated. And fourth, analyzing production as a representational emphasis of AAFNs is complicated by its very obviousness: highlighting production is the point of many agri-food projects, and the chance to produce, or to live a producer lifestyle, is part of what makes this approach to sustainability attractive. My goal is to frame production’s fetishization in a way recognizable to non-academic AAF project participants with the goal of exploring the

possible use of the concept of commodity fetishism for furthering dialogue on integrating into projects critical evaluation of the implications of this emphasis on production.

In the next section, I describe my methods and analytic approach, and consider in an institutional case study ways that the category of production is used to produce sustainability and that conspicuous production is performed and consumed. I explore how agency, identity, and legitimacy are figured vis-à-vis production and sustainability in this case, and, in particular, how concepts such as natural, local, seasonal, and producer-related are used to establish the sustainability of foods by emphasizing production. In the third section, I focus on problematic aspects of production as fetish, concentrating on how these concepts contribute to the veiling of actually existing institutional supply chains (as well as material practices that make foods more sustainable) at the same time that they educate and enroll their audiences in normative ideologies of sustainable production and consumption. In the final section, I consider the role of critical scholarship related to production within AAFNs.

### **Case study: Producing sustainability**

Part of the concern of this paper lies in the relationship between activist administrators and academics in university agri-food projects. The people who administer such projects and the academics affiliated with and interested in the projects have significantly different approaches to the goals and processes involved. One of the most basic may be that academics treat the projects as “case studies” and things to think with quite broadly, in addition to opportunities for praxis, whereas administrators may be more interested in academic production that meets specific goals – and much less interested in academic work that complicates or calls these goals into question. The way that I construct my case study reflects my interest in this contrast – and my respect for the projects in which I have been involved. Although I hope that the larger discussion of which this paper is part will help frame frank critical reflexivity within AAFNs (particularly academics ones) in such a way that narrative devices such as this will become less necessary, the case study described below is a composite case drawn from five years of ethnographic work within alternative agri-food networks in Southern Ontario in Canada, the Canterbury region Aotearoa New Zealand, and southern New

England in the United States. I focus on alternative agri-food projects that are attempting to transform institutional dining services to include a greater emphasis on sustainability, and are doing this primarily by changing sourcing practices and by highlighting these changes within normative educational frameworks. I examine how production is produced and how it functions by analyzing project texts and events representing production; however, the description and analysis here is based on interpretation of these texts and events – and, because of the methodological challenges I discuss of addressing critique to such projects, it is explicitly *not* based on close reading of specific project texts.

I have been involved with these projects in a range of roles: from occasional interviewer and volunteer participant observer to frequent (weekly) participant in specific projects (including fundraising and funder review processes) to paid (daily) staff; my role as an academic researcher has been explicit in all of these roles. In addition to these alternative agriculture projects that have brought agri-food issues into universities through the back door – often literally – I have also participated in academic agriculture programs that regularly invite producers to engage in more traditional academic discourse. I approach the category of “production” from the perspective of political ecology, using an analytic frame that considers how political and natural systems are intertwined and co-constituted, how material and symbolic environment are shaped to respond to social needs and imaginaries, who holds power in the decision-making involved in this management, and how representations and discourses of best practices and sustainability improvement narratives act in this domain of nature-society relations. As described above, the concept of the fetish has emerged as an important category in my analysis of the uses of production, and I have also approached these cases using a commodity chain heuristic, considering the processes by which sustainability and production are produced at various sites and scales connected to their consumption in university dining halls (Cadieux in prep). My hope is to open up the concept of production in a way that invites discussion across disciplines and different positions in agri-food networks by applying to the idea of production discourse analysis approaches that have been applied to parallel uses of the category of “nature” (and “rurality”) over the past two decades in geography, rural sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies –

and by considering how these approaches might themselves be integrated into AAFNs like my cases.

In the cases I describe, a transition from conventional to sustainable food is signified through education about production and producers. Relationships with producers and production processes are constructed through labeling food with adjectives like “local,” “organic,” and, primarily, “sustainable,” through prominently displayed descriptions of local farms and farmers with detailed farm facts, and through series of educational and marketing texts about the philosophical and production differences that make food and agriculture sustainable. Sustainability is defined in terms of production, as a criterion for production that requires that processes do not degrade the systems upon which they rely. Sustainable processes are additionally advocated through events emphasizing training in particular production practices or celebrating links to producers, who visit with students to describe or demonstrate their production practices. Volunteer and paid internship opportunities are created for students to learn the sustainable production practices around which the projects are organized, practices that emphasize the craft of labor-intensive processes, such as permaculture design and laying of planting beds, espalier training of fruit trees, or forcing of food plants not adapted to local climates but associated with foodie or alternative food culture (like artichokes, olives, or meyers lemons).

