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FARMERS’ MARKETS IN PHILADELPHIA: REHUMANIZING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

By

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Abstract

This thesis considers the practices, behaviors, and ideas of urban consumers shopping at farmers' markets in Philadelphia. This study presents an analysis of shoppers' experiences at a non-mainstream site of consumption. The data results from the anthropological methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The central concern inspiring these methods was an understanding of consumers' motives for coming to the farmers' markets. Five themes emerged in the analysis of this data: Consumers' appreciation for the physical characteristics of the products; their articulated political awareness of the impact of consumption; the valuing of social interaction; the role of nostalgia; and the comparison of the farmers' market, as a site of consumption, to the corporate-chain grocery store. This study contends that consumers and vendors at the farmers' market interact in ways which rehumanize the act of consumption. Consumption is rehumanized when shoppers are motivated to shop by a recognized connection to other human beings, and to food sources. Consumers value their experience at the farmers' market, and the goods which they buy there, in human-centered terms. While consumers state that they come to the market in relation to the physical, political, social, and moral consequences which they perceive in this action, it is from the recognized human connection that these ideas draw their meaning.
Acknowledgements

In addition to all the small-scale producers and farmers still getting their hands dirty, I would like to express my gratitude to Lisa and Ike Turner of North Star Orchards, for their valuable time, reflections, and most importantly, for growing the BEST apples and Asian pears I have ever eaten. And to Jay Dautcher, for feeding a starving student with his genuine passion for critical thought, just in time.
Little Miracles

There had been an ominous tone hanging over the Saturday farmers’ market, as gray clouds gathered overhead. Already an hour into the morning, the usual steady current of customers had so far been an irregular, weak, pulse. Farmers were braced as the threatening morning finally gave way to a storm. Skip, the college drop-out, turned ‘fresh greens’ vendor, immediately lost his awning in the gales. Signs not yet blown away, were quickly sealed in zip-lock bags. Fresh cut flowers were put back in the truck, only the hardy and heavy were permitted to remain on display. Pumpkins and potatoes weathered the storm as farmers battened down the hatches, and faced the assault of rain, wind, and an unpromising customer turnout.

And still, despite the fear lying in every vendor’s mind, customers came. Outfitted with raincoats, umbrellas, and unseen layers, the customers came. They exchanged wet dollars for onions, garlic, Asian pears and goat cheese. Despite the downpour, one shopper still wanted to know ‘How is the farm doing?’ and whether the freshly butchered lamb would ‘be good for Thursday’s dinner party?’ Rain could not discourage these dedicated customers from making their carefully planned purchases. Rather, the rain epitomized the farmers’ market experience, here was the source of food expressed at all levels: in the creation of goods, the sustenance of a lifestyle, and in the ultimate surrender to nature. If anything, perhaps the weather was a test of the commitment to these choices customers made daily and weekly, choices bound in distinctly framed ideas of quality and value.

The weather also helped to mask the usual disparity between buyer and seller. Raincoats and bulky fleeces hid the contrast between the worn clothes of farmers, and the cosmopolitan look of customers. Polished faces and well coiffed hair dissolved under the wet skies. City and

\[Note: Throughout the remainder of this paper, the use of single quotation marks is reserved for direct quotes from shoppers.\]
country did not seem so different. Instead the weather illuminated the real essence of the marke;
human beings engaging in the age-old process of trade. A process marked by smiles and the
fostering of relationships.

As the rain continued pouring, one shopper slowly made her way through the row of
hunkered down vendors. Heavily laden with produce she commented, ‘The markets are a little
miracle in the city’. The farmers’ markets are more than mere places to get food, they are an
oasis of human interaction and connection to food sources in an otherwise dehumanizing world
of urban consumption.

Within the city, the farmers’ market carves out a distinct space of locally grown and
produced goods which almost seem to defy the concrete walls and buildings looming overhead.
While the traditional dress of an Amish farmer may function like the shiny packaging of grocery-
store bought goods, as it draws the attention of the shopper and suggests ideas of authenticity
and integrity. In the end, the packaging is thrown away. The human relationships and exchanges
which sustain the farmers’ markets are not discarded. Human beings manage the experience of
shopping at the farmers’ market, in contrast to the instrumental mediation of industrial
packaging, market-centered advertising, and algorithmically based spatial plans, found within the
grocery store.

Max Weber describes the “typical ‘urbanite’ as a man who does not supply his own food
need on his own land.” Weber implies that by virtue of his/her landlessness, the urban dweller is
automatically dependent upon an external food source. Contemporary grocery stores create
elaborate facades to mask and supplant this dependency, and distort consumers’ relationships
with this food source. The United States Department of Agriculture, in a paper entitled, US
Farmers’ Markets 2000: A Study of Emerging Trends, concludes that the farmers’ market is “a
common facility or area where multiple farmers/growers gather on a regular recurring basis to sell
a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other farm products directly to customers." This definition provides little insight as to what occurs when consumers and producers directly interact in this setting. In contrast, writer Padraic Burke suggests that farmers’ markets are places where urban realities are transformed, “as soon as we enter a market, we are almost immediately aware that it is one of the few places in the city where economic and social distinctions tend to fade.” Clearly there is something at work within these impermanent structures of exchange. Anthropological fieldwork has long been involved in describing the ways in which human societies create meaning in their lives through customs and practices. It is the intention then of this anthropological study, to examine the descriptions of consumers’ experiences at farmers’ markets in the city of Philadelphia, and to consider how they may contrast with shopping at the urban alternative, the grocery store.

The Farmers’ Market

They arrive in old and new pick-up trucks and Volkswagen vans, bearing loads of collapsible tables, metal change boxes, and crates full of fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, and baked goods. The farmers trickle into the city. Setting up temporary stalls from which they will sell a season’s yield, vendors at the farmers’ market depend on the fact that they will leave the city carrying less. They line up along streets and sidewalks, and carefully construct vibrant displays. Earth is juxtaposed with concrete. And shoppers, perhaps intrigued by the unfamiliar scents, colors, and company sharing their urban passageways, take the time to stop, and look around. They leave with bulging bags.

An onlooker might wonder whether the farmers’ markets have changed much throughout the over three hundred years in which they have been setting up at urban centers across the United States. The popularity and presence of farmers’ markets has undoubtedly reflected
society's response to the dramatic social and material changes that have occurred in history. Still, there are two fundamental components of this urban-rural connection that are typical wherever one finds a collection of small scale rural producers selling their goods in the city: community and rurality. Writing on the rebirth of the urban market that has been occurring in cities since the 1960's, Burke describes the farmers' market as, "a direct and living link with our past and an unstructured social environment where a variety of people can gather to share both an urban and natural experience." Amid haystacks, wooden crates, and pickup trucks, farmers' markets remind urban consumers of their involvement with systems of rural production and social exchange.

