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"Eating in an Uncertain World:
An essay on the exclusions and erasures of local food"

Abstract:
The common sense about local food is that it is essentially a virtuous project. Local food markets are said to embed market actors in the ennobling relationships of communal life while shielding them from the corrupting influence of global capitalism. That presumption of virtuousness, however, rests on an illegitimate local-global binary that posits the global as the privileged site of capital, and the local as the privileged site of resistance. The binary is especially damaging in this context, as it renders “nonlocal” concerns illegible — with persistent neglect of issues facing migrant farmworkers being only the most egregious example.

The analytic focus of the dissertation is on the cultural logic of local food as it emerges in concrete discursive and material practices, with particular attention to the ways that the messiness and contradictions of practice are managed and rationalized. Drawing on data collected over 15 months working in various local food markets in San Francisco, California, supplemented by a critical reading of discussions of local food in popular media, I find that local food markets embed market actors in a romantic discourse of connection and authenticity while shielding them from recognizing their own participation in racial and class exclusions.

The major contributions of this study include a critique of the methods and theory of local food studies. I argue against a methodological localism that privileges local “stakeholders,” and for more concerted attention to the constitutive presence of nonlocal people and things. Theoretically, I suggest that localness is better understood as performative, rather than as a social elaboration of a pregiven geographic fact. Other scholars in the field have noted troubling patterns of exclusion in local food markets, and have called for “reflexive localism” to address the worst tendencies while preserving the centrality of localness. But if we follow through on the alternative theoretical and methodological premises I suggest, then the widely acknowledged shortcomings turn out not to be “tendencies” at all. The findings here show, instead, that the exclusions and erasures of local food markets are built into the very practices that realize localness in the world.