Some of the most significant shifts brought about by these projects involve shifts made in sourcing infrastructure and in influence on curriculum, evidenced by staff gains both on the side of sustainability coordinators overseeing university purchasing, consumption, and waste practices, and also in academic programs, where practices of consumption and production are becoming more legitimate domains of study. However, like many of the other project discourse domains (such as websites and annual reports, in addition to those listed above), representations of these gains emphasize *production* much more than they do the politics, manufacturing, social and administrative processes within which production practices and producers are contextualized. In fact, analysis of these representations shows that production *as such* is emphasized to such a degree that it is often used to stand in for a larger political economy and ecology that it is supposed to represent.

This is interesting partly because the motivation for emphasis on production is roundly claimed to be a form of demystification, a “return” to an understanding of the relationship between production and consumption, and a means by which everyday practices might be transformed from an alienated state and reembedded in social and environmental relationships (Kneafsey et al. 2004, Soper & Trentmann 2007). However, in strategically demystifying some parts of the commodity chains supplying universities, these projects may be fetishizing production in a way that challenges the goals of defetishizing food and agriculture in the first place. I consider here in more detail a few themes from examples of how these projects use and represent production, mobilizing and translating it to meet the perceived needs of producing sustainability, and in so doing, producing a very particular sort of production.

I discuss examples grouped into four categories of qualities associated with production that are used to create purchase on the commodity that then themselves become fetishes: natural, local, seasonal, and productive. I then follow these concepts to explore how the fetish quality of production functions.

### *Natural*

Reflecting associations between sustainable food activism and environmental movement aesthetics, assertions that food and agriculture that are more sustainable are more *natural* carry many of the usual normative associations of nature (Williams 1980, Smith 1996). Controversies over state-legislated organic standards has shifted additional weight onto the concept of *natural* farming, as farmers, agriculture advocacy organizations, distributors, and consumers navigate post-organic paradigms (Goodman & Goodman 2007). Representations of farmers who are deemed to be using more sustainable production practices emphasize the degree to which their practices mimic or minimally impact natural processes, for example using pheromone traps as part of integrated pest management in apple production, or using native tree species in hedgerows to provide wind protection. Production is represented as relying on – and having the potential to negatively effect – natural processes and systems involving water, air, flora, fauna, and human health, and, increasingly, energy resources and climate.

### *Local*

Wrapped up as they are in the promotion of “locavore” eating, sustainable food projects rely heavily on *locality* as a central heuristic in the production of sustainability. Although local production is often regionally defined, it is primarily represented in terms of knowable producers and of maintaining nearby landscapes of production, which are represented as high amenity places, in addition to sources of food security. A sense of relationship with producers, usually constructed through texts that describe producers in highly stylized ways or events that feature them as the faces behind particular foods, is used to provide a sense of accountability for agricultural practices and also for consumption as activism, assuring consumers (readers) that their support of the production practices about which they are now better informed contributes to a shift toward more sustainable food and agriculture. In addition to the social contract of responsibility and trust implied in the (potential) relationship with producers, the aesthetic of knowable locality also contributes to a preference for small scale. Particularly in areas without large farms, “small” is equated to “family farm,” as inherently preferable to large farms, a heuristic that is supported by the idea that smaller farms are not only easier to fit into the local landscape, but also more natural.

### *Seasonal*

Seasonality works in sustainable food projects as an important rule of thumb for whether something is natural and local. This is a particularly important heuristic in university dining projects, where expectations for uniform food availability are high and knowledge about produce seasons is often low. The affordances of particular seasons provide a useful window into the production process, as the importance of day length, temperature, moisture, latitude, and type of food all reveal details of natural and production processes. Further, particularly because of the offset between the growing season and university calendar in most temperate climates, the procurement of produce not in season locally from elsewhere provides the opportunity to consider the details of and connections along commodity chains that contrast and complicate the model of sustainability provided by knowable local farmers.