Mary Douglas writes that "Consumption uses goods to make firm and visible a particular set of judgments in the fluid processes of classifying persons and events." She suggests that consumption operates within particular cultural bounds, yet Douglas goes on to say that "goods have another important use: they also make and maintain social relationships." In the direct transfer of goods at the farmers' market, consumers dynamically help to create a space of social and material interdependency. It is from this role of social relationships, that the idea of community begins to take shape. If we agree with Tonnies that, "Community is a state of being-in-relationship to others" then the relationships which are maintained through consumption at the farmers' markets may even sustain a greater notion of community. Kenneth P. Wilkinson in his description of The Community in Rural America defines "community as a social bond shared in interactions." Community at the farmers' market is thus not only created by relationships, it is more importantly, conditioned and colored by them and their symbolic interactions.

Wilkinson also suggests that, "society is an abstraction one can experience only indirectly or symbolically. The empirical manifestation of society is interaction in localities." During symbolic and real interactions at the farmers' market then, abstractions of rural and urban
societies are invoked. Consumers connect with these abstractions of rurality in rare urban opportunities. In the irregular contours of recently harvested fruits and vegetables, the huge worn hands of a traditionally dressed Amish farmer, and in the makeshift quality of vendors’ stands, consumers indirectly and symbolically interact with non-urban realities. The farmers’ market is a living breathing space of imported rurality.

Members of this temporary community identify with the labels of “urban” and “rural” to varying degrees. Consumers revealed a wide range of personal backgrounds and histories. Some had grown up in cities, rural communities, summer homes, and even other countries. Additionally, not all “consumers” actually consumed at the market. Although I use the term “consumer” and “shopper” interchangeably in identifying the non-vendor individuals who peopled the farmers’ market, this is a conceptual category and does not authentically capture what these actors always did at the market. Unlike the grocery store where people do not usually go for a stroll, to meet a friend, or hang out, the people I interviewed and observed at the farmers’ market were often participating in the market community in ways other than consumption.

Similarly, vendors came to market with diverse identities, and through complex personal processes. While Skip had been a philosophy major before he decided to leave college, one middle-aged “farmer” had dedicated most of his life to being a college professor. Another farmer grew up on a dairy farm and after leaving that way of life for a time, returned to the country to raise free range cattle and chicken instead. One vendor had a former life as a chef, and another as the owner and operator of a small business. Even the Amish farmers had recent converts. While many vendors had been at the markets for generations, typically there was a much less static relationship between vendor and market, and to the identity of a “farmer”. This delving into the complex backgrounds of both vendor and shopper is not integral to my analysis and because of
this, I will use the labels of both “farmer” and “vendor”.

What is of interest to this study is how consumers, in ignoring the complex backgrounds of vendors may actually use this static sense of rural identity in qualifying their motives for shopping or participating in the community at the market. In his study of rural life in the United States, Dave Rossell suggests a historical link between the literary imagery of the rural farmer and popular perceptions of him/her: “The images and literature of rural life ... offer prime examples of the process whereby the small farmer and the farm became a moral unit, concerned with the improvement of land and life.” This idea of “the moral farmer” may still be active. Such an imagining of rurality may even sustain consumption at the farmers’ market, although it curtails the actual complexity of the farmers’ own identity. Eric Asimov, writing for the *New York Times*, suggested as recently as 1985 that, “a single farmer can constitute an entire ‘Greenmarket’ himself, like a lone lighthouse keeper whose dim beacon signals hearth and home.” Whether or not their personal backgrounds and actual habits support it, the farmers symbolically import rural culture to the city. In their dress, apparent lifestyle, and oftentimes their manners, vendors at the farmers’ markets are visibly different from urban consumers. Furthermore, the unpolished edges of the physical space they create may connote ideas of human morality, and even home. The physical and social space within the farmers’ market encourages an awareness and behavior that is absent in other urban spaces of consumption.

**Theoretical Lens**

The marked difference between consumer experiences at the farmers’ market and grocery store has important suggestions for the study of consumer culture. This analysis of consumer narratives attempts to fill a void within the theoretical discourse surrounding this subject matter. In her exploration of the rise of supermarkets in Australia, Kim Humphrey describes a certain
tension existing between theoretical portrayals of the consumer. This study usefully condenses many of Humphrey's conclusions in an analysis of the history and shape of consumer culture theory, and will consider what insights the farmers' market has for the future of consumerism.

Consumer culture theory may have commodified itself. Academics, the good marketers that they are, have invented an assortment of packages to sell their theories to diverse audiences. Yet these theorists have failed to capture the elusive center of consumer cultures. The academic rendering of the human being within consumer cultures, has either positioned the consumer as a static victim acting within these cultures, or has attempted to capture a more dynamic and complex portrait through a post-modern analysis.

Humphrey describes consumer culture theory as beginning as a form of cultural critique. Examining consumerism historically involved an exploration of the industrial and societal complexes which produced it. I locate four particular moments of cultural critique along this trajectory of theorizing consumer culture, that resonate with the ideas present in this study: consumerism as a catalyst for societal change (Laski), imagined "dream worlds" (Williams), resistance theory, and what I describe as "post modern vagueness".

The mass production which characterized development in industrial and post-industrial nineteenth century capitalist society is largely responsible for the rise of consumerism. While historians have argued that consumerism did not really take shape until after World War II, by the early 1900's writing on the subject was well underway. Humphrey states that "many, though certainly not all, twentieth-century social theorists have tended to interpret consumption as embodying the materialism, social fragmentation and destructive individualism seemingly embedded within the rise of Western modernity and, more recently, post modernity." Early on, consumption theory incorporated negative criticisms of industrial societies' inner natures. Harold J. Laski, one such critic, wrote in 1930, "because our process of consumption is highly
individualistic, because, that is to say, we make no organized effort to supply ascertained demand from the angle of social benefit, there is nothing in the satisfaction of wants that has spiritual principle inherent therein.” Consumerism was thus initially met with harsh criticism and a rather hopeless sense of it’s potential spiritual and societal impact.

Theorists, soon broadened their attention of the changes in manufacturing and consumer practices, to consider other less tangible variables. Rosalind Williams demonstrates an instance of this shift with her depiction of the rise of department stores in the late 19th century in France, and her theory of “dream worlds--a changed pattern of personal and social consciousness in which life was given meaning through consumable things, and the meanings offered were ones that drew on the inner fantasies and desires of the consumer.” Williams thus develops cultural critique of consumer cultures by adding the variable of human creativity to the academic equation. Williams elaborates consumer culture theory from it’s one dimensional beginnings, in contributing the idea of the consumer’s individual agency and capacity to imagine within spaces of consumption. Humphrey extends this idea to suggest that,

retailers develop retail forms and construct retail cultures; they do not create smoothly functioning mass consumer cultures however hard they may try. Consumer cultures arise only in the interaction between those that have something to sell and those who look, listen, watch, wander, feel and sometimes buy... retail environments have no power to make consumer cultures until those environments are peopled.

