

## Resisting ‘Agribusiness Apocalypse’: The Pleasures and Politics of Ethical Food

The chapters in Part 1 provide an overview of key food politics discourses and debates to provide a broader international context for the case studies in Parts 2 and 3. This chapter locates international debates about food politics in relation to the literatures on ‘ethical’ food, and, in particular, their reframing of food politics in terms of ethical consumption, pleasure and alternative hedonism. It does this via a close reading of the tropes and techniques of a group of popular texts that have been influential in putting questions of food politics on the popular agenda: the non-fiction food writing often called “locavore literature” for its tendency to privilege local eating as a solution to the problems of global industrial food production (Lavin 2013: 102).

Many of the tropes adopted by the locavore literature—the revelations of the horrors of industrial food systems, the utopian visions of powerful ‘connections’ with local food producers and places—are now typical of how food systems problems and solutions are expressed across a range of popular media and cultural forms. Through an analysis of the textual strategies and critiques associated with three of its best-selling texts, this chapter examines the genre as a broader example of food media’s (and food politics’) attempted reconciliation of simultaneously progressive and reactionary impulses, and how this works to construct encounters with (particular types of) food as pleasurable, affective experiences that are appealing for both media and food industries.

The chapter focuses on the work of US writers Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver and Gary Paul Nabhan through an examination

of three of their most internationally successful books: *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan 2006); *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: Our Year of Seasonal Eating* (Kingsolver 2007); and *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (Nabhan 2002). These have been chosen because the terms in which food politics is articulated and mobilised by each of these texts are typical of contemporary food media texts. In particular, such texts are exemplary of the tropes through which food media seeks to resolve its sometimes-competing progressive and reactionary ideologies (particularly those related to class, gender and nostalgia) through their combination of personal stories with broader political criticism. A closer examination of their discursive approaches is thus revealing not just of how political questions and concerns are constructed as appealing in such texts, but also in those featured in the case studies throughout the following chapters. As Michael Pollan's (2006: 289) rephrasing of Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests, the locavore literature, like other contemporary food texts, constructs certain foods as not only "good to eat, but [also] good to think". Investing food with particular types of meaning (i.e. making it "good to think") is not only a key dimension of these texts' cultural work, but it is also part of how popular food texts come to be located within a broader reframing and reshaping of popular food politics, the industry effects of which will become more apparent as the book progresses.

*The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Coming Home to Eat* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* each combine memoir and autobiography with investigative journalism to advance a case for local eating as a means to ameliorate the significant food system crises associated with contemporary industrial agriculture. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* does this by tracing the origin of four meals—a fast food, a 'big organic', a grass-fed organic, and a hunted and gathered meal—to reveal the "true costs" (Pollan 2006: 410) of ingredients as they are transformed from paddock to plate. *Coming Home to Eat* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* catalogue each author's attempt to eat locally for a calendar year, using ingredients that they have either grown or gathered themselves or have purchased from someone they know personally. All of these books have spent time on the New York Times' Bestsellers List. They have also proven to be a significant driver of consumer action: people frequently name Michael Pollan, for example, as a key motivational figure shaping their food production and consumption practices (Click and Ridberg 2010).

Unsurprisingly, then, much of the existing scholarship has centred on the question of whether such texts, given their tendency to locate political potential in individual consumer 'choices', have the capacity to effect real transformation in our food system (e.g. Lavin 2013; Guthman 2007; Pilgeram and Meeuf 2015; DeLind 2011). However, rather than contributing to further debate about whether or not consumer choice is an effective motor of political change, I begin from the premise that the power of the locavore literature (and other popular food media texts) lies not so much in its capacity to change the food system, but in the way that it reflects substantial changes to the food industry that have already occurred over the past several decades. These include the rise of farmers' markets and other initiatives that express (middle class) consumers' desire for connection to the sources of their food and, as subsequent chapters will show, the emergence of new alliances between food producers, food products and media texts designed to capitalise on a growing interest in the provenance of food and the ethics of food production.

But before addressing these issues more fully, this chapter first details the textual strategies used by the locavore literature to represent the problems of, and propose solutions for, contemporary food systems. I begin by outlining how popular food narratives advance a critique of conventional food systems by contrasting dystopian images of contemporary agribusiness with alternatives framed in largely utopian terms. This shows how these alternatives invest (certain kinds of) food with meaning and significance by drawing on notions of tradition, trust and connection. The chapter then reframes the persistent criticism that the locavore literature's emphasis on consumer 'choice' reflects a "retreat from politics" (Lavin 2013: 103) by locating these debates within the contexts of changing markets and within the growing literatures on ethical consumption. In particular, I do this by exploring the imaginative possibilities associated with alternative hedonism and nostalgia, and consider how these can be used as resources to reframe aspects of these texts' potentially conservative politics, especially those with respect to class and gender. This provides a foundation for discussions in subsequent chapters about the appeal of contemporary food politics to media and food industries, the cultural work these politics perform, and how media and food industry relationships are reflecting and responding to changing discourses, values and practices.

## PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

In the locavore literature the problems of contemporary food systems are typically conceived as a problem of knowledge: industrial agriculture is sustained by “an almost heroic act of not knowing” what is involved (Pollan 2006: 84); supermarkets’ cornucopia of unseasonable fruits and vegetables persist because eaters lack knowledge of how and when food plants grow (Kingsolver 2007); environmentally and socially destructive food practices endure because of an absence of deeper understanding of our ecological systems (Nabhan 2002). Most mention the need for legislative change, but the primary goal of these texts is to provide the necessary knowledge and impetus for consumers to reconnect with their food and those who produce it; buying local, growing one’s own, and supporting farmers’ markets are the cornerstones of the authors’ vision for a new, ‘better’ food system. *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *Coming Home to Eat* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* each offer a vision for an alternative food system that is structured by the “polar forces” of the apocalyptic and the utopian (Mikulak 2013: 11). This is frequently articulated via images of what Michael Newbury (2012: 87) calls “agribusiness apocalypse”—a sinister ‘Other’ against which ‘good’ food practices can be constructed—contrasted with idyllic pastoral scenes invoking notions of tradition, authenticity and pleasure. Even beyond the texts in question, these tropes of the apocalyptic and the utopian are now used so widely in popular food media that even more strongly optimistic texts, such as *River Cottage* or *Gourmet Farmer* (see Chaps. 3, 5), often implicitly rely upon audiences’ (and industry’s) familiarity with critiques of more dystopian food systems. As such, the locavore literature’s dual impulses of the apocalyptic and the utopian are worth outlining in some detail.

Apocalyptic imagery appears in all three texts, but it looms largest in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, the first third of which details at length the problems of industrial agriculture. Pollan canvasses issues ranging from the effects of government subsidies on farmers to the health and environmental impacts of industrial diets, but among the most powerful are his descriptions of the devastating consequences of America’s vast monocultures of corn and beef cattle. He invests corn with a sinister agency as he traces its role in constructing his fast food meal. Having colonised vast areas of land, our stomachs and our bodies,<sup>1</sup> it appears in almost all

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<sup>1</sup> Pollan notes that corn is unique in that its carbon isotopes can be clearly identified in human remains. “When you look at the isotope ratios,” said scientist Todd Dawson, “we North Americans look like corn chips with legs” (qtd. in Pollan 2006: 23).

of the ingredients of Pollan's fast food meal: in his burger bun, the meat patty, the ketchup, the soda, and in a range of other binders, emulsifiers and fillers. Corn is presented not as something to eat, but as a substance that provides "building blocks" from which food manufacturers "assemble" a great many processed foods (Pollan 2006: 86). This includes not only the products of the fast food industry, but also those of the supermarket, where an apparently dazzling variety of product choice masks the fact that many of the products are simply various configurations of corn. What is most shocking about corn's remarkable capacity to insinuate itself into the food supply is how it has assisted food manufacturers and food scientists to find increasingly creative ways to incorporate America's surplus of cheap corn into its citizens' everyday diets, resulting in an epidemic of obesity and diet-related diseases, an impoverished food culture, and a range of negative environmental and animal welfare consequences.

The paradigmatic example of the latter is the CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation), a result of using surplus corn to produce cheap meat. The horrors of the cattle feedlot invoke the abject, in the Kristevan sense of the term, where matter out of place "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982: 4). For Pollan, the feedlot's putrid landscapes, unhygienic conditions and deadly foodborne pathogens are primarily problems of corn and of shit. The cattle's corn-based diet, combined with a cramped and unsanitary living environment, causes them to suffer a range of gruesome diseases that make them "go off their feed, pant and salivate excessively, paw and scratch their bellies, and eat dirt", and makes them susceptible to diarrhoea, ulcers, bloat, rumenitis, liver disease, pneumonia, coccidiosis, enterotoxaemia and feedlot polio (Pollan 2006: 78).

At the centre of Pollan's account of the feedlot is steer number 534, the animal he purchased as a calf in order to observe its full lifecycle from birth to fast food hamburger. The enormous amount of waste that CAFOs produce gives steer number 534 blood-shot eyes as he stands and sleeps in a pile of his own and others' manure. But this vast amount of shit is not only a problem for the animals' quality of life, it also becomes a serious health risk to consumers once the animal enters the slaughterhouse. The unsanitary conditions in which the animals live, and the extreme speed at which slaughterhouse workers are required to operate, mean that manure from the animal hides inevitably falls onto the meat. Some of this shit contains *E. coli* 0157:H7, an especially virulent

pathogen that thrives in the cramped conditions of the CAFO and which can be deadly even in very small quantities. Due to the vast quantities of hamburger meat produced by individual slaughterhouses, contaminated meat can easily become widely dispersed in the food supply, causing lethal outbreaks of foodborne illness.