### *Productive*

The final adjective I consider is “*productive*,” by which I mean identified with producer culture in some way. The culture of food and agriculture promoted by sustainable food projects explicitly promotes identification with producer culture, emphasizing as its most important message that eating is – and should be thought of more explicitly as – inextricably linked to agriculture, and hence to environment, energy use, and all of the requirements of production. These requirements of production are rarely spelled out in a comprehensive way; rather, consumers are invited to identify with and to imagine what it is like to be a farmer. Considerable slippage occurs in this representation, as the labor of production is layered over with the pleasure of consumption, and the process of production is represented by an aesthetic of production, in which what is emphasized is produce that is “delicious, beautiful, and inspiring.” The adoption of Alice Waters as the patron saint of educational food service has generated some controversy for exactly this representational slippage (Bilger 2006); however, the combination of straightforward farmer identity, clear (and celebrity) mission, and competitive greenness garners considerable support from several quarters.

### **The fetish of production in local agri-food activism**

Having discussed some ways that production is emphasized, I now consider how production is consumed as a fetish in these projects, both making the relationship between producer and consumer more accessible, and also obscuring that relationship. I concentrate on understanding both how fetish qualities are used to assist sustainability projects and also how they may create problems and lessen the efficacy of these projects in meeting their goals. It seems useful to illuminate this tension in part because the function of these concepts is lauded as de-fetishizing produce and production – one effort of the case study project, for example, is to discourage foodservice workers from calling various foods by the generic label “product,” and instead emphasizing the specific identity and value of individual foodstuffs. I emphasize that by identifying fetish qualities in the way production is used, I am not seeking to delegitimize this use, but rather to understand the way the production fetish functions.

## *Natural*

Standing in as a proxy remedy to address a wide range of anxieties, the *natural* provides one of the central rules of thumb for assessing sustainability, one that is rarely unpacked or questioned. Alternative food project labeling highlights the degree to which producers are in direct contact with nature, advertising a variety of processes that comprise nature (soil ecosystems, hydrological cycles, solar energy, weather), and representing as more sustainable those farmers who engage these systems most directly (unmediated by technology such as tractors and GIS). Foodservice venues using all-the-food-you-can-eat models (where students pay for unlimited meal plans) are particularly interesting cases, partly because disincentives to sell more food contribute to a lack of textual mediation of food that in other situations is likely to be encountered on food advertising and packaging, where “natural” claims may be diluted by their constant use. In the project dining facilities, the only “value added” labeling on food makes claims that connect the food to the processes of production – but at the same time, foods appear only in their ready-to-eat forms, with very few signifiers of the processes that produced them. This disconnect between ideal and material food is exacerbated by the additional disconnect between representation of general principles (raising food animals on pasture, for example) and the presentation of specific foods, which are only rarely tied directly to an advertised process or producer (e.g. “grass-fed beef burger”).

Representing nature as a means of connecting consumers to producers does provide attractive entry points for students (generally unfamiliar with agriculture) to relate to producers based on their own experience of nature and environmental interests and values. “The natural way” to carry out production processes, or the closely related “way things used to be,” attract people in particular ways and may encourage them to be more open to additional information about their food than they might otherwise be. Further, natural tropes tie agricultural processes to broader environmental problems about which students may be considerably more concerned. However, the disconnects I describe serve to isolate the ideal of nature away from the food being consumed, leading critics (for example, in student newspaper editorials) to complain about the dissonance between expectations of a specific food’s sustainability and the discovery of its provenance (often via California), or about their perceptions that only a few token foods

meet advertised criteria, associating project representations, which are meant at least in part to be educational about the processes supporting production, with advertising sleight of hand that tries to make broader claims than can be supported.

Reliance on a heavily critiqued, superficial, public-relations version of nature may arise out of practical engagement with the political economies of the agri-food systems these projects seek to transform. Limits on representing production processes, and on tying these representations to particular foods, reflect, to some degree, limits of infrastructure, such as social and corporate relations within dining service organizations, supply networks involved in sourcing, and the technology that organizes menus and labeling. However, partial or non-representation of specific processes also reflects an emphasis on *achieved* alternativeness – the foods at hand are *asserted as sustainable*, and the imperative of advertising this shift in the brief window of engagement afforded by the pass through a dining hall line may pressure representational practices away from complex explanation. For example, the mechanics of shifts toward alternative sourcing are rarely highlighted, and nor are the rationales of what is or not a target for becoming more sustainable – a central feature of the decision-making process underlying these mechanics, and a salient feature when some foods, such as luncheon meats, are tacitly excluded from otherwise overarching claims for sustainability. The aesthetic of naturalness accentuates this pressure away from engaging messy political economies; sustainability is almost always presented as a natural outcome (of thoughtful engagement with the issues), rather than a contingent, partial, and highly political and constructed label. As a fetish of an already-achieved goal, this teleology of natural sustainability creates tension with the politics required to promote further alternative shifts. And emphasis on production coming straight from nature obscures the labor involved in production processes, as well as other steps along the supply chain.