In the 1980’s the notion of the “subversive consumer” became popular in critical analyses of consumption theory. The subversive consumer rejected the idea that consumer cultures were passively managed by manufacturers and retailers. Instead, consumers were asserting their own demands. Humphrey describes theorists such as John Goldring (Consumers, or Victims?) as expanding the consideration of the experience of the consumer. Writers now suggested the mobilizing potentials behind the masses of consumers and romantically heralded a political consciousness. Still, this moment within the literature differed only in perspective from earlier
works. Despite their positivist portraits, consumers remained divorced from any sense of flexibility, or inner contradictions, within and without the market structure. This fragmented form of analysis, echoed earlier critiques of modernity and merely repositioned the consumer in a new fixed setting. Now, consumers had the choice of either being described as passively controlled by industrial agents, or as active saboteurs in resistance theory. Humphrey criticizes this problematic polarization, “equating popular consumption practices with a politics of resistance ...(is)... expressive of both a critical timidity and an inability to fully confront the difficulties embedded in reformulating a radical critique of the present.”

Theorists have attempted to enliven the subject of consumption in the contribution of what I term “post modern vagueness”. These writers described consumer practices with an almost paralyzing attention to their complexities. Consumers were now diagnosed in consumer theorists’ abstractions, as embodying many complicated and interrelated variables. Daniel Miller offers an example of this in the following decision that:

as a consequence of consumption work, consumption cannot simply be reduced to the nature of the commodity and the consumer is more than simply the process by which the commodity is obtained. Rather through the contribution of intrapsychic, biographical, family, gender and cultural forces, a person-object relation is regulated which in turn gives rise to identities, understanding and everyday practices.

While these contributions certainly do more justice to the inner dynamics and vitality within consumer cultures than earlier critiques, Humphrey adds that, “The result was -- and perhaps still is -- a loss within radical cultural analysis of a sense of anger about the way the world is and a certain timidity of response, involving a muting and even fear of writing critical analysis and of entering the terrain of ‘political value’.” First polarized and muted, the gap within the discourse surrounding consumer cultures now lies in noncommittal writing, a theoretical and apolitical graying of an otherwise vibrant picture.

Rejecting the dichotomy of resistance/acceptance proposed in earlier theory, and carefully avoiding “post modern vagueness” Humphrey suggests that, “Consumer culture is not accepted
or celebrated in its entirety within the recent cultural studies of consumption; rather a structural
analysis is suspended in favor of a discussion of specific consumption practices.” The powerful
idea of this disconnect within the theory becomes more compelling in Humphrey’s notion that,

neither the inscription of meaning by forces outside the individual, nor the
reinscription of meaning by an individual’s actions can be privileged within any
analysis of consumer cultures. Rather, both the processes of inscription and
reinscription are of interest, since it is the dynamic between the two - the space in
between, so to speak - where consumer culture arise.”

It is in this question of how to appreciate the entirety of consumption theory, and still
leave space and integrity for a critical analysis, that this study intends to address. More
specifically, the study attempts to answer a question Humphrey poses of, “how can we both
participate in consumer cultures and radically oppose them; confirm our role as consumers and
undo it?” It is the suggestion of this study, that the farmers’ market is one place where this
paradox of consumption thrives. The theoretical concepts of cultural critique, “dreamworlds”,
resistance theory, and “post-modern vagueness” identify vital organs within the academic
rendering of the anatomy of consumer culture. It is the breath and words however, of the
consumers themselves, that can impart true life to this subject matter.

Sites

Before beginning this section, it is important to note that the markets I visited were either
sponsored by the organization “Farm-to-City”, or the non-profit organization, “Farmers’ Market
Trust”. This study in no way attempts to tease out the many variables of the farmer-sponsor
relationship. This relationship is most often expressed at the bureaucratic level of the sponsor’s
selection of, and alliance with, participating farmers. There are a number of elements involved,
including, but not limited to: farmer’s expressed politics, self-presentation, social success with
consumers, history of conflict with other vendors and or sponsors, and diversity of product.
Sponsors have a fundamental role in creating the socio-physical space of the market, and monitor how the structure of the market takes shape. This study, in drawing attention to the hidden processes at play within the grocery store, does not intend to romanticize or obsfuscate those equally transparent structures supporting the farmers’ market. Rather, it is the focus of this study to compare how particular experiences within each of these consumer spaces differ, and to explore what these differences look like and mean to the people who narrate them. The bureaucratic relationships and processes invisible to consumers do not detract from the meanings and interactions which consumers experience at the market.

There are a number of farmers’ markets which weekly dot the streets of Philadelphia. I based my fieldwork at four of them. This study incorporates my observations from the markets at Clarke Park, Second and South Streets, Passyunk and South Streets, and Seventeenth and South Streets. These four markets took place at different times and days. However, at each market, the same group of vendors would consistently come. Depending on their products, the season begins as early as April, gathers momentum by June and July, and finally winds down in November. Typically, an hour (more or less) before the market would formally start, four to eight vendors would arrive and set up at their predetermined position within the market’s boundaries. Never out of place, vendors would line up along the sidewalk or street, and form a clearly delineated space to accommodate and engage a stream of soon to be arriving consumers. Free from the confines of a vehicle, the farmer would unburden their carefully packed trucks or vans. Within minutes, farmers assembled tables and awnings and artfully crafted elaborate or simple arrangements of their always diverse product. Leeks, carrots, broccoli, beets, apples and other goods were interspersed with cardboard or wooden containers and handmade labels. Whether alone, or accompanied by a family member, vendors deftly constructed and transported compact settings from mere tables, digital scales, and metal change boxes; their structural
midwives to facilitate the passage of goods and money.

From this general pattern any number of variations might sprout up at a given market. Many times a market would meet at the same place but on more than one day per week, giving it a greater sense of belonging within an area than one which every year scuttles from block to block. A market set in a large park surrounded by trees and a residential neighborhood, had a very different outward feel than one nestled between shops, bars, and glaring neon signs set on a lively commercial street. Similarly different were those markets where there was enough space for vendors to indulge in an arcade formation, rather than lining up along the sidewalk and forming narrow passageways for consumers, opposite to concrete walls. The variation of both consumers and vendors also gave certain accents to each market, of which participants in the market were aware. One evening, while interviewing a self-styled ‘urban farmer’ I asked whether she made distinctions between the shoppers at the different markets she attended. ‘Oh yes,’ she replied, ‘Down at Second and South you got your ‘center city sophisticates’ and here you have...’ she stopped, conscious of a shopper visually grazing her stand. To both our surprise, the shopper offered a suggestion for the words she was looking for, ‘At Clarke Park, we’re what you call the ‘third world’’ she said, and referred to the surrounding community composed of mainly low income residents and emigrants.

