

Paper Session 4: The New “Local”

Curated by Susan Squires

Traditionally ethnography has been a local-level method for gathering direct, first-hand participant-observations and interviews in order to investigate the daily lives of a group of people, and to discover unmet needs. With the emergence of “digital communities,” “local” has taken on a new meaning for participants and researchers alike. Further, practitioners are now challenged to provide insights and recommendations, which provide value beyond product innovation and design. In this session we will look at two evolving aspects of our practice: how we are using theory to make sense of the new “digital local” and how ethnographic research is evolving frameworks to accommodate the strategies and goals of large corporations that go beyond “local.”

The Luminosity of the Local

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This paper seeks to capture the local in Locavore--both its concrete and symbolic character. Locavore is a kind of nascent identity that emerges from constellations of social relationships, self-defining “food communities”, made up of consumers and farmers and chefs, and food writers and environmentalists of various stripes. These communities live in the blogosphere, tweets and other media as well as through face-to-face relationships and transactions. At their core are representations of the local—in foods, dishes, recipes, meals, places, and persons. Place-bound identities that in some theoretically interesting ways transcend place.

Drawing on classical anthropological theory and recent studies in cultural geography, we explore ways in which the local is invented and given representational power in the creation of face to face and digital communities. Implications for branding, marketing and understanding the continued power of place-bound identities in the very constitution of digitized and globalized worlds.¹

THE LOCAL IN LOCAVORE

Local has assumed new meanings in recent years, new values, new coordinates and new dimensions in our imaginations. Many of the objects, persons, and things we identify with the local have a kind of manna. In them we see something of the spirit, feeling and character of the places they come from. This is what gives them their cultural currency, their magical power, their luminosity.

¹ Special thanks to fellow Practica Group Partner Rita Denny, whose gentle prodding got this paper off the ground. The views expressed in this essay are my own.

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Nowhere does this manna seem to be more conspicuously celebrated than in what is now popularly known as the Locovore Movement. Locovore is a whimsical construction, (the Oxford Dictionary’s new word of the year in 2007), combining the Latin *locus* (place) with *vorare* (swallow or devour). It pulls poetically on the well-established carnivore and herbivore, but imports an entirely different category of foods, those that are “locally sourced”. It is perhaps most generously defined as a commitment to eating foods that are produced locally.

Not surprisingly, the local in Locavore is a social construction. It is imagined, and invented by a loosely and only intermittently connected community of consumers, farmers, artisanal food makers, chefs, purveyors, restaurateurs, and equally important, influential voices (food activists and writers) from the blogosphere and other media. The geographic coordinates of the local are similarly contingent, and variably shared within the community.² Counterbalancing this indeterminacy is the food itself. Unlike the “placeless” commodities available in our supermarkets, locally grown foods “come” from somewhere--designated spaces and places, specific constellations of social relationships and identities, that are deemed to be local.

The local (in Locavore) is not local in the conventional sense. It is not lived and territorialized as a hamlet, or village, or church parish, or town or urban neighborhood. It does not organically foster a sense of affiliation, identity, and attachment that such places do, or once did. It is, in some important ways, quite the opposite of these parochial experiences. The local in Locavore is the creation of highly mobile ideas and values that can be broadly described as creatively oppositional. In supporting local farms and the principles of environmentally sustainable food systems, it creates spaces in which to foster intimate and thick relationships around food and eating that are more or less explicitly in opposition to the price-value transactional ethos of the mainstream food economy.

The local articulates alternative moral and aesthetic spaces as well as oppositional political and economic spaces to the dominant food economy. This is, after all a movement centering on food, an endlessly symbolic and pleasurable medium of social life. Listen to how my local Brooklyn CSA (community supported agriculture) website describes a recent delivery from the farm³:

This week you will be getting the last of our spring kohlrabi and garlic scapes, along with a head of Romaine lettuce, a bunch of Swiss chard, frilly and dinosaur kale, summer squashes and scallions. Some of you will be getting cucumbers, and others will be getting snap peas. The fruit share will consist of sweet cherries. The flower share is a mix of larkspur, snapdragons,

² Locally produced is always situationally defined, but generally is circumscribed to be within 100 or 200 miles of the place where it is marketed, and presumably consumed.

³ The CSA (community supported agriculture) has developed an innovative model for the distribution of farm products to consumers by drawing them into farm production as shareholders in the seasonal harvest of a farm. CSA members make an upfront investment in a farm, committing to share the risk and reward of the harvest season. Their investment gives farmers the reliable funding needed to run their operations.

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campanula and sunflowers, depending on your site. Next week you should receive more salad and cooking greens, cucumbers and squashes, the first of our sweet peppers and white cipollini onions, and bulb fennel. Snap beans and sweet corn harvests are still a couple of weeks away. Tomatoes are about three weeks away.