### *Local and seasonal*

Locality and seasonality provide central logical supports for alternative food projects, especially in areas that have local production and where participants might form relationships with farmers, as well as laborers, distributors, and food service workers. Local farmers' markets and project farms are representational centerpieces in alternative

food project promotional materials – usually highlighting one end of the agricultural production process, the (natural) farm end, a domain that is inherently seasonal and local. The degree to which local has become a proxy for sustainable is highlighted by debates about food miles, which often overlook the broader context of competing values in different production, processing, distribution, and labor processes. Emphasis on local food has had significant impact on agricultural landscapes and social networks, and this is particularly evident in marginal agricultural regions, where local premiums support row crop and specialty agriculture, a phenomenon much touted in alternative food projects. The fetish quality of “local” and “seasonal” production becomes evident in defensiveness around dissonances that arise around the definition of local. Locality is often defined in terms of imagined communities, and flexibility in the definition of local is often underplayed so as not to weaken the primary message of short supply chains and few food miles. This downplaying of hierarchies of locality is in tension both with gradient models of locality (Florida produce travels less far to New York than produce from Peru, for example) and also with more complicated heuristics that attempt to take sustainability practices into account along the whole supply chain.

In general, seasonality provides a heuristic less prone to warping in representation than natural or local, partly because efforts to extend or change seasonality obviously exhibit production practices whose visibility defetishizes the appearance of vegetables in winter, for example, through explanations about greenhouse or hoophouse growing. But the emphasis on seasonality of the Alice Waters / “California cuisine” paradigm demonstrates fetish qualities, as an *aesthetic* of seasonality is often substituted for a more material seasonal locality, with an emphasis on eating squash and root vegetables in winter, for example, even if these are imported – and in some cases out-of-season where they were grown. In addition, this aesthetic often emphasizes unexplained local and seasonal preferences, such as for nuts and chocolate in winter, or for growing foods that might be more “local” to Mediterranean locales, and provides a justification for loopholes in preferential sourcing of local goods: foods like bananas and coffee, that never have a local season, jump analytical tracks and become alternative when they are associated with fair trade practices, a concern that is not applied to foods considered under heuristics of locality, seasonality, or naturalness.

Perhaps the more serious issue associated with fetish qualities of local, seasonal, and natural labels involves the exclusive (and often uncritical) equating of small farms deemed to have these qualities with sustainability. Claims about small farms' preferential ability to meet goals associated with naturalness and locality may be supportable in particular domains, as the multifunctionality literature suggests. And seasonality is widely used as a strategy not only to educate consumers about the effects and processes of long versus short supply chains but also to provide support to local procurement efforts in the face of hostile legislation (Maye et al. 2007). But the benefits of small scale are often represented without reference to these justifications, and instead, many romantically emphasize the craft nature of small farming and contrast it with the un-naturalness of large machinery and manufacturing. The association of local and natural with anti-modern and anti-industrial aesthetics seriously undermines engagement with supply chain relations. Mid-scale agriculture and food processing that might well fit into rubrics of sustainability are overlooked or avoided in this paradigm of scale blindness. Some exceptions are evident in parts of this case study, particularly in the canning of tomatoes for institutional use. But in other areas, totemic emphasis on seasonal, fresh ingredients has produced rhetorical resistance to incorporating processed foods, and interest by local manufacturers has been rebuffed – particularly when manufacturers have no redeeming story of identity worthy of celebration in project texts. Although well-justified opposition to the heavily processed foods traditionally associated both with agribusiness and foodservice may be one of the strongest political stances of alternative food projects (particularly impressive given the hegemonic control of foodservice providers), the binary opposition created between these foods and artisanal foods may be one of the fetish qualities most open to critique.

### *Productive*

As a domain of identity, perhaps particularly in the current moment of U.S. (and E.U.) neo-agrarianism, association with production functions as a badge that signals seriousness, material competence, and authenticity. As a contrast to many negative associations of consumption and consumerism, production offers not only virtuous association with the rural and with the natural, but also a promise of agency in

confronting agri-food problems that alternative agri-food actions aim to address. Becoming or supporting a producer seems to allow increased control and improvement of problematic agri-food processes. Or at the very least, relationships with producers are seen to break down the problematic alienation between producers and consumers. As these projects demonstrate, though, connections with producers across the supply chain are not necessarily being forged. Instead, although students may well think and know more about the supply chain in the form of food factoids and sustainability slogans, the producers being constructed in alternative dining service projects are highly romanticized and aestheticized.