While the markets, and particular consumers and vendors who people them, could be differentiated from one another in a number of ways, these distinctions fall outside my analysis. It became clear that most consumers frequently shop at more than one market as one shopper attests, ‘If I missed this [market] because I have a commitment on Thursday, then I know when [there is another market so] I can get my Asian pears.’ The focus of this study lies at the level of overlap there is in the types of responses consumers gave. Since there are no distinctions within consumer narratives in relation to the specific market they shopped at, my analysis will similarly
Methods

The inspiration for this study came from my personal connection to the farmers’ markets in Philadelphia. I grew up in a small town in Maine, since moving to Philadelphia, assimilating to an urban environment has been a part of my daily existence. It was with great relief then, when I finally found myself in a comfortable space, at a farmers’ market, between the awkward neighbors of pumpkins and speeding taxi cabs. After talking with other consumers I learned that many shared this “comfort” in going to the market. The search for the source, shape, and consumer consciousness of this transformative effect of the markets led to my regular market attendance, a job working at the stand of one apple and Asian pear orchard, and a senior undergraduate thesis.

During the last three months of the farmers’ market season, and over two years, I spent between three and nine hours a week visiting and/or working at the markets. My research methods consisted of participant observation and interviews. I compiled over thirty five formal interviews and countless other informal conversations with consumers. This study draws on the analysis of semi-structured interviews. Consumers’ responses elaborated from my central question of “Why do you come to the farmers’ market?” While I often inquired of consumers’ personal histories with the city and farmers’ markets, I generally allowed our interactions to take their own shapes. I did not recognize clear categories for my analysis until the end of the market season, so my interview approach never evolved into any standardized set of questions.

An important characteristic of my fieldwork was the general ease with which I was able to approach consumers. This was perhaps due to the temporal nature of the market. Since most consumers made a conscious choice to shop there, they were sometimes choosing to spend more
time in their purchases, and were perhaps more open to talking with an interviewer. Unlike the confined space of a grocery store with all its bustling bodies and distractions, the outdoor space of the farmers’ market, as well as the more personal nature of the purchase taking place there, helped to warm up many of the consumers, and for lack of a better term, made the experience of interviewing rather natural.

The Data: Consumers’ Motives

I asked one woman shopping at the farmers’ market whether she thought there was anything unique about the experience, she quickly replied, ‘Sure! Can’t you see all that is going on down here?’ This was a typical response. Consumers saw a number of different things ‘going on’ at the farmers’ market, and often linked what they saw to why they come to the market. Consumers also linked these observations of the markets and reasons for their shopping to definitions of the quality of their experiences there, and within the goods they purchased. My analysis of the farmers’ market organizes consumer narratives into five distinct categories. These categories reflect how consumers discuss quality in terms of the physical good itself, a political awareness, nostalgia, the social dimensions of the market, and in comparisons to shopping at the grocery store. Throughout these categories, there is a sustained engagement with my conceptual theme of rehumanization. Consumer responses repeatedly emphasized the centrality of human beings as channeling quality and providing its meaning. This rehumanizing aspect of consumption, where quality depends on human interactions and connections to food sources, distinguishes the farmers’ market from other sites of consumption, and has powerful implications for the future of consumption.
‘The Stuff is Real Good’

‘Good’ was a term which consumers used repeatedly to describe the physical quality of the products they buy at the farmers’ market. In this description, consumers generated a particular vocabulary to express a sense of ‘good’. Words such as ‘organic’, ‘fresh’, and ‘natural’, were used as the key indicators of worth. One shopper confidently surmised that, ‘everything is fresh and good’, and these words were echoed many times over. One shopper, prompted for an immediate image of the farmers’ market, replied ‘The first thing I think of things are fresh, homegrown and I think of things as natural’. These terms were often used interchangeably and consumers speak of ‘organic’ labels rather vaguely. One customer, ‘really much prefer[ed] organic’, while an elderly couple were only, ‘willing to come and spend more on organic occasionally’. Another consumer was simply excited about the ‘fresh wonderful fresh, organic goodies’ of the farmers’ markets. Still another older woman admitted that while, ‘the produce is really fresh, it lasts and is wonderful, I’m not into it [the farmers’ market] for the organics, I mean I like the fact that it is organic, but you know - it is not a big thing in my life’. Other consumers simply liked that ‘there is generally less pesticides’, and that, ‘it all tastes very very good’. This linking of taste and health was common, as another customer illustrated, ‘we love it because the food is so good, and a lot of it is organic, so that makes it healthier and it tastes better’. While I never once asked consumers about their preference for organic produce, again and again, consumers suggested the label as integral to the quality of produce at the market.

The ‘cukes taste great’ because of they are ‘organic’ to some, ‘natural’ to others, and just simply ‘good’. The quality of the produce is an overwhelming defining feature of the farmers’ market and home to a myriad of meanings for shoppers. Interestingly, many customers seemed to take the source for this quality for granted. Often at each market only one or two vendors were truly ‘organic’, and for awhile there was a farmer still selling peaches in November which
eventually earned him a few pointed remarks from concerned farmers, suggesting that vendors are equally aware of consumers' blind trust in this food source. Most consumers at the farmers' market do not need to be assured of the exact source of their purchases. Consumers blurring of labels almost suggests an acceptance of the limits of language.

‘Natural’, ‘fresh’, ‘homegrown’, ‘no additives’, and ‘organic’, these descriptors reveal how consumers interchanged specific terms to convey the ‘good’ness of the market. All these terms connote an appreciation for the proximity of the product to its source and with the least amount of synthetic interference. The significance of these perceptions lies in their management through human interactions. Handmade signs marking produce as ‘organic’, and conversations with producers about whether the ‘broccoli survived the frost’, serve as human affirmations of the physical quality of the purchased good.