In opposition to the repulsive and stomach-churning conditions of the CAFO and the slaughterhouse, Pollan offers an alternative method of farming and food production, one centred around idyllic pastoral imagery and animals' 'natural' predilections. While Pollan's final meal of hunted and gathered foods stands as the ultimate expression of a 'natural' food system, his acknowledgement that this is an ultimately impractical form of sustenance for most people means that *Omnivore's* most powerful visions of an alternative food system come from Polyface Farm, the mixed farm operated by self-described "Christian-conservative-libertarian-environmentalist-lunatic farmer" Joel Salatin (qtd. in Pollan 2006: 125). Pollan sees in Polyface's practices a real, viable alternative industrialised food, and his descriptions of Salatin's farm invoke the storybook wholesomeness of traditional farm life—a powerful rural idyllism that is also central to many of the other texts discussed in this book. The 'natural' processes that were a source of abject horror in Pollan's account of the feedlot and the slaughterhouse—the bodily wastes that pile up in CAFOs—are reframed as positive sources of nourishment on Salatin's farm. Pollan describes how Salatin's beef cattle are regularly moved onto fresh pastures to allow the egg-laying hens, broiler chickens and turkeys to move in, clean up grubs and parasites in the cowpats and distribute the manure. During the winter, when the cattle live inside, Salatin does not muck out the barn; instead, he leaves the manure in place, covering it with a layer of straw or woodchips every few days, along with a handful of corn. This fermenting corn becomes a source of delight for his pigs who aerate the manure at winter's end. In contrast to Pollan's earlier descriptions of the repulsiveness of animal hides caked in manure, Polyface Farm's respect for the natural predilections of the animals results in cartoonish depictions of happy animals writhing in shit:

Buried to their butts in composting manure, a bobbing sea of wriggling hams and corkscrew tails, there were the happiest pigs I'd ever seen. (Pollan 2006: 218)

Pollan's direct observation of the happiness of animals that he ultimately eats as part of his third meal, the grass-fed organic, is something that enhances his eating pleasure—pleasure that is an important dimension of the text's food politics. For Pollan, Polyface meat is not only ethically 'right': his new knowledge of its production also grants access to revelatory eating experiences. When he accepts Salatin's offer to slaughter his own chicken in Polyface Farm's open-air chicken processing facility, he finds it both deeply affecting and a 'gold standard' of food system transparency. But Polyface's transparency does not just ameliorate Pollan's animal welfare concerns: his Polyface chicken, eaten with a full knowledge of the life the bird had lived and the conditions under which it died, provides a sublime meal of unparalleled deliciousness. "The chicken was out of this world," he said. "The skin had turned the colour of mahogany and the texture of parchment, almost like a Peking duck, and the meat itself was moist, dense, and almost shockingly flavourful" (Pollan 2006: 271).

Images of agribusiness apocalypse are less detailed in both *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and *Coming Home to Eat*. Although their narratives are nonetheless structured by a shared vocabulary of food system crisis, specific details of the problems of industrial food systems take up less space in these texts than their proposed solutions. In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* food system crisis is sometimes an opportunity for comic relief. For example, in Kingsolver's discussion of industrial turkey production, the practice of breeding turkeys for their size and docility leads to accounts of turkeys so big they are unable to mate without human intervention and so stupid they can drown by looking up at the rain. It is in her partner Steven Hopp's short vignettes interspersed throughout the book that *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle's* dystopianism becomes most apparent; by canvassing issues such as the industrial food system's unsustainable reliance on fossil fuels, the horrific animal welfare conditions of CAFOs, and the perils of GM (genetic modification), these vignettes offer a powerful indictment of the unviability of 'the conventional way' and provide a foil for Kingsolver's more ethical and sustainable alternatives.

In *Coming Home to Eat* negative impacts of conventional food systems are revealed through Nabhan's realisations of how unsustainable his own reliance on industrial food has become. When he cleans out his pantry at the commencement of his locavore experiment, he is shocked to discover how much processed food he has kept in his kitchen, the vast distances it has travelled and how much of it was produced by the

world's ten largest food companies—global food giants that are now part of the 100 largest economies in the world. Later in the book Nabhan tells of the devastating epidemic of diet-related diseases in O'odham communities caused by a diet of processed foods, and of the negative ecological impacts of the technologies used to produce this food, especially GM. Among his most memorable images of agribusiness apocalypse are those that, as for Pollan, invoke the abject to describe contemporary changes to how food is grown and eaten. During his travels in southern Minnesota, for example, Nabhan (2002: 158) expresses sorrow at how industrial-scale food production has pushed families from their farms, resulting in “unpeopled farms stretch[ing]...as far as our eyes could see”. The farms offer a visual analogue to the repulsive products of the industrial food system, with deliberate allusions to decay and degeneracy: at dusk, they take on a “sickly greenish cast, the color of moldy Spam” (Nabhan 2002: 158).

For Kingsolver (2007: 3), the solution is to move from Arizona to Appalachia, a place constructed as a paradise “where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground”; for Nabhan, it is to eat the traditional foods of his desert home. Nabhan's commitment to indigenous food traditions means that *Coming Home to Eat* is less invested in pastoral imagery than either *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* or *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, but it shares with the other texts a commitment to ‘traditional’ forms of food provisioning as a means of redeeming the food system, forging connections between producers and consumers, and ameliorating consumers' alienation from the sources of their food. It also prioritises pleasure as a valuable by-product of food system connection and trust.

