Final word:Putting the "alter" in alternative food futures

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Putting the "Alter" in Alternative Food Futures

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It is the wickedest of problems. If what we know is truly embedded in practice, in our routines, habits, and embodied performances (Carolan 2011), than we have to *do* food futures before we perceive them. How do you enact an alternative reality before thinking it? Without coming right out and saying it, this Special Issue collectively attempts to make sense of this complex emergent nexus between practice, thought, doing, and being. It also shows, leaving the reader (hopefully) more hopeful about the future of food, that enacting alternatives is not

impossible. Practice might not make perfect but it does create difference. And there is something immensely hopeful about that.

There are many ways one can read this empirically and conceptually rich suite of papers. Indeed, each reading elicited within me its own unique flight of experience—a collection of affective encounters that generated feelings of possibility that prefigure a broader collective politics. One recurring encounter allowed me to locate this Special Issue within a still fledgling, but maturing rapidly, body of scholarship seeking to move beyond a totalizing economic narrative, as exemplified by recent research on, for example, "pious neoliberalism" (Atia 2012), "progressive neoliberalism" (Lewis 2009), and the "domestication of neoliberalism" (Smith and Rochovsha 2007). Instead of embracing "a kind of structuralist paranoia" (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 62), which inadvertently reproduces the very dominant order it seeks to critique by choosing to focus on sameness rather than difference, these articles add to the patchwork of practices and performances that show us a world full of "diverse economies" (Brown 2009). I will now address in no particular order the papers and the hopeful message I gleaned from each.

Rebecca Duell seeks to further disrupt an already messy politics of local food. Is "local food", as an actual thing, just another example of capital's uncanny ability to follow in the footsteps of activists and capital-ize upon their successes? There is without question what could be called dominance-power embedded within this politics, as evidence by *what* local food has tended to fetishize (e.g., geophysical distance over social justice). Yet as Duell reminds us there is also at work what I like to call difference-power within these micro-movements, as

evidenced by the multitude of performances from below that work to substitute passive consumer choice for active citizen choice (Carolan 2014a). The politics of local food is indeed weighed down by the weight of capitalist logics but this heaviness should not be confused with totality. For as Mikulak (2013, p. 22) points out, "the micro-utopian embodiments of alternative values" have the ability to break through the seemingly impenetrable concreteness of present structures, if we only allow them the opportunity.

Cororina Tucker takes up the subject of taste's sociological fluidity, specifically as it applies to eating animals "nose-to-tail". The materiality of offal—liver, kidneys, testicles, eyes, and the like—has changed little over the last century. And yet few have a taste for this food anymore. Indeed, many would even question whether "food" is the correct designate for these artifacts, preferring instead that of "waste". Tucker's fascinating empirical exploration into the entanglements of taste speaks not of a collective movement toward any global taste profile. Taste is not something we think but something we *do* (Carolan 2011). And because consumption practices vary widely so do our *doings* of taste. This study reminded me of the research done by the American anthropologist Marvin Harris (1986, p. 13). Roughly 30 years ago, in *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*, Harris made the delightfully hopeful observation that "we can eat and digest everything from rancid mammary gland secretions to fungi to rocks," or cheese, mushrooms, and salt if you prefer using culturally accepted euphemisms. Many view a "nose-to-tail" diet as unthinkable. That would appear as an insurmountable barrier to changing diets, until it is realized how cultural practices set the boundaries between the probable and improbable. Change those and a whole new world of possibilities, and tastes, opens up.

The food future offered by Claire Parfitt might initially sound dystopic, the "enclosure" of genetic resources into the circuit of capital accumulation. This narrative is further reinforced after one takes into consideration the general trajectory of intellectual property rights, the TRIPs (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement, and biopiracy. There is plenty of dominance-power at work here, as evidenced by how the World Trade Organization, through TRIPs, has been able to essentially homogenize patent law around much of the world (Carolan 2010). But let us not be too quick to ignore difference-power, those spaces of hope that short-circuit processes of capital accumulation. Partfitt hints at these spaces too, such as when she makes note of the more than 50 organic farmers in the US who brought suit against Monsanto. Other examples would include spaces being created by *La Via Compensia* or the heterogeneous network of seed savers that stretches across six continents. Or, to take a very recent development, just days ago—October 16, 2013, to be exact—a judge in Mexico City placed an indefinite ban on genetically-engineered corn within Mexico. Effective immediately, companies such as Monsanto and DuPont/Pioneer are no longer allowed to plant or sell their corn within the country's borders (Robbins, 2013). Parfitt is spot on, with her sketch of one particular aspect of a food future the agrifood industry would like to enact. Their grip on the future is not monolithic, however. The challenge then becoming identifying those spaces of difference (and thus of hope) and multiplying them.