‘It’s Local’

For many shoppers, the choice to come and shop at the farmers’ market has political dimensions. One farmer described the market as, ‘part of a movement’, and representative of a ‘good cause’, and echoed the sentiments of many consumers. Buying produce ‘because it is local’, was the most frequently articulated intersection of motives with a political awareness. Consumers identified this idea of ‘local’ at several different levels. One woman admitted that ‘I like the idea very much of having access to locally grown produce, and I really think I should support it more’. To one shopper it was, ‘promoting small businesses’, and another described it as ‘good for the local economy’. Other shoppers articulated this motive to support the markets in much broader language, as one man concluded;

The greater the distance there is between the product and the source, the greater is the detachment in the shopper to that origin...there are only two products in Fresh Fields that are local. People are conditioned to have their strawberries in January. If they knew more and had a better connection to the source they would not only understand why there can't be strawberries in January, but they wouldn't expect them.
Many consumers understood the reasons ‘why there can’t be strawberries in January’. One man (in a particularly inspired response to my one introductory question) remarked, ‘There is no area in our lives that is untouched by corporate globalization’. For this shopper his purchases were a ‘personal choice’, because he felt that, ‘the corporations are arrogant to think they got the best food, that they got the only food. They just have the connections and advertising’. Another shopper disparaging the sprawl of suburbs which now covers over two-thirds of Pennsylvania’s best farming land (Dionis-Buckalew), understood her choice to live in the city and support the farmers’ market as part of the same continuum, ‘We want to support local farms and we think it is extremely important that you don’t cover up all the land ... We would support [the farmers’ market] for nothing else than to keep farmland from being paved over, and to keep cities from being totally dependent on things that as you know, wouldn’t be available under certain conditions’.

All consumers who expressed a political consciousness of the meaning of ‘local’ also shared a value for a ‘better connection to the source’. One woman in articulating the politicized relationship between producer and consumer suggested that, ‘There should be more signs saying that it is local, and if there is a railway strike, there will still be local produce here. You know, if there is problems ... it is important to support these guys’. Other shoppers described a sense of responsibility to the source of their local goods, ‘I come because I want there to be farms in Pennsylvania’, was an idea supported by one shopper in her belief that ‘It is important to support our farmers’. One shopper explained, ‘It is not like a big store where its in different hands, you know, its their [the farmers] livelihood ... I know it is coming from their farm’. Another woman described a similar idea,

_right down the street from my mom’s house we had a neighbor who had a big farm and we’d always go to her place because we knew she needed the money. So since then, I prefer to go to [farmers’ markets] ... There is a farmer by my house now and I live nowhere near here, but I just prefer to go to him because I always think of farmers as needing a hand._

This consumer’s narrative demonstrates how memory intertwines with political, social, and even
moral ideals as she articulates a consciousness of her role and responsibility in directly impacting
the future of the local vendor.

‘Homegrown’

An expressed nostalgia was another way that consumers qualified their reasons for
coming to the farmers’ market. The valuing of ‘homegrown’ products surfaced a great deal among
producer and customer. One young shopper eagerly awaited the weekly Amish baked goods,
which reminded her of ‘tastes of home’. People used the word almost synonymously with
quality. There was an intangible integrity which the word ‘homegrown’ conferred, and it is this
sentimental attachment made to another time or place which inspired many customers’ reasons
for shopping at the market.

Several customers anchored their motives for shopping at the market in memories of a
particular time. One farmer said that the markets ‘remind me of a time perhaps gone’. This idea
of the markets as associated with an almost romanticized time was also shared by a consumer, ‘It
sort of takes you back to a simpler kind of life’. For others, the memory was a bit more specific,
as one regular stated, ‘I grew up in south Philadelphia, and it was a world of corner stores, and
there were relationships. And this, in a very curious way recreates that, even though they aren’t
neighborhood people, but on Thursdays and Saturdays they are neighborhood people’. This
relation of the farmers as ‘neighborhood people’ suggests a level of comfort and connection
between consumers and vendors. Other shoppers framed this connection and nostalgia in terms
of a remembered place, or simply through a transmitted sense of rurality. One college student
admitted that the market ‘reminds me of how we used to always go apple picking at the
orchards’. Many shoppers informally shared similar personal stories, triggered by the sight of
an heirloom variety of apple, or some freshly baked bread. To others, the market nostalgically
connected them to an even more remote location; several people commented how, 'European' the markets felt, and for one South American man, the farmers’ market at Passyunk was 'a little like Ecuador'. Such comments suggest a consumer awareness of different cultural views of this relationship between consumers and products.

Coupled with the concept of temporally or geographically framed nostalgia was another idea of one’s ‘roots’. For several urban consumers, the farmers’ markets not only remind them of another time and place, but are a way to plug into more rural, or less urban, pasts. One woman identified herself as a city person, but qualified this in mentioning that she ‘did grow up in the Adirondacks’, and felt a particular relationship to the country as she had an ‘advantage’ of still having her ‘old family home in the Adirondacks’. To this consumer, life in the city without access to the country is apparently a disadvantage, an indirect criticism of urban life. Another customer commented that,

> When you live in a city you kind of have to find a place to get your roots back. I have a little garden ... I can only live in a city because I can find bits and pieces of ways, I wouldn't feel comfortable living in a suburb, but when I am living in a city where you are so close to people, you have to find a way to connect back ... It was easier in Chicago because I could go to my parents place on Lake Michigan, but here I have to find different ways.

There is a clear sense of not only the ‘advantage’ of a connection to one’s ‘roots’ but the necessity of it for some. Another woman originally from California, expressed a similar need to connect to the earth in a very physical way. In describing her difficulty in readjusting to city living after visits home to California she mentioned how, ‘having a community garden helps too’. Another shopper added that, ‘I’ve been going to farmers’ markets for as long as I can remember. I used to live in Vermont, so the farmers’ market, when you could get there, has always been my first choice of where to shop ... so that sense of having roots to land is important to me’. These memories and associations to less urban places are symbolic recreations of a particular setting which is not accessible the contemporary city. In each of these settings, human connections to one another, and to one’s food source, are central.
‘There are Lots of Good People Here’

It is early afternoon at the farmers’ market. The Saturday morning wave of shoppers colliding with parents and children headed to soccer practice in the park, has been replaced by leisurely afternoon strollers. A man in his 30’s slowly makes his way to the last vendor along the row. He carries a plastic bag, which is in turn, stuffed with other plastic bags, a clear sign of a committed market shopper. He scans the baked goods of the Pennsylvanian Dutch vendor and quickly makes eye contact as he draws up to the table. ‘Your daughters aren’t here today’ he remarks to the vendor, and initiates a typical exchange between buyer and seller. This engagement with the social realm is perhaps one of the most striking aspects of interactions at the farmers’ market.

It is in consumer and vendor conversations about families and homes where the the clear social motive and value for human connection, marks the consumers’ support for the market. People are cognizant of the relationships in which they are surrounded at the farmers’ market. Consumers knowingly build and affirm social connections through their presence and purchases at the market. Consumers and vendors alike commented on the unique ‘atmosphere’ of the market and the particular interactions which unfold within it, comments such as, ‘There is a real sort of scene here’ were common. It is this recognition of an underlying social quality to the market which most dramatically emphasizes this rehumanizing transformation of consumption.