For example, eating food of known provenance is what comforts Nabhan following his step-father's death and what fortifies him to support his mother in her grief. His enjoyment of this food also deepens his spiritual connection to the land. Nabhan vividly describes cooking with freshly picked native greens that “so buzzed with their recent photosynthetic surge that [his] meal sizzled with sunshine” (Nabhan 2002: 142). He also describes the pleasures of the slowness enforced by his locavore diet; by slowing down and paying attention to the land around him, he is for the first time able to notice a nearby hackberry tree with unusually delicious fruit and discovers an apricot variety that exists nowhere else in the Americas. He is also able to build deeper relationships with his Native American neighbours, culminating in a desert walk celebrating



local food traditions and involving a cathartic ritual destruction of the cheap white bread that had caused so much disease and heartbreak for Native American communities.

Just as Nabhan's commitment to local eating is predicated on forging stronger connections with his O'odham friends, their land and their traditions, for Kingsolver it is her relationships with local farmers that are understood as an important precondition for healing damaged food systems. In *Animal Vegetable, Miracle* "local" is the definition of transparency, trustworthiness and community: it is a "handshake deal in a community gathering place.... It [is] an open-door policy on the fields, where neighborhood buyers are welcome to come have a look, and pick their food from the vine" (Kingsolver 2007: 123). As well as allowing her to build relationships with her local community, eating locally gives Kingsolver access to a dazzling array of foods unavailable to the ordinary supermarket shopper. Her locavore diet is not the deprivation she imagined it might be, but is a gateway to satisfying abundance. Kingsolver spends a great deal of time in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* listing the colours and varieties of her locally purchased and home-grown produce: the many types of heirloom potato and tomato; the bounty of the summer harvest; the diversity of their wintertime diet. Descriptions of heirloom turkey so delicious it tastes of lobster, and the family's enjoyment of otherwise exotic dishes like asparagus and morel mushroom pudding, not only see Kingsolver "groan[ing] with pleasure" (Kingsolver 2007: 22), but also offer real pleasures for the reader who is invited to imagine participating in a similarly abundant and gratifying food system.

Even the hard work of gardening, the details of which Kingsolver outlines at length in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, are transmuted into a pleasure at the end of a long day of desk work. Gardening is what allows Kingsolver to decompress after a stressful day; it is also what allows her to connect with the plants that feed her. These plants are bestowed with an anthropomorphic subjectivity through which they express human emotions like gratitude. She describes the routine maintenance of her tomato vines as a communion between herself and the plants: "Holding the soft, viny limbs as tender as babies' wrists, I train them to their trellises, tidy the mulch at their feet, inhale the oxygen of their thanks" (Kingsolver 2007: 177). The utopian fervour with which Kingsolver describes her local eating experiences extends not just to her connections with the natural world, but also to her family relationships. Unlike *Coming Home to Eat* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, in which the authors

recount some resistance from their families, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is littered with almost absurdly wholesome depictions of impeccably behaved children who embrace the experiment to the full. From stories of laughter as the family makes mozzarella together to images of her youngest daughter hugging a special treat of tangerines to her chest with “bliss lighting her cheeks” (Kingsolver 2007: 287), Kingsolver’s children display the same gratitude for the experience as the plants.

This seemingly unreflexive idyllism (Goodman 2009: 441) is perhaps one of the reasons that some critics see *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*’s nostalgic pastoralism as essentially conservative—as reflecting a desire to ‘return’ to a purer, simpler time of family togetherness and locally-run businesses, rather than any real attempt to remake the future (e.g. Mikulak 2013: 107, 110). Such criticisms do not apply to *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* alone. While the utopian solutions proposed by all three food texts mobilise ideas of tradition, trust and transparency to construct a food politics attuned to the pleasures of food production and consumption, this is a food politics that has been subject to significant criticism. Many food scholars see the locavore literature’s faith in individual consumer choice as a motor of food system change as reflecting, at best, an emptying out of the political dimensions of popular food activism and, at worst, a worrying and reactionary conservatism. Because their politics is one that frequently replaces collective political action with consumer choice, authors are often insufficiently attentive to structural power. This means that their ‘solutions’ to the problems of industrial food frequently rely on a troubling nostalgia for white, patriarchal forms of community and social organisation (Pilgeram and Meeuf 2015; Zimmerman 2015).

These are indeed problematic aspects of each of these three texts (as well as of some types of media representations of contemporary food politics more broadly). But rather than simply rehearse these critiques again, I want to use them as a platform to think through the cultural work that these texts perform. Given the popularity and cultural impact of contemporary food writing and other popular media texts that utilise similar tropes, we need to not just critique their problematic dimensions, but also ask how, and in what ways, nostalgic reimagining of ‘tradition’ and ‘the local’ comes to be constructed as a reasonable and appealing solution to significant food systems problems. In other words, we need to ask questions not only about food politics or food justice, as some food studies scholars expect (e.g. Guthman 2007; Goodman

et al. 2012), but also about the pleasures and affects that are mobilised within and by these texts, and the effects and opportunities of this for media and food industries 'outside' the text. The locavore literature may indeed imagine social change primarily in terms of the consumer market and individual food choices, but these texts are also shaping and being shaped by a proliferation of meanings *within* the market about how food politics can be practised, enabled and made thinkable, and they need to be taken seriously.