Creating (or “re-connecting” with) food culture is an important emphasis, and is constructed by numerous associations with processes that are presented as necessities of production, vis-à-vis seasonality, transportation (locality), and natural process. But the details of this food culture may be as much associated with consumption as production – as they may well ought to be, but it is notable that consumption practices are celebrated only insofar as they clearly relate directly to production. For example, the idea popularized by Slow Food of *co-production* is celebrated, but images associated with this idea – of food choice, preparation, and consumption – are framed in a way that parallels romantic, natural imagery of farmers: food is often being prepared or eaten outside, on a farm, in ways that further remove from view the modern, industrial supply chain through which most foods, even the more sustainable items, are procured. Likewise, the (infrequent) celebrations of food preparation use romantic language of foodie culture that sanctifies consumption more than it does production or preparation, effectively cloaking themes of pleasure and taste in virtuous metaphorical associations with producers: “hands, minds, and hearts”; “care, experience, and devotion”; “The decision about when to harvest a field of tomatoes or how crisp to cook a pizza makes a subtle—but essential—difference in the quality of each meal you consume.”

While some emphasis on food preparation does raise important issues of routine deskilling and unfair labor practices in foodservice, the attendant mystification of who procures and prepares the food may be used to inoculate against agitation to focus more on labor – it certainly passes over the issue without much engagement. And in fact, one of the central tensions of the everyday management of alternative dining programs is the

stark disconnect between their bourgeois food culture and employees' food culture, a contentious issue that is almost never represented as part of a transition toward more sustainability. Issues of taste, such as objections to aesthetically unnatural foods – or food colors, or presentation – cause constant friction between those who manage project ideals and those who carry out project material practices, and little attention is paid to the ways that the normative pressure applied to produce aesthetics of sustainability reify existing class, gender, and ethnic power relations. The origins of and influences of the food culture of sustainability are similarly given little consideration, with particular tokens of aesthetic or competitive sustainability (particularly in the context of American universities' competing to be greenest) promoted and reproduced without much concern for representing the cultural values of producers, preparers, or consumers involved.

Representation of production as the pleasurable heart of agri-food activism has additional implications. Support for alternative university dining projects is often mustered by contrasting enjoyable ways of working on food and agriculture with the austerity and negativity of other activisms. This is problematic in a number of ways, not least because of the depoliticization this message associates with vote-with-your-fork types of consumer activism (Guthman 2007). Promoting alternative agri-food networks as being mostly about the fun work involved in getting your hands dirty delegitimizes problems in agri-food networks, such as exclusions and problematic power relations, and political action to address these. It also (often explicitly) dismisses significant (“negative”) agri-food ethical frameworks, such as those that advocate “eating low on the food chain” or that emphasize social justice and food security. (Some aspects of the projects explicitly incorporate a social justice agenda, while others explicitly do not.) And although the simultaneously enjoyable and positive action orientation of agri-food networks does notably differentiate it from other traditional spheres of environmental and social justice, emphasizing pleasurable forms of work contributes to the abdication of agency involved in withdrawing from – and further effacing – difficult and complex domains of political economy. These explicit turns away from political action have a number of causes, but one is the desire to maintain a streamlined, attractive, and uncomplicated message, furthering the fetish qualities of sustainability and production as they are represented to support this message. Projects cultivate mainstream legitimacy by

associating themselves with pastoral, populist, agrarian ideals, and by presenting a non-threatening, positive approach, especially to donors and to boards of university governance that often include representatives with significant agribusiness concerns.

Adopting – and appropriating – producer identity proves to be a useful strategy here, protecting projects both against suspicions of substantive critical politics and also against charges of silly and fanciful romantic attraction to farming. Demonstrating producer knowledge and skill proves that these are not “hippy dippy” projects, and appearing with dirt on their hands provides a physiocrat moral high ground project participants use deftly. At a recent appearance in one of a series of meet-the-farmer events, a farmer apologized profusely for the suit he was wearing, having come directly from his day job as a lawyer. Keen awareness of the propriety of iconic representation of farmerness show self-consciousness in engaging these representational strategies, but their usefulness and shortcomings have little place for discussion within those strategic domains. Events such as this one incorporate substantive demystification of staple commodities like fluid milk, apples, and tomatoes: (some) students indeed get to shake the hand that feeds them and learn about the processes that connect farm to fork. However, the events are also spectacles – the small percentage of students who have engaged supply chain relations in more detail become grist for a representational process that will crystallize this juxtaposition of student and farmer and use it to further fetishize the actual food chain that both connects and separates consumers and producers.