In a different reference to ‘home’, many consumers described the social dimension of the market with particular respect to the idea of ‘family’. One woman stated, ‘Well, this is part of the family of West Philadelphia ... it is almost like a town square, cause you see everybody and you catch up on stuff ... it is very much the neighborhood’. One shopper mentioned that ‘there is a warm family feeling’ at the market, echoing the experience of another who commented that,
‘they [the vendors] are nicer, you know? It just reminds me of home.’ Another shopper remarked how ‘it is a very good thing for the neighborhood as well, obviously there is a lot of social gathering around’. Consumers are aware of, and almost grateful for, the unique social quality permeating the market space and encouraging a family-like atmosphere. One woman observed, ‘[that it is]outside is a big deal, parents can come with their kids and be around neighbors, whereas at the supermarket a lot of people have to take public transportation and can’t make it a family thing’. Vendors are also aware of this closer connection. In a New York Times article describing the farmers’ market, one farmer is quoted as saying, “It makes you take what you do very seriously, you see the people who buy your food, you see the people who put it in bottles and feed it to their baby.” (Farmers’ Markets, Good for Growers, Shoppers and Cities) The farmers’ market is clearly distinct as a social setting from the grocery store.

Consumers also valued the social dimension of the market at an individual level. Recalling Mauss’ idea of “reciprocity”, a young couple commented that they shopped because, ‘We have gotten to know people over the years and build relationships, it is because they know us too, like, we just made plans to get a bushel of apples for next week’s canning and they’ll do it because they know us’. Being ‘known’ carries real weight to the consumer at the farmers’ market. Personal knowledge had different meanings for another consumer who valued ‘The fact that the people who grew the product are there selling it, the people who made or created it, it is a very different experience and there is a closer connection’. A young woman voiced a similar sense of connection and her appreciation for the social experience of shopping in the following:

I think the people who are selling their stuff are proud of it and they want you to be happy and they totally can negotiate if stuff is overly ripe ... whereas there is no real control in a supermarket, no one really knows what is what or where it came from, you can get local stuff up at the co-op, they buy local produce, but it is still not the same as buying it from the producer, as they stand there with all their kids and their kids are helping.

For other shoppers, the social experience fits more into a personal ritual. There are those people who come to the market, as one woman commented, ‘for who it wouldn’t be a Saturday...
morning without popping in here'. And indeed it is part of some shoppers' routines as one man commented, 'I can walk over, make it part of walking my dog like I am doing now and the people who are running it are friendly'. Another shopper elaborated that, 'I'm out to get the kids fresh air, I'm purchasing something local and good and I'm also milling with customers, I am talking to people'. The potential to socially interact is a major reason consumers come to the market, after all, as one man put it, 'There are lots of good people here'.

'It is Kind of Depressing'

Analysis of consumer's reasons for coming to the farmers' markets suggests that there are four central categories: physical standards, political awareness, nostalgia, and social/moral ideals. Within each of these categories is the role of the human being (the farmer/vendor in this case) in inspiring and mediating these experiences. We now turn to how this site of consumption is rehumanizing the urban landscape by considering a fifth category: consumer narratives of the grocery store, and their other urban realities.

Although most everyone I interviewed seemed to support one older woman's notion that, 'the food is good', many others felt that even more than this, 'it is better'. This description was always made in comparison to the other primary means for acquiring food in the city, shopping at a supermarket. Consumers at the farmers' market were generally troubled by the grocery store's methods of produce acquisition, preservation, and distribution. One consumer, in reflecting the experience of shopping at the farmers' markets felt there is 'something about the quality of the food ... in my mind you don't have to worry about whether or not it is good. I can almost, not be assured, or guess but be comfortable in the fact that it is all good quality ... and along with that would be the freshness'. In this positive reflection of the farmers' market, negative doubts and concerns about the grocery store alternative lie in the shadows. Another
shopper elaborates, 'at the store, you don’t know where the chemical process starts to keep the food there for a long period of time. Here you get what you get. You know it is fresh and right off the farm or whatever'. This sense of satisfaction in knowing the source of the goods is echoed in the following customers’ statement, ‘The most outstanding aspect is the quality of the produce, especially summer fruits that don’t travel so well, [they] have completely spoiled me for supermarket peaches. That is the best time and when you really sense the difference between locally produced things and stuff that has been shipped and shipped and shipped’.

Consumers criticized grocery store produce as they appreciated the local source and flavor of the farmers’ market. ‘I like locally grown produce and I tend to eat seasonally’, one shopper remarked, ‘this tends to be produce that has not traveled. You don’t have the problems of produce that has been picked early because it has to be shipped and you can talk to the people who have grown it’. One woman summed up this relationship with her feelings that, ‘It seems to make more sense to buy what is local and it is seasonal too so you are buying whatever is in season. Often when I go to the grocery store it is kind of depressing. There is so much there ... You come here, and there is less, but it is better for you, it is natural’. Depressing for one woman, the produce at the supermarkets was a big disappointment for another, ‘I go to Thriftway occasionally because it is cheap, but the produce! I’ll find maybe two moldy tomatoes’. Another woman quickly summed up her feelings about the quality of grocery store produce, ‘They don’t have any flavor, they are just symbols’.

Hollow symbols for one, other consumers expressed an anger for the processes and relations whereby fruits and vegetables arrive at the farmers’ market. One shopper expressed:

> Health food should be, food. They shouldn’t put that stuff [additives] on it. This is food, you know, food is by my logic, nutritious, and if it is not, then it should be trashed. I go to other places to buy fruit and you discover that it has been pre-stored, bused in, and its like a surprise. Yeah, it’s cheap, but you should have thrown it out already, and I am suggesting that people have a right to good quality sustenance.

A woman elaborated this distinction between farmers’ markets and other indoor markets such as
Reading Terminal or the Italian Market:

The difference between there and the farmers’ market is that at the Italian market, you cannot touch the produce, and secondly, they didn’t grow it. It is huge for me. They are importing it from someplace else ... I think it is really important to support farmers’ markets because they get rid of the middle man, and I’ll pay more because hey, its just a really wonderful thing. This identification and concern for the ‘middle man’ emphasizes the political implication of shopping at the farmers’ market. Another consumer in comparing the sites of consumption stated, ‘The cucumbers taste like cukes ... you go to ShopRite and the cucumbers are old, they have probably been sitting there for ten days and this is the best the system can do but in this [the farmers’ market] ‘quasi-system’, the cucumbers taste great’. Many consumers are more than critical of the quality of grocery store produce, they are angry at ‘the system’, or corporate apparatus it represents.