## THE POLITICS OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

The most sustained critiques of the locavore literature are of its particular construction of the political subject and its framing of what 'counts' as political engagement. Critics argue that the texts' exhortations to readers to consume differently reflect a wholesale adoption of the logic of neoliberalism in which 'citizens' are transformed into (self-governing, individualised) 'consumers' who are invited to locate their political activities primarily in relation to the market, rather than in relation to other forms of collective political participation (see Lavin 2013; Guthman 2007; Pilgeram and Meeuf 2015; DeLind 2011). Chad Lavin's (2013: 94) critiques, in which he argues that texts like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* represent an investment in "postpolitical fantasies" that reflect a "wholesale colonization of the political imaginary by the logic of the market", are typical of food studies' misgivings about the locavore literature. They suggest that this literature's encouragement to consumers to 'vote with your fork' ignores structural barriers to food access (Young 2014), and implies that major food systems issues can be solved through altered personal practice (DeLind 2011: 276). Instead of suggesting that it is necessary to "alter the structural features of the food system, so that all might come to eat better" (Guthman 2007: 78), the argument that we produce the food system we 'want' through our consumption choices frequently constructs those who make the 'wrong' choices either as lacking the 'right' knowledge and instruction (DeLind 2011: 276) or as morally deficient (Lynch and Giles 2013: 489). For the liberal middle-class subject who is already well-schooled in these 'right' choices (Zimmerman 2015: 45), the kind of politics that is offered by these texts is often seen as "perhaps *too* easy" as they offer a "worrying (a)politics of taste" that is insufficiently reflexive about their own positions of privilege within the food system (Goodman 2009: 441, 442). Indeed, calls to "pay the full

karmic price of a meal” and to eat with “full consciousness” of where it has come from (Pollan 2006: 9) are predicated on the reader already occupying a privileged position from which these costs are neither seen nor felt (Zimmerman 2015: 46).

Certainly, class privilege does assist in making ‘ethical’ consumption choices easier. The large literatures on ethical consumption, radical consumption and political consumerism that have emerged in recent years have examined both the classed dimension of ethical consumption practices and the work of these practices in constructing ethical consumer-citizens (e.g. Lewis and Potter 2011; Littler 2008; Stolle and Micheletti 2013). While critics of popular food writing often see the turn to consumption as a “retreat from politics” (Lavin 2013: 103), scholars of ethical consumption tend to view consumer activities as legitimate methods for investing in ethical, social and civic concerns (e.g. Lewis 2012; Littler 2008). In particular, ethical consumption is seen as offering alternative pathways to political participation for people who no longer value traditional political investments (Barnett et al. 2005). While not underplaying the impact of structural constraints, scholars show how, in its focus on environmentalism, anti-materialism and sustainable lifestyles, ethical consumption implicates life politics in a growing sense of connection between personal life choices and community, national and global concerns (Lewis and Potter 2011: 7–8, 10), even if this is a politics that disproportionately hails a white, middle-class subject.

The changing consumer preferences and practices that are occurring as a result of the growing interest in ethical consumption are significant not only for their impact on contemporary debates about what ‘counts’ as political, but also for the way that they have reshaped sections of the consumer market in line with ethical and social values. In the USA, for example, the number of farmers’ markets increased more than four-fold between 1994 and 2013 (Campbell 2015: 209); similar impacts are being felt elsewhere across the anglophone West (Dodds et al. 2014; Guthrie et al. 2006). Indeed, farmers’ markets and other previously ‘alternative’ food practices have been so successful that they have placed upward pressure on conventional retail, leading to growth in ‘mainstream’ sales of organic and local foods (Campbell 2015: 209).

*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* explicitly acknowledges these changes to the contemporary food economy. In 1997, when Kingsolver first gave up eating meat from CAFOs, it effectively meant becoming vegetarian. Now ‘ethical meat’ is so widely available (to middle-class consumers, at least)

that it has made it possible for her to feel comfortable eating meat again (Kingsolver 2007: 228). As a result, the type of action that these texts ask of readers may appear to be “easy” (Goodman 2009: 442) because, in many ways, it now is. Popular food texts may be framed as a call for change to our food systems, but the changes that they encourage (e.g. choose local, ethical, organic, etc.) are achievable precisely because they are now so widely available to the middle-class, urban consumers that are their target audience. In other words, the locavore literature did not so much ‘invent’ the citizen-consumer as reflect its currency, appeal and power. As such, this literature’s appeals to ‘consume differently’ must be understood within the context of the changing consumer markets that both precede and animate these texts.

That they largely limit food systems action to individual consumer ‘choices’ may indeed be problematic, but if we ask not only whether or not these are the ‘right’ politics, but also consider their political and cultural effects, it is possible to locate texts within a much broader proliferation of meaning about the pleasures and politics of food. These meanings are not limited to contemporary food writing alone. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the examples discussed here are just one set of popular texts that are shaping the cultural ‘work’ that food does. But in these texts, we can see an especially clear manifesto for forms of pleasurable consumption that combine ethical and sustainability concerns with a nostalgia for ‘tradition’ and ‘connection’ to one’s food. In doing so, they simultaneously contribute to the prominence and popularity of food systems critique and reflect the increasing mainstream availability of alternative food practices. They may well do this by locating political solutions within ‘the market’, yet we need not see ‘the market’ as a single universal market but as a combination of highly diversified markets, each with different goals (see Rebrovick 2015: 685). It is in these markets that the effects of ethical consumer discourses and practices are being most keenly felt.