**Reflexivity in production: appreciation and critique of appropriated production; considering possibilism, process, critique, and evaluation of material effects**

In the minds of many of their organizers, the most significant action toward sustainability produced by university alternative food projects is the education they provide about the implications of and possibility for improving decision making about the material basis of everyday life: something as mundane as eating is worth paying attention to, and bringing it in line with larger values can be important – a goal that I argue should be considered as a form of defetishization. Perhaps the largest contradiction relating to the fetish qualities of these projects’ representational practices involves the way that downplaying material processes and practices behind fetishistic representations of

production signals that appearances are, in fact, more important than the material practices represented. In this concluding section, I consider the tension between goals of defetishizing everyday consumption and the fetishization of production used in project rhetoric. I also consider what might be involved in usefully framing a critique of the fetish qualities of production (and of sustainability) in agri-food discourse communities potentially hostile to critical academic interventions.

Academics form a significant percentage of the audience for performances of model producer identity by university alternative agri-food projects. And at the same time that academics engage in such projects, they are also enrolled in the projects' representational strategies. However, academics and activists engage these representational strategies in different ways – and these differences are often linked to tensions in the relationships between academics and project activists and administrators. Academics and activists simultaneously look to each other for information and leadership, but also often undervalue each others' approaches. Activists may resent academics for what they perceive as unrealistic and moralistic demands; academics express frustration with activists who are too busy with the details of their projects to engage the social and abstract contexts of the moral economies and political ecology they are engaged in producing. Activists who have invested themselves in creating and maintaining their projects are not necessarily eager to welcome critiques that appear to poke holes in carefully constructed narratives of improvement and sustainability and representations of moral superiority. Addressing labor issues or ethnic relations may be seen as a different domain of concern from starting a campus community garden or procuring local food, for example, or the project of answering difficult questions about how much more sustainable particular foods are – or sustainable for whom – may be seen as questions for a future time in which the projects have become more established. Academics often press questions about what is left out or what kinds of problems might be exacerbated by projects' narratives and representations. Many of the heuristics and rules of thumb promoted around concepts like *natural*, *local*, *seasonal*, and *productive* are not necessarily internally consistent, and they often lack explanatory depth; for example questions such as why it is more sustainable to substitute mined rock powder supply chains for manufactured fertilizer are rarely addressed when one is asserted as

more sustainable than the other. Academics have raised significant questions not only about the omission of questions of labor from alternative agri-food projects' domain of focus but also of their often facile use of claims about health and nutrition – particularly in the context of popular narratives about obesity and diabetes. Although the often superficial resort to soundbite heuristics with public purchase may provide easy legitimacy, critics such as Julier (2006, cf DuPuis & Goodman 2005) note that the lack of rigor exhibited in these representations not only reproduces problematic (and often racialized) power relations, but also opens projects to criticism from parties who would like to support them.

The specific contents of tensions between academic and activist approaches to alternative agri-food discourse may be less significant than the accompanying defensiveness and communicative difficulty around them. These tensions are notable in academic settings, where the main audience for such projects are (nominally) accustomed to atmospheres of critical inquiry and open discourse. These tensions are related to power relations and also to normative associations related to producer status – while academics (who often hold more prestigious positions than their activist and administrative colleagues) may criticize activists for lack of rigor and reflexivity, activists (who may increasingly be as well-paid and educated as their academic colleagues) criticize academics for ivory-tower, blue-sky thinking, and use anti-intellectual tropes that privilege hands-on work to critique academics for not getting their hands dirty (with all that represents). In the context of these tensions, it is useful to examine in more detail ways that scholarship engages – and does not engage – the production of fetishes at sites producing sustainable consumption, especially those within the academy – and especially in language recognizable to project activists and administrators. In contexts where fetishized production is being used to help simplify agri-food messages and to give alternative projects legitimacy contra mainstream agri-food systems, the strategic uses of production fetishes as such are likely to be recognizable by those who employ them. Recognition (and acknowledgement) of what one participant called the difference between “a rigorous relationship with the truth and a P.R. [public relations] relationship with the truth” could provide an entry into useful exploration of how representational strategies around the fetish of production function.