Many consumers alluded to other frustrations with their urban worlds in similarly subtle comments. For many shoppers coming to the market is a way of reengaging with an nostalgized past, or an imagined present, and accessing an other time or place. This othering is not necessarily unique to the farmers’ market. One woman interviewed at a grocery store in Australia admitted that, “I liked to go to this place where you got personal attention. I was used to it. People called you by name. And when I came back to Dandenong in 1988 I found that I was just one the busy shoppers. Nobody knew who I was. I miss that, I really miss that.” (Humphrey, 184) Other shoppers in the same study, voice their discontent with the modern store and actually contrast it to the old fashioned corner grocers of the past; however, “Both these women are relatively young, their ‘going back’ to older forms of retailing is not a nostalgia for a retailing they have experienced, but a form imagined.” (ibid.) This idea of a borrowed nostalgia and imagined present showed up at other market sites. One farmer describes the influx of her new (formally urban) neighbors, “A lot of people moving in have never lived in a rural area and they love the farm experience ... People congregate there [at her Christmas tree farm] and chat with their neighbors .. A lot of people are looking for the idealized Christmas tree from their
childhood". (Dionis-Buckalew) As they borrow pasts and engage with other places, urban consumers (and novices of rural living) are imagining themselves right out of present urban realities.

Many consumers searching for access to idealized pasts and places were simultaneously affirming other ways of living and connecting with food. Shopping at the farmers’ market was one among many ways in which consumers dealt with the urban present. One shopper stated that, ‘We are tied to the land, even though we live in the city ... it is hard, you know, just to deal with that ... so I take it as a personal choice to shop at the farmers’ market because I relate to them’. Another echoed this sense of needing to ‘deal’ with the city; ‘I also have a community garden so that helps too’. Both consumers suggest that spaces which connect humans to their food sources are rare within the city. Consumers, in addition to the connection to non-urban spaces, expressed a sense of gratitude for the human interconnections that take place at the market. One couple asserted that, ‘Fresh Grocer makes it easier to shop in the city, the farmers’ market makes it nicer’. It is this new prioritizing of niceness over efficiency which offers contours to the aspects of consumption present at the market, and absent from the grocery store. Another shopper describes these purely human elements in recounting very literal terms of reciprocity;

The people are all very nice, I usually say something to the flower guy ... Last week, he still had some flowers and my wife bought one huge flower and he gave it to her for nothing. And we all sort of laughed at it, and she said, ‘I’ll get you next time’ And it was just very very nice. I just like coming here. It is a nice urban ritual. I grew up and loved not needing a car. I think if I lived elsewhere I couldn’t do this. I see a lot of neighbors, ‘How are you doing? how are your kids?’ Yeah, I like this a lot.

Rehumanizing Consumption

In addition to consumers’ own words and ways of articulating the role of human-connection in their urban lives, observational data provides concrete support for how this rehumanization is nurtured at the farmers’ market and discouraged at the grocery store. Human
connection lies at the center of the farmers’ market, in its form, function, and success. At the
grocery store (and in many other spaces of modern day urban life) human connection is avoided
and replaced by technological short-cuts. Unlike the distancing of credit cards, endless lines, and
robotic cashiers present at the typical grocery store, rehumanized consumption is characterized
by an intimacy between the consumer, producer, and the consumed. My observations of both
the structural and social components of these two sites of consumption will reveal this clear
distinction in their respective orientations towards human connection.

It is hard to believe that the farmers’ market and the urban grocery store share any
similarities, let alone a fundamental societal role. Their spatial design and physical components
are grossly different. While each perform the same basic societal operation of providing
consumers with goods, their particular inputs and outputs are deeply divergent. Spatially, the
supermarket is mathematically mapped out and carefully arranged into rationalized sections of
product. While no scientific or complicated mathematical processes are involved in the layout of
the farmers’ market, vendors do maintain a somewhat static positioning of their stands. It is in
the use of negative space (or lack thereof) which distinguishes these two physical sites from one
another most dramatically. There is a sense within the supermarket that all space is bound or
captured, while at the farmers’ market, space is literally open. Beyond this foundational
structure, the occupation of all available space at the grocery store manifests at other levels.
From the floor on up, supermarkets are abuzz with advertisements, “markdowns”, colors,
pictures, suggestions, descriptions and seasonal themes. Conversely, decor at the farmers’ market
is minimal, perhaps the display of a particularly impressive or unusually shaped squash, for
example. Some markets may have an informative table with health and community concerns, or
surveys depending on the market’s supporter, but advertising is generally minimal. At the
farmers’ market there is less of a concern for distracting the consumer, or needing to warrant
his/her attention.

Divergent patterns of movements and behaviors among consumers at these sites, result from these dramatic spatial distinctions. The farmers’ market is a porous space, encouraging creative and spontaneous human improvisation in movement. It is not unusual to see consumers wedging themselves behind, or between, vendor tables as they make their way to the street. People would also park strollers or bicycles within the markets’ bounds, in order to better access the space. Unlike the open-air market, with its central artery of pedestrian traffic, the grocery store is a confined environment with physically defined paths and areas. At the supermarket, within the overstimulating space of advertising and frenzied product pushers offering samples with a standardized greeting; customers spiral and whirl in and out of sections, wielding large metal carts and awkward plastic baskets. Some, absorbed in themselves, family, or endless lists methodically travel from one point of the store to another, similarly absent to the sensual stimulations surrounding them. Workers disappear and emerge from closed doors, when they move at all.

At the farmers’ market there is no door, it is all “on stage” (Goffman). Shoppers typically meander through the market and ‘do a loop’, returning to the point at which they began. Armed with their own cloth or plastic bags, the pace is calm, and often quite slow. Consumers are more attentive, patient, and present to their fellow shoppers, and the experience of making their selections. Perhaps it is simply the kind of people the market attracts, but consumers more frequently engaged in conversations with each other and with vendors. They smiled more.

Not surprisingly, behaviors at the farmers’ market reflect a greater degree of intimacy shared between the buyer and seller. While the amount of individual attention a vendor may give a customer varies from market to market, and stand to stand, shoppers at the farmers’ market generally expect a certain quality of personal engagement to color their experience of buying. The
disinterested, if not annoyed, grocery store cashier is replaced by a person much more invested in the purchase. I observed some vendors who were vigilant of their goods, seemingly conscious of every touch, drop, and selection a customer made while at his/her stand. Many would customarily open the plastic or paper bag for the customer, others gave the shopper more freedom and space, coolly observing the shopper and simply waiting for the inevitable purchase. Still this dependency on the consumers’ dollar did not have the dehumanizing effect one might expect. Vendors rehumanized the actual exchange of money by rounding to the nearest nickel (to avoid the use of pennies), and tucking dollars into pockets or open cash boxes. In the transaction of money for product, vendors were almost “disinterested” (Mauss). On a personal level, the consumer is always accompanied at the farmers’ market. However, even in those instances where the vendor was the least engaged with the shoppers’ individual experience, there was always a quality of accompaniment, through being offered information about the product, a plastic bag, or simply an acknowledging nod, the shopper at the farmers’ market is rarely unnoticed, if ever, alone.