Alison Henderson provides a timely piece on the health claims around food, by asking what counts as healthy and who is doing that counting? Food companies today are busy trying to find ways to blur boundaries between medicine and food, as high tech ingredients promise, drawing upon terms mentioned by Henderson, to "harness the power of nature" in order to

"optimize" health. As Henderson warns, however, we must be cautious of these claims as they are tied to situated knowledge systems that are attempting to enact very distinct food futures. Let us not forget there are many ways to understand "health". The venerable World Health Organization (nd) has been defining the term since 1948 as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". How well do the so called super foods included in Henderson's analysis stack up to this definition? Were they produced sustainably? Were the workers, along the entire commodity chain, fairly compensated for their labor? Were migrant laborers used and if so how were they treated (a question particularly relevant for products originating out of the United States)? You cannot make health claims about a product, if we were to follow the WHO's definition, without first looking into these questions. As Henderson notes in her concluding paragraph, not all situated knowledges—and thus situated food futures—see these super foods as being all that super or all that healthy.

Margaret Forster's paper is a delightfully hopeful analysis of Māori agency as it plays through and around a very Western-centric style of Foucaultian governmentality. The Māori literally embody a repertoire of *doings* that have the potential of making the un-thought thinkable and the undoable routine. Forster points to a number of tantalizing examples of where these *doings* are creating meaningful points of difference in how value creation is being done, such as the Ngai Tahu sustainable dairying project and how it integrates Māori environmental and socio-cultural goals with economic development. Some might take these Māori economic ventures as instances of dominance; a case of uncreative destruction—or, to

put it even more simply, death by neoliberalism. But that is too simple a reading of what is going on here. These are cases of multiplication, not of subtraction.

I conclude mentioning the paper by Andrea Brower, which parallels in many ways some of my own recent musings (see e.g., Carolan 2013, 2014b). Brower highlights the literal eventfulness of "the possible". This speaks to the point I made with my opening salvo when I wrote that to know is to do, which, from the standpoint of enacting social change, means you have to *do* something different before you can *think* something different. (For examples of difference being enacted I recommend the recent Special Issue in *New Zealand Geographer*—vol. XX, no. XX—highlighting the work of the Biological Economies group). I commend Brower for taking up the task of attempting to name and explore the "fissures in the logics that sustain capital" (or capitals, as these logics are never uniformly expressed) and that limit "imaginations of the possible", though I would add that to explore these fissures is more than just an intellectual task. To explore difference is to *do* difference, which, especially when it comes to food, means occasionally getting your hands dirty (such as in the case of saving seeds or engaging in guerrilla gardening) and clothes torn (an occupational hazard, for example, of dumpster diving).

This brings me full circle to the paper's title: putting the "alter" in alternative food futures. The trick is not that we need to come up with fully formed food alternatives; such thinking is not only misplaced but dangerous as it further subtracts from the diversity of difference we ought to be striving for. The goal, rather, ought to be about creating spaces that *alter* routine, thought, affectivities, and, ultimately, being. Perhaps we can think of this aim as

one towards a politics of fermentation—an admittedly messy activity whereby people brew themselves toward something/s new and that while never entirely in accordance with itself is never directed from above either (Latour 1999, p. 247).

Harvey (1990, p. 423) writes of the need to "penetrate the veil of fetishisms", such as by learning "how space and time get defined by these material processes which give us our daily bread". Not that this claim, even in 1990, was particularly novel. Well before then Pierre Bourdieu, Michel De Certeau, Agnes Heller, and Henri Lefebvre (among others) had been busily elaborating on how sociocultural fields and/or space constitute and are constituted by processes and practices (versus those that see these practices as dictated by some totalizing logic working "behind the backs" or "over the heads" of social actors, as Althusser (1979, p. 180). To be sure, some networks and assemblages are of greater "weight"—to use a metaphor evoked by Lefebvre (1991, p. 366)—than others. But such pressures or tendencies do not equal destiny, as everyday practices inevitably reflect the "ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" (Certeau 2011, pp. xviii). That is one of the things that captured my interested in this suite of papers; not the fact that the world is performed and enacted by our everyday practices but how certain practices are made strange, become altered, and lead to novel enrollments/disenrollments.

I have wondered what role my situtatedness as a scholar in the United States played in this. The articles pointed out to me different doings and beings, differences that were amplified by my non-antipode location (for instance, I know little about the beings and becomings that are the Māori). I often hear, for example, from students about how they get

depressed when they read case studies from around that world—the weight of neoliberalism is indeed hard to miss. That is easy to do, if you choose to focus on dominance-power. Perhaps we choose to ignore difference precisely because it is strange and choose to focus on dominance because it is familiar.

On that note, I will conclude (without fear of offending) by saying that I found this grouping of articles to be very strange. Strange is good, at least in this case, because it is disarming. And what better way to image altering food futures than from a position where the veil of fetishisms, to evoke Harvey's phrase, if not being penetrated is at least sufficiently decentered to see around it.

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