To some degree, activists and academics both reproduce the fetish of production in creating public narratives and in supporting their projects as legitimate and authentic. Associating rules of thumb for what is sustainable with specific data produced in the academy, university-related agri-food activism is marked by specific claims about how qualities like natural, local, and seasonal make foods more sustainable (e.g. food miles, and the widely cited – but only locally accurate – 1500 miles that food travels from farm to fork, or similarly reproduced statistics about the inverse relations between nations’ cost of food and cost of healthcare). In contrast, this activism also mobilizes qualities of sustainability in a “know it when we see it” way – one often based on personal relationships and trust with individual producers or producer groups, a strategy that makes the heuristics and aesthetics of production that much more important, but that does not lend itself well to generalized project education and propaganda campaigns.<sup>1</sup> If these two approaches could be more explicitly related, they might provide valuable opportunities for the cultivation of critical engagement with alternative agri-food projects’ claims to sustainability. In the absence of a framework to relate them, projects and academics lack purchase on each others’ approaches – and face increasing disappointment about the disparity between the transformative potential represented by these projects and the material progress they have made so far (Goodman & Goodman 2007).

Cultivating frameworks to help these projects address supportive critique (and to explicitly help the current fraught relationship between academics and activists) could help strengthen projects in several ways. If activists who are striving for authenticity and legitimacy could be open to critique, this would help them engage the counter-narratives arising to what they see as their own counter-narratives to mainstream agri-food systems. This could strengthen and diversify projects, for example by helping them recognize problems in defensive localism and by cultivating critical evaluation processes, which are currently contentious for many projects – in part because academic emphases are not seen

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<sup>1</sup> A related question outside the scope of this paper involves the influence of foodservice representational strategies in shaping the related counter-strategies of university alternative agri-food projects. An approach parallel to the exploration of the influences of political economy of pesticide manufacture on the moral economy of the lawn (Robbins & Sharp 2003) could shed light on opportunities and constraints produced by relationships with the political economy of foodservice, effects not apparent to either producers or consumers.

to be practical enough, do not straightforwardly enough support project goals (projects, for example, may require that academic studies related to them are published only if they show project in positive light), and take too much intellectual control out of the hands of the activists and administrators who initiated projects (whose efforts, in many cases, have achieved success against considerable institutional inertia because of these objections to interference). As interest in alternative food and agriculture rises (in university settings in particular), increased student and administrative support may enable shifts away from defensive positions. Engaging the substance of sustainability initiatives could also more substantively connect to projects the rising number of academics interested in alternative agri-food activism and employed in emerging sustainability and agri-food programs of study. This relationship could help in connecting (largely privileged) university consumers in a more detailed way with (often third world or marginalized) producers, since the relationships between first and third world agri-food political ecologies tend to be considered in more detail on the academic than the activist sides of university agri-food interest.

*Note on methods and research posture*

Because of the widespread way in which it is mobilized, and because of the obviousness of its strategic use, the category of production could be a powerful concept for inviting discussion between different positions in alternative agri-food networks and across disciplines and public discourse (Wilkins 2007). The reasonably straightforward way in which this strategic use of production can be deconstructed to consider what production represents suggests possibilities for methodology and research posture for academics conducting activist research within AAFNs. I consider briefly my use of case study examples to discuss the role this type of research might play in contributing to reflexive engagement in academic agri-food networks, and to consider challenges and tasks that face this approach.

My approach has drawn common themes from several projects. Instead of being explicitly comparative, this use of case studies attempts to downplay a specifically critical tone picking on the contingencies of a specific case, and instead attempts to present these themes in the light of common occurrences in different contexts – a

perspective that might enable organizations self-conscious of these themes as perceived failings of their particular project to engage critiques more openly and less defensively. Such an approach may enable academics to balance the potential usefulness of considering critiques with the possible difficulties of seeming to publicly undermine specific projects with which they may be engaged, or endangering access to (and social and professional networks involved in) the projects they discuss. This approach also has significant drawbacks, however. Not only does it only partially protect against these risks, it also presents considerable ethnographic challenges. Composite cases not only create difficulties in establishing significance, representativeness, context, warrant, and authority, they also introduce narrative difficulties (establishing background and consistency in examples) and concerns about analytical slippage. Composite cases do not entirely remove concern about representing individuals and projects – or about the appropriateness of leveling critiques at local projects from the international domain of journal publication – and critiques at scales of analysis useful to the larger alternative agri-food community may or may not line up with critique useful for the projects at whose expense these critiques are illustrated (Holloway & Kneafsey 2004).