Like other food media, contemporary food writing frames its politics within the realm of consumption in part because it is the problem of consumption that these texts seek to address and reimagine. Heidi Zimmerman (2015: 33) has argued that popular food texts may align with the imperatives of neoliberal citizenship, but they also offer lifestyle instruction—a “technology of the self”—that seeks to manage some of the deep ambivalences experienced by the liberal, professional middle classes about their attachment to unsustainable forms of capitalist

consumption. These texts, she argues, help readers to manage “attachments to the trappings of middle-class life as they bump up against worries about the environmental destruction that such trappings entail” (Zimmerman 2015: 38). They also reflect the influence of a broader lifestyle industry through which appropriate lifestyle management is constructed as a site of both responsibility and pleasure for the ‘good’, self-governing subject (Lewis 2008: 13; Miller 2007: 143). Through communicating pleasurable versions of austerity that promote changed consumption practices (see Bramall 2013), these texts offer tools to curb unfettered consumerism without the need to give up the luxuries and privileges of middle-class comforts. In doing so they grant access to what Kate Soper (2004: 112) has called an “alternative hedonism”, in which notions of the “good life” become linked to environmental and sustainability concerns. The alternative hedonist, motivated by the need to develop a more ecologically sustainable use of resources, adopts an altered conception of what it is to enjoy a “high” standard of living by embracing “new modes of thinking about human pleasure and self-realization”, primarily within the realm of consumption (Soper 2008: 571).

The consumption practices associated with alternative hedonism are frequently expressed within the capitalist market, but they also involve more-than-market affects. For example, when Kingsolver (2007: 22) says that food is one of the rare realms in which “the ethical choice is generally the one more likely to make you groan with pleasure”, or when Pollan (2006: 11) declares that the pleasures of eating are “deepened by knowing” where the food has come from and how it is produced, they are engaging in an affective encounter with food that binds political investments in what Michael Mikulak (2013: 116) calls a “productive assemblage of pleasure and critique”. The authors’ rapturous experiences when they eat ethically produced food are an example of the alternative hedonist’s reframing of specific types of consumption as pleasure, rather than as deprivation. Throughout the locavore literature, readers are exhorted to choose ethically not just because it is morally right, but also because it ‘tastes better’. This is a tendency also repeated throughout popular food media (indeed, *It Tastes Better* is the title of the cookbook on ethical and sustainable eating that is the subject of Chap. 6). It is in part how food media’s utopian impulses work to form new connections between eaters, food producers and the food itself, by presenting ethical consumption as an appealing alternative to the consumption practices currently encouraged by conventional industrial food systems.

As a number of critics have noted, the capacity to make ethically 'right' choices has a gendered, as a well as a classed, dimension. This is because the practices of ethical consumption typically encouraged by much contemporary food media—buying direct from farmers, growing one's own, cooking from scratch, avoiding the overly processed foods of the industrial food industry—necessarily involve a significant investment of time and effort. Given the traditionally gendered nature of foodwork, critics argue, it is likely that a disproportionate burden of eating ethically would fall to women (see Phillips 2009; Stănescu 2010; Portman 2014; Johnston 2016). This is indeed a concerning aspect of the gender politics of all three texts. It is one worth looking at in more detail because these representations of gender also offer opportunities to reframe and reimagine potentially reactionary impulses as part of a progressive politics. In the section below, I begin with a critique of the texts' conservative dimensions before considering their potential for other types of meaning-making and interpretation. In short, I suggest, we need not understand 'traditional' representations of gender as simply a desire to return to the past, but rather as a means of responding to a set of very contemporary concerns about food production and consumption that, in turn, create opportunities for new media and food industry responses.

## GENDER AND NOSTALGIA

Gender politics are perhaps most explicitly problematic in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Kingsolver (2007: 127) describes feminism as the "great hoodwink of my generation". By trading homemaking for careers, she says, women gave up "the aroma of warm bread rising, the measured pace of family routines, the creative task of moulding our families' tastes and zest for life" in exchange for "the minivan and the Lunchable" (Kingsolver 2007: 127, 128). While Kingsolver is not sentimental about pre-feminist domestic drudgery, and while she does insist the participation in domestic tasks is required of men, with the exception of the bread making performed by her partner Steven Hopp, food provisioning is disproportionately women's work throughout the book. Kingsolver and her adult daughter Camille appear to do the majority of the cooking for the family, and Kingsolver regularly encourages women to see food preparation as a "creative opportunity, rather than a chore" (Kingsolver 2007: 127). This includes not just cooking, but also preserving and canning, which is presented as an opportunity for women to get together

to “discuss...[their] stuff” in ways not dissimilar to “your average book group” (Kingsolver 2007: 201).