The physical spaces of the farmers’ market and grocery store involve distinct inputs and necessarily have dissimilar outputs. The farmers’ market shopper has more liberty and flexibility in his/her movement, and with this space is generally more tolerant of his/her fellow shoppers. Unfettered by an onslaught of corporate advertisements, consumers can arrive at less manipulated choices in their purchases, and are more active in the experience of buying. In short, a handful of farmers with tables lined up on a sidewalk selling their goods achieve what the spatially complex, and environmentally harmful supermarket is structurally opposed to doing, reminding consumers of their relationships to their food source and to each other.
Implications of Study

The practices and behaviors celebrated at the farmers' markets recall a site sought by Humphrey where the culture of consumption is simultaneously being challenged and renewed. Shoppers, dissatisfied with 'the best the system can do', are rehumanizing the practice of consumption and meeting their material and social ends. Again, they suggest an answer to the challenges put forth by Humphrey:

Consumer environments and experiences - of which the supermarket is a central one - have a power to greatly delimit the possibilities for human interaction, satisfaction and cooperation, even though a human creativity seeps through and partially undoes those delimitations. Supermarkets, like all other retail forms, are never simply free-standing, entirely local environments, open to an endless free-play of meaning. On the contrary, they are always part of a broader economic, social and cultural framework of production, distribution, consumption and disposal in the West, which is implicated in enormous damage to community, human relationships, the environment and other cultures. The central issue confronting the historian and critic of consumption, then, is not simply how passively or actively people live the present, not simply about condemning or celebrating the blandness or vibrancy of popular culture, but how all of us can think about and realize other cultures; how all of us can think about and realize modes of living differently. Those modes are precisely the things that are never to be found on the supermarket shelf. They cannot be bought. They can only be found outside the shop.

The farmers' market is a place where consumers and vendors are "living differently".

Whether or not it is revolutionary, the farmers' market encourages a cultural shift away from the modern day successor and counterpart, the grocery store. The farmers’ market is a place where the human aspect of production is reinstated and esteemed. One writer, Warren Belasco, offers the following evaluation for the farmers’ markets:

Such direct links [farmers' markets] would restore the face-to-face intimacy lost in mass-scale supermarkets and mass society in general. In conjuring up the neighborhood grocery and vegetable stand, Rodale editor Goldstein invoked a nostalgia that Americans had felt ever since the advent of the supermarket age. In a direct marketing system, if prices seemed high one season, the producer could explain firsthand: a drought, a cold snap, or whatever.

This intimacy of the markets allows customers to generate both imagined, and real relationships through a closer connection to their food source and its purveyor. Throughout this study, consumers uniformly revealed a greater consciousness of the purpose and impact of their purchases that invariably went beyond the typical supply-demand perspective of contemporary market structures.

The rehumanizing principles of consumption alive at the farmers’ market, suggest that
although individuals are still participating in traditional market-consumer processes and relationships, they are simultaneously redefining them. Gone is the stamp of industry marking the quality of an item, and is instead, replaced by handmade labels and goods. The humble presentation at the market emphasizes a closeness to the earth, and a relationship to natural and human processes. Dir: is not only permissible at the markets, it is celebrated and sold. Efficiency doesn’t take the form of an underpaid teenager behind a computer, but is instead embodied by the reuse of plastic bags, and as consumers simultaneously walk the dog and shop for dinner.

In contrast, consumer culture as witnessed in large grocery store chains, reflects a very different species of consumerism than is present at the farmers’ market. At corporate supermarkets such as Whole Foods, or ShopRite, customers engage with alleged models of free choice, diversity, and efficiency, and are not encouraged to see the culturally and environmentally damaging relationships that support them. A trip to the local ACME no longer even necessitates any human interaction, customers need only press buttons and slide cards and they are free to take their product away. Describing these modern day trends, Humphrey writes that,

In this climate the selling of the non-material, of the meanings attached to a product rather than simply the product itself, becomes the central part of retailing. This is mirrored in the transformation of what it means to be a consumer- the transformation from consumption as chiefly tied to material and social needs and goals to consumption as a process of personal pleasure and autonomous self-expression. Contemporary consumption emphasizes an increasing self-absorption and isolation in the experience of the consumer.

This detached “autonomy” from an understanding of the (un)natural and human relationships and processes operating behind purchases, has disturbing cultural implications. As Belasco warns:

The problem with modern American society was that it was so easy to get meat-disembodied and prewrapped in plastic - so easy to forget the killing. The same disconnection had produced the Vietnam War, where politicians and their constituents could so blithely approve saturation bombing because they did not have to see the consequences. The modern fragmented mind had become anesthetized to death - and thus callous to life. Either response-whether avoiding flesh o-
drinking fresh blood - involved resensitizing, seeing connections, understanding whole systems. This disconnect between consumers and their products is especially relevant to consumer cultures in the United States, if we reflect upon Weber's idea that our identities are tied to our consumption. Humphrey reinforces this important relation with the following important question, "For cultural critics and historians, then, it remains important to explore not simply what people do within consumption cultures, but to ask of ourselves and others, are they what we want and do they actually embody the way we want to live?"

As citizenship becomes more and more defined by consumerism, the lack of awareness of the impact of our practices no longer merely threaten "mom and pop" stores, exploited workers, and wetlands. The effects travel far beyond the transfer of money from pocket to register. This growing disconnect distorts consumers' perceptions of their realities and distances them from recognizing the many interrelationships bound up within their purchases. The farmers' market value of relationships affirms models of human interdependency. Mauss alludes to this idea in his description of the role of reciprocity and the "force" of things in material exchange. The farmers' market indeed involves such ideas, and underlying relationships of reciprocity. However, just as relationships shared between consumers and producers cannot be artificially simulated at the grocery store, so too can they not be captured with words and elaborate theories. Consumers and producers at the farmers' market affirm values and practices of living which defy such institutional boundedness.

In a world where it is normal to receive a phone call from a computer, the farmers' market offers remnants of human connection. The grocery store, in all its declarations of greater efficiency, accelerates towards a future with less human input and interaction. The practices of corporate agriculture and biotechnology, (the "big brothers" of the grocery store so to speak) are prime examples of this modern, "rational", reinvention of human connections to their food sources, and to life. Processes of production and distribution suppressed within the self-
presentation of the grocery store, now promise an even greater disconnect from the human being, and a removal of a need for the small scale producer. In the face of this grim future, farmers' markets are spaces of hope. Resiliently maintaining an age-old transaction, the markets remain grounded in rehumanizing practices of consumption. The farmers' markets remind consumers of the impact of their choices. They show us that there are alternative ways of interacting and living as human beings.
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