Sustained critical engagements with cases seem like they could be considerably more useful, especially as projects become secure enough to engage critique – and to document challenges and successes. However, in the absence of frameworks to support such engagement, indirect engagements may be useful stepping stones. For one thing, they may help direct attention to the need for more space of public negotiation in alternative agri-food movements – and to the irony of their particular lack within university networks, where students and staff who engage and try to incorporate critical literature (such as DuPuis & Goodman 2005) are often marginalized. My experience working within such networks – particularly in seminars that re-situate project staff and producers within explicitly exploratory and dialogic settings – suggests that many individuals who might be hostile to project critique are willing to consider more abstract versions of the problems exhibited in their projects. Explicating habits of fetishizing conspicuous production that are shared across different subject positions in alternative agri-food networks may be a useful strategy, in part because the concept explicitly does not call project goals or motivations into question, and it might create space to consider

the ideological implications and mechanisms represented by the desire to fetishize production, and through which power over production and consumption is consequently exercised.

In the context of emphasis on production as a way to relate production and consumption, the somewhat contentious tension between goals of demystifying agri-food systems and further fetishizing production provides opportunities for broadening critical domains. As different ways of constructing alternative agri-food systems encounter each other in part through expanding university-related networks, binary oppositions of consumption and production will be further complicated (Maye et al. 2007). Emerging scholarship on the political economy (as well as potential) of activism in the realm of sustainable consumption points out the way that the performance of conspicuous production may undermine the culture and politics of consumption (Goodman & DuPuis 2002, Goodman & Goodman 2007). Critical engagement of these themes by academics engaged in agri-food work can help strengthen a vocabulary that builds both on theoretical insights and experience of practitioners, helping to evaluate and frame the dialectical ways in which particular avenues to sustainability, such as nature, locality, seasonality, and production, can help demystify and contextualize everyday political ecology, but can also disembed and commodify it (Kopytoff 1986, Lotti 2008). Such work might consider the influence of the emphasis on producer-centered discourses in academic work on agri-food project representational strategies. This type of inquiry might help provide much needed epistemological and historical context for the apparent disparity many perceive between the academic work promoting alternative agri-food systems that has been translated into public circulation (and so set expectations for further work) and current more critical trends by which many activists – and readers only just introduced to agri-food issues, say, through Pollan’s work – are perplexed. Such work might also offer suggestions for both academics and activists about how to frame cross-over discourses. In all of this, reminders of a central intent of conspicuous production – emphasizing relations in the supply chain – may help smooth these relations with the recognition of the many ways that different actors in alternative agri-food work *appreciate* production, and can participate in the appropriation of production critically, in part by critiquing production as fetish.

## *Conclusion*

Actors in different parts of AAFNs mobilize certain representations of production to smooth over problematic or dissonant issues – particularly of labor, and of the political economy and ecology of food production, and even of the ways that AAFNs may exacerbate some of the problems they attempt to engage. Political ecology explorations of nature-society relations in the context of production provide models and examples of framing topics that may be difficult to broach and frame, yet whose translation into public discourse could be tremendously useful to AAFN actors working to change institutional frameworks that mediate nature-society relationships in ways addressed directly by this literature. Substantive critiques point to the way that overemphasizing production can be a red herring or garden path leading to strategies that do not necessarily address underlying or structural issues (Mutersbaugh 2004). Framing this literature in domains of discourse that include both academics and project activists and administrators could help create a broader understanding of the *purposes* that the fetish of production serves – and how conspicuous production is performed in particular ways to meet these purposes despite the problems and contradiction such performance introduces to agri-food projects.

Illuminating tension between the attractiveness of conspicuous production and its limitations may help make more explicit the ways that consumer activism is limited by fetishizing production (Miller 1995), *and* it may open up space for discussing limits of appropriating producer identity that are not necessarily recognized or acknowledged in the mobilization of producer narratives. Such reflexive discursive frameworks would be particularly timely following recent surges of attention to sustainability and production as critical perspectives on producer-focused agri-food activism point to the disconnect between valorizing production, consumer activism, and persistent problems in agri-food systems. By acknowledging both the usefulness and limits of focusing on production for AAFNs, the interpretive categories of conspicuous and fetishized production may provide valuable conceptual entry points for collaboration and discussion in AAFNs, partly because they provide reflexive affordances for exploring the work done by production – both progressive and reactionary, aspirational and appreciative.

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