Gendered narratives are less central to either *Coming Home to Eat* or *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, but they do display an equally problematic gender politics. Although Pollan connects ideas about ‘good’ food to traditional notions of gender more explicitly in subsequent books (see Portman 2014: 12),<sup>2</sup> his apocalyptic visions of industrial corn production gender corn as feminine—it is a “welfare queen” pushing out the (male) family farmer in favour of corporate interests. The world of alternative food in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is one made up entirely of men. Pollan speaks to almost no women, and the greatest praise and prominence is reserved for a farmer so attached to traditional gender roles that in the past he has refused to employ women as farm workers or interns (Stănescu 2010: 20).

Nabhan more directly acknowledges the gendered dimension of food labour, but he responds with intolerance and insensitivity when the women in his life do not uncritically embrace his locavore experiment. When Nabhan’s partner, Laurie, a nurse who spends her days dealing with bodily trauma, declines to participate in the slaughter of their turkeys, he criticises her for “shirking” her responsibilities (Nabhan 2002: 195). When his mother refuses to cook a week’s worth of her own mother’s meals for Nabhan because she did not want to emotionally “go back” to a time when she suffered repeated illnesses as a result of her impoverished diet, he is remarkably unreflexive about the historical and structural differences attached to local eating. Nabhan can see his mother’s resistance only as a failure to see the ‘true’ enlightenment that he has found. He does not see “‘back’ as someplace that progress has allowed [us] to escape from”, but rather “imagine[s]...life as a looping and relooping, circling back to pick up something that we have forgotten, something that we desperately need for our health and our happiness” (Nabhan 2002: 259).

As a result, he does not seem to recognise that his mother, who lived through the ‘past’ that Nabhan is attempting to recapture, may experience these food practices differently, and see them as granting neither

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<sup>2</sup>For example, in *In Defense of Food*, Pollan (2008: 148, 3) tells readers not to eat “anything your great grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food” and that “culture..., at least when it comes to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother”.



health nor happiness. When he visits his mother following the death of her partner, he is appalled by her reliance on convenience foods, and sneers at the notion that no longer needing to “‘slave away’ for hours in the kitchen or in the barn” might be a liberation for her (Nabhan 2002: 61). Instead, he sees it as something that has encouraged his mother and her partner to become “insatiable consumers” sitting in front of the TV, “convinced that there would always be producers of anything they needed out there somewhere” (Nabhan 2002: 61). Although he suggests that “Chuck could rest in peace, for his widow would never again be constrained by labouring in the food chain that had imprisoned his own mother most of her life” (Nabhan 2002: 61), it is said with some degree of scepticism that women’s foodwork does indeed constitute “imprisonment”.

However, despite insensitivities with respect to gender in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *Coming Home to Eat*, it is significant that the majority of the foodwork we see in these texts is performed by men. Almost all of the shopping, gathering, preparing and cooking in *Coming Home to Eat* is done by Nabhan, who regularly cooks for family, friends and neighbours. This is much the same in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, in which Pollan engages in all dimensions of food provisioning from paddock to plate, as his desire to eat “with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake” (Pollan 2006: 11) includes personal responsibility for transforming raw ingredients into cooked meals. Although women occasionally cook in *Coming Home to Eat*, they are virtually absent from the kitchen in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. When Pollan cooks his third, grass-fed organic meal for his friends Mark and Liz, it is not Liz who assists him in the kitchen to prepare the two-course meal (although she is acknowledged to be an excellent cook), but Liz’s 12-year-old son.

Although, as critics suggest, the burden of ethical eating may well fall to women ‘in practice’, the locavore literature nonetheless provides narrative and imaginative resources to envision food practices unconstrained by such ‘real life’ structural limitations. It has frequently been noted that media and popular cultural representations of men’s foodwork tend to present cooking as a form of “leisurely entertainment” (Swenson 2009: 41) or “aestheticized leisure” (Ashley et al. 2004: 183) done for pleasure—for special occasions, for example, or as part of a broader construction of lifestyle (Moseley 2001)—rather than as part of the daily responsibility for feeding oneself and/or one’s family. In *Coming Home to Eat* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, men’s food provisioning is located somewhere

between the two poles of cooking-as-daily-grind and cooking-as-fun. Pollan very deliberately genders everyday food provisioning as masculine when he discusses the additional demands of time, effort and work required by local eating. The “local food shopper”, he says, “will need to put some work into sourcing *his* food—into learning who grows the best lamb in *his* area, or the best sweet corn. And then *he* will have to become reacquainted with *his* kitchen” (Pollan 2006: 259, emphases added). Men are encouraged to see these time-consuming activities of sourcing and preparing ‘ethical’ food not as ‘work’, but as a daily leisure activity in which “finding, preparing, and preserving food [is seen] as one of the pleasures of life rather than a chore” (Pollan 2006: 259).

While nostalgia for ‘old-fashioned’ forms of food production and consumption may animate contemporary food writing narratives, by placing men at the centre of what can traditionally be considered ‘women’s work’, these texts do not simply advocate a return to the past, but rather broaden the scope of who can (and should) participate in food sourcing and preparation. The centrality of men in both *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *Coming Home to Eat* reconceives daily food preparation as a form of recreation and as a (politically progressive) ‘choice’ in ways that both mitigate their sometimes-problematic gender politics and offer spaces of pleasurable fantasy that make their demands potentially more acceptable to their audience of middle-class, professional readers.

