

Final Written Report  
Professional Development Grant

“Heritage Killing: Intimacies of Animal Death and the Ethical Elisions of the New Local  
Food/Farming Movement”

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## Restatement of Problem

The paper I presented at Mercyhurst College's annual *Colloquium on the Americas* (April 2012) examined the unusual articulation of ethical relations to animals in the new American locavore movement and the emerging sustainable agricultural projects that have become associated with that movement. I focused on the cultural arenas of documentary film and food writing and asked the following central question: how does violence against animals become re-inscribed in representations of the practice of "mindful" farming and the radical reconsideration of eating? And specifically for this colloquium I asked: how do such self-styled "radical" movements of reform participate in the narrative remaking of animals into food?

My aim was to disentangle the logic of various forms of localism to understand how the critique leveled at contemporary modes of industrial agricultural production, processing, and distribution/consumption frequently and surprisingly elides thorny questions of animal relations, questions that would appear to be consistent with those asked elsewhere in the profound reconsideration of farming and food. This ethical bypass or inconsistency is especially remarkable in the context of the often stated principles professed by the local farm-to-table advocates, most notably regarding expanded notions of community, issues of justice, reformulations of health and well-being, and re-evaluations of anthropocentrism (of human excesses of power in relation to the non-human world), but also in the context of such affects as care, intimacy, and the re-imagining of limitation as abundance.

While I recognize that these are not monolithic movements, cultural activity like the marked proliferation of documentary films as well as the political activity of such organizing groups as the National Young Farmers' Coalition has begun to create a regulatory discourse that is naturalizing the association between animal violence and apparently revolutionary agriculture and consumption practices. In order to make sense of the development of this discourse of ethical considerations I examined a representative sample of the recent surge of food/farming related documentaries of the last five years including such films as *Food, Inc.*, *No Impact Man*, and *To Market, To Market To Buy a Fat Pig*, as well as food writing such as Simon Fairlie's *Meat: A Benign Extravagance* and notable food/farming blogs like Jenna Woginrich's "Cold Antler Farm," all in an effort to describe these movements in effective terms.

## Review of Research Opportunity

Each year Mercyhurst College hosts a colloquium exploring significant facets of American culture, bringing together scholars, artists, activists, and other professionals associated with the year's theme. The focus for this year was "Food and Foodways in the Americas," and the organizers were able to attract literary scholars, film critics, Native American activists, and creative writers for the event. The relative small size of the colloquium allowed all participants to attend each session and develop a continuing dialogue, which proved to be effective in stimulating quite a few extended exchanges.

## Summary of Findings

Through the extended process of researching, writing, and presenting and discussing the paper in the colloquium, I found that my speculations regarding the ethical gaps and the causes of those elisions are a generally strong explanation for the wide-scale, accepted continuation of slaughter and violence against animals in the locavore movement (in both that movement's theory and practice) as it is represented in film and food writing.

Proponents of "slow food" and local economies that encompass agriculture and agricultural markets emphasize the long history and habit of animal use in foodways, often relying on historical views that invoke family lineage and a sometimes vague or inaccurate formulation of traditional Native American/hunter practices of "maximum use" of animals, what historian William Cronon describes in another context as a logic of modern efficiency. Thus, this nostalgic view of "how things used to be" participates in a romantic mythos of timeless sustainability, occluding not only serious questions of the actual necessity of animals in agriculture and diet but more importantly the need to address legitimate contemporary concerns about the moral standing of animals. In short, this narrative past becomes a convenient refuge from current ethical considerations.

I also found that this revisionist history is cloaked in a pseudo-ethics rife with internal inconsistencies that further enables not a radical re-thinking of where our food comes from, but rather a continuation of human narcissism and self-aggrandizement under the guise of mindful consideration of the non-human world. In other words, locavores promote a critique of anthropocentrism, a leveling of need and obligation where humans are not at the center of concern or the top of hierarchies, but their explanations and actions betray their continued human-centeredness. The archive of films and texts I examined repeatedly showed that attentiveness itself all too frequently becomes the endpoint rather than the means to complex ethical relations with the non-human world, especially when it comes to animals. This attentiveness consists of an aura, I have concluded, of care, intimacy, and spirituality that is meant to demonstrate transcendence: in the process of animal slaughter, the slaughterer characteristically reports a deep religious connection to the animal who is killed. Obviously, the sentiment is experienced only by the human who not only gets to claim to be profoundly moved but also feels satisfied, even self-congratulatory, about destroying a life, while the experience of the animal is slaughter, an end of life the animal obviously neither seeks nor desires. Food writing and documentary film show that this aura is typically borrowed by those who consume the carcasses of animals from this ostensibly ethical kill. Patrons of local farmer's markets report that they feel good knowing that animals are slaughtered compassionately, continuing the chain of human benefit over and against the absolute loss experienced by animals in their deaths.

Thus, while this apparently revolutionary movement carries legitimacy in its critique of contemporary food-related industries and practices in many ways (not under examination here), it is unusually conservative, even retrograde in its consideration of animal politics, and it also contradicts the stated ethos of mindfulness as it perverts notions of care and spirituality where killing becomes kindness.

## Conclusions

The colloquium afforded me the opportunity to meet with other leading experts in the field of food studies, to think through these ideas carefully, to make a fairly exhaustive review of contemporary films and food writing directly related to my research problem, and to develop the paper into manuscript form. I am grateful to Mercyhurst College for sponsoring the colloquium and especially to Dr. Christina Riley Brown for organizing and hosting the event with great professionalism and cheer. While the publication opportunity I had hoped to pursue did not work out, I have plans to finish revising the manuscript and submit it to journals in food culture. This grant was valuable in helping me continue my research interests in environmentally related textual studies, especially from an American Studies perspective. This research additionally informs my teaching of environmental literature and film.

I sincerely appreciate the support of the university in helping me develop this project.

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