This vividly descriptive note takes us right into the world of food plants and farm production. It is implicitly educational (who has heard of dinosaur kale). The sheer variety of plants listed sets the promise of discovery. It models a relationship between farm and consumer that combines a sense of bounty, of giving and receiving, and of limits: “Some of you will be getting cucumbers, and others will be getting snap peas”. It introduces us to the seasonality of farm production: “the last of our spring kohlrabi,” “the first our sweet peppers,” tomatoes are three weeks away.

CONNECTIVITIES

Such weekly web postings are, no doubt, singing to the choir. They suppose, but also have a hand in creating a moral community, who share values, and tastes, and more diffusely, ethical and political commitments. Blog Links on the site take us to “*What Your Neighbors Are Cooking: Strawberry Upside-Down Cake with Cardamom from fellow member Katherine*”, and “*What to Make With Summer Squash*”, as well as an announcement for an upcoming talk by a Will Allen, Milwaukee food activist, on the “*Good Food Revolution*”.⁴

My CSA web site casts a neighborly connection among a relatively diverse group of Brooklynites from a densely inhabited cityscape, with farm and farmers, the Windflower Farm near Saratoga to be specific, three hours north of NYC. The link to the CSA Facebook page provides a space for mundane transactions like swapping work-shifts with fellow members or splitting a CSA share. And from The Windflower Farm Corkboard (another link) we can see photos and hear running reflections on the workings of the farm, from Ted, Victoria, and Dareen, the blogging farmers of Windflower Farm.⁵ Here is a recent posting:

Andrea has been working hard to secure our tomato harvest for the season since we discovered some disease on the plants in our greenhouse and high tunnel. Removing the infected leaves and spraying the plants with copper were the only way to save the seedlings,

⁴ The Locavore movement falls under the big tent of the Slow Food movement. Like Slow Food, its politics are primarily educational. Its ambition to transform our food system begins with teaching about the moral, political, nutritional and culinary values of locally grown foods. The food itself is cast as a transformative agent.

⁵ Postings on the website and Corkboard give readers an intimate view of the material conditions of farm production, a kind of weekly primer on where, and from whom, their food is coming. In the process, these reports work to build affective ties between the farm and its material supporters.

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and she diligently kept up with the weekly and sometimes daily process. So, when you see tomatoes this season, be sure to thank her for the hard work.

In such ways the local becomes a discursive space within a dense, lively and far-reaching web ecology. It is just a short hop from my CSA website to a Kick Starter site with a Vimeo link for the City Chicken Project, “building chicken coops and advancing food justice in NYC neighborhoods” or to the Just Food twitter site which revolves around the mission of “making sustainable locally grown food accessible to all” where you can follow RT @ Slow Food USA who is urging you to become a “Veggie Educator.” These overtly political links cohabit with a link to local Chef Joshua, teaching us how to keep our CSA greens from going bad in the fridge before we can eat them, and recipe links for Mark Bittman of the NY Times, and Smitten Kitchen, both unabashed dot com food writer cooks.

To paraphrase Pred and Watts (1992), it is through these digital connections that the local becomes global becomes local again. The threads one could follow here are countless and the degrees of connectedness within this community are quite variable. One can ponder, for example, how engaged the typically distracted Brooklyn commuter coming to pick up his CSA share is in the workings of Windflower Farm, much less the politics of Slow Food, food justice and sustainability. Disparate levels of engagement or connectivity, from the glancing to the near totalizing, are common to any networked community of interest.

PLACE MAKING

In fact our distracted Brooklynite’s contribution to the creation of the local is rather modest. He comes for the food, his weekly share, some squash, some greens, a bunch of beets, a loaf of bread and dutifully reports for his one work shift a season, manning the produce bins. And he is dimly aware that, in doing so, he is partaking in something that is both abstract and concrete. The food he carries home embodies the local, and so too, more diffusely, the local is enmeshed in the dishes, the tastes, the sense of pleasure and conviviality that “comes” from food to table.

These “things” are creations as well. As Durkheim (1912) would tell us, they are invested in meaning through the social relationships they embody. This ultimately is what gives them their manna. They are folded into food traditions, shared recipes, and shared tastes that form the basis of shared identities and affiliations. And perhaps most importantly here, they are instrumental in the creation of places around and through which the local takes on geographic and phenomenological shape. In my Brooklyn neighborhood, we have not only the tomatoes et.al. from Windflower Farm, but also myriad other “local” sources of seasonal fruits and vegetables, honey, eggs, fish, beef, artisanal cheese, bread, and wines that can be found at our weekly farmers market, food coop, “farm to table” restaurants and many other purveyors.