The prominence of women’s kitchen labour in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* means that the imaginative work of gendered representations is slightly different in Kingsolver’s case. Like Nabhan and Pollan, Kingsolver does not advocate a return to traditional forms of feminine foodwork. But rather than focusing on men’s involvement in food preparation, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* seeks to rehabilitate food provisioning as distinct from other kinds of domestic drudgery. By reframing cooking as a “creative opportunity, rather than a chore” (Kingsolver 2007: 127) *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* attempts to make available to women some of the “aestheticized leisure” (Ashley et al. 2004: 183) that is typically the preserve of men. In Kingsolver’s case, not only does this involve active participation in the special occasion cookery—the cooking for parties and holidays, the cooking with and for guests—that dominates popular cultural representations of men’s cooking-as-leisure, it also involves reimagining ordinary domestic foodwork as a similar site of leisure and desirable lifestyle. Kingsolver’s idyllic accounts of communing with her plants in the garden, or her children’s gratitude for the gift of

'real' food, construct the home as a utopian space from which eaters can escape industrial food and foster deeper connections to their family and their food. While it is indeed possible to read the pleasures of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* as laughably quaint, we need only see them as especially problematic if we interpret the text's scenarios as *literal* manifestos to action, rather than as opportunities for fantasy and experimentation.

In her analysis of Nigella Lawson's cookbook, *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*, Joanne Hollows argues that the domestic goddess is not a person that readers are literally invited to "be", but rather a fantasy figure that they are encouraged to "feel like"; that is, as a nostalgic reimagining of the 1950s "housewife", the domestic goddess is an identity position primarily available in fantasy (Hollows 2003: 188). In the case of Nigella Lawson, Hollows suggests that the fantasy of the housewife can be appealing to middle-class women who feel the time scarcity caused by the dual burden of paid work and a "domestic division of labour prov[ing] relatively resistant to change" (Hollows 2003: 190). The fantasy of the domestic goddess also serves a similar purpose in women's downshifting narratives, a genre of which *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is a part. In these cases, Hollows (2006: 108) says:

the pressure to 'have it all' and the problems of achieving a 'work-life balance' are magically resolved through a process of relocation as urban femininities are abandoned in favour of rural femininities, which seem imbued with the balm of the 'rural idyll'.

For Hollows, pleasurable fantasies of housewifery are an attempt to resolve the contradictions of modern femininity by enabling readers to experiment with identities otherwise unavailable within the constraints of everyday life, and which may, in fact, be undesirable in 'reality' (Hollows 2003: 190, 2006: 113).

Seen in these terms, the pleasures of escape from the urban industrial food desert into a place of delicious variety and abundance that we see in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Coming Home to Eat* can be seen as the pleasures of fantasy, at least for the majority of readers who would be unlikely to make similar commitments to their own self-sufficiency. The locavore literature frequently frames its seasonal eating narratives as a 'how to' guide for those interested in adopting something similar (e.g. Kingsolver 2007: 20), but in practice it interpellates a much wider range of readers than their experiments in

self-sufficiency would perhaps suggest. Kingsolver does this explicitly, telling the reader that “it’s not necessary to live on a food-producing farm to participate in this culture” of ‘real’ food; instead, “know[ing] that such farms exist, understand[ing] something about what they do, and consider[ing] oneself basically in their court” is all that is needed (Kingsolver 2007: 20–21). Indeed, the repeated refrain in these texts that doing *something*, even if just visiting a farmers’ market or growing a pot of herbs on the windowsill, is a positive step towards a greater connection to one’s food system serves to hail a wider range of subjects beyond card-carrying downshifters.

The locavore literature, like other food media, can be read not as a series of manifestos for literal encounters with food, but rather for affective encounters. These texts harness the imaginative possibilities of fantasy, pleasure and nostalgia to invest (certain kinds of) food with associations of meaningfulness, trust, connection and place. That readers can now so easily express these affective relationships through consumer markets that accommodate ethical consumption values is undoubtedly part of their appeal. But to see these relationships as *only* about the market, rather than as also about the generation of meaning, is to miss something important about the cultural work of these texts.

These texts are not simply about recommending practical solutions to the problems of the food system. They also offer means of rethinking the politics of food in ways that tie affects to meanings and experiences, rather than to specific practices. That their imaginative possibilities have already been harnessed by various sectors of the consumer market suggests that these texts can be seen not so much as manifestos *for* food system change, but as manifestos *of* food system change. The ways in which the key themes of the locavore literature (utopianism, nostalgia, tradition, ‘the local’, the pastoral idyll, etc.) reappear and are reworked across a range of food media texts highlight their capacities as both market and imaginative resources. The next chapter explores this further via an examination of another key international context that has significantly shaped contemporary discourses of food politics: the international celebrity chef. As we will see, the celebrity chef is illustrative of how media and food industries adapt and respond to changing politics with respect to food, in this case through much more thoroughgoing media and food industry partnerships.

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