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In the relatively passive activity of consuming “local food,” we are participating in the creation of places, a loosely connected network of farms, markets and other sites—both “virtual” and physical. This place-making capacity is at the heart of the local in Locavore. Heather Paxon (2010) captures the spirit of this “reterritorialization” in her ethnographic study of the efforts of US artisanal cheese makers to adapt traditional French notions of *terrior* to talk about (position, in marketing terms) who they are and what they and their products are all about to consumers. She writes:

“By calling attention to material conditions of production, US experiments with *terrior* offer opportunity for reterritorialization—for drawing meaningful lines of connection among people, culture, and landscape to invest rural places anew with affective significance and material relevance” (Paxon 2010: 446).

For Locavores, “calling attention to the material conditions of production” begins with the food itself, its seasonality, its flavors, its culinary possibilities, its nutritional goodness, and its protean quality to create relationships between people--new identities, new places, new attachments. So for example, the detailed and human reporting from my CSA farm strives to create thick, informationally rich connections between farm and consumers, drawing the later into the ups and downs of farm life and turning the typically abstracted act of consumption into a form of participation in the creation of “the local”.⁶ We consumers, in our characteristically fragmented lives, may have only intermittent and glancing connections to these sites and places but our commitment to eating local foods contributes however modestly to their ongoing “material relevance.”

POETICS

The local is also a form of knowing, in its most telegraphic, “knowing where my food comes from”, which presupposes in our food economy a relatively privileged position. It is “situated knowledge”, in Donna Harraway’s terms, which pulls together people with similar tastes and interests and ways of locating themselves in the world (Harraway 1988: 583). More bluntly, it creates social boundaries, which undeniably is a part of its representational power and attraction, despite the ardent attempts of food activists to democratize this space and perhaps even more ambitiously to democratize tastes. Its poetics shift between a notably “foodie” emphasis on pleasure, discovery, conviviality and personal enrichment, a activist rhetoric of “food miles” and “food justice,” and the localized specialized “rural” and craft knowledge of farmers and artisanal producers. Once again, a posting from my CSA farm:

⁶ This is the kind of calculus tied to eating locally, that Carlo Petrini, pioneer of Slow Food, describes as turning consumers into “coproducers” (2009: xii). Others, no doubt in recognition of the “anti-consumerist” ethos of the Locavore movement have spurned the term consumer in favor of “eater” which seems to be a rather awkward and narrowing label. I opt to stick with consumer in its broadest sense, presupposing a social and economic relationship.

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We know you like your food from the farm, but did you know that a lot of your medicine is also growing right under your feet? This fun weekend getaway at Windflower is designed to teach you some fundamentals about herbal healing that can easily be brought back to Brooklyn. We'll learn the basics of plant identification while walking the gorgeous land of Windflower, drying herbs, making teas, infusions, and tinctures, and using food as your first line of defense. Also on the agenda are an elderberry wine tasting at a local neighboring farm, an excursion to hunt for antique botanical illustrations, and time on your own to just enjoy being out of the city.

Here is an undeniably specific aesthetic--a way of knowing, and so creating a particular landscape. While I would guess that few members completely embrace the intimate and totalizing relationship this dispatch poses between person and farm, it does present, in open hearted fashion, an invitation to participate in building an alternative landscape and identity-- integrating creatively oppositional visions of person and place (see Darby 2000, Donovan 2001). Notice once again the primary role of plants and foods in creating affective and material attachments--“drying herbs, making teas, infusions and tinctures, and using food as your first line of defense.”

Articulations like this more or less explicitly pose the question “what counts as local” which can be a contested issue within activists’ circles. It also situates the local, here represented in a humble CSA, distributed on a member’s driveway in Prospect Heights Brooklyn, within a global network of highly mobile ideas and images. In fact it would be difficult to disentangle local efforts at remaking our relationships to food from globally circulating identities that are taking shape in the creation of alternative “food systems.”⁷

The local is, as we have seen a discursive space, created, by connectivities, forged face to face and, in no small part, on the web. But it is also, by its own definition, spatially prescribed. Its transformation from being a discursive space that lives in our moral and political imaginations to a geographic space with actual physical coordinates that then has the power to reignite our imaginations happens through an ongoing process of place making, which after all the talk is over, is born out of social relationships created around food. It is food that provides the luminous local, with “the husk of material reality” and keeps it from floating into thin air (Evans-Pritchard 1956).

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⁷ This is the relatively influential space occupied by food activists such as Alice Waters (2008), Michael Pollan (2006), and Carlo Petrino (2009), who situate Locavore within a holistic frame of environmental stewardship of farmland and cultural stewardship of foods and food traditions. These multilayered ethical, political, environmental and culinary values and commitments all have their refractions in the creation of the local.

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