Dear EP workshop participants,

Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this workshop, and for taking the time to read the paper.

This paper is both new and old ground. It’s the same data on farmers markets that I’ve been working with for years, and is one of the last papers I plan to write on this. But in a way, it’s a bridge piece to a next project, which will also be about food movements but will examine them in the context of urban development, place-making/sense of place, and gentrification. This paper is in some ways an attempt to familiarize myself with a new literature.

It was inspired mostly by the insight in the paragraph on the bottom of page 8/top of page 9, that much of the work on socio-nature redraws the nature/society binary because it either attempts to show us how something we commonly assume to be natural is also social, or the reverse. But food seemed to me to be commonly understood as both natural and social, in a way that wildernesses and cities are not. Therefore, it seemed like looking to food might give us some purchase on getting to the hybridity that is at the core of actor-network approaches. But looking to food movements might also facilitate the more explicitly political approach of the urban political ecologists with their emphases on labor and uneven development.

I think this paper could probably use some reframing, and it’s in that sense that I’d love some advice and assistance. I have three more specific questions/areas where I think the paper could be stronger:

- How could I better work with this new literature? Are important works I’m missing? What seems extraneous? Are there insights I’m getting wrong or fault lines I’m stepping on that I’m not aware of?

- Do the contributions make sense and do they seem important? Are there other insights this data leads you to that I’m missing?

- How can the analysis at the end be more closely tied to the literature at the beginning and are there better or other areas of analysis that I should be thinking about?

That being said, I don’t mean to limit your comments to these issues, and I’m very interested to see the kind of conversations this draft leads to.

Thanks again for helping me to work through this,

Alison

The Socio-nature of Farmers Markets
Alison Hope Alkon

Among critical geographers and fellow travelers attempting to bridge the nature-society dualism, the concept of socio-nature asserts that social relations are inherently ecological and that ecological relations are inherently social. Analyses guided by this topic
demonstrate the inseparability of society and nature sites ranging from genetically modified organisms (Harraway 2008, 1997) to urban gardens (Gandy 2006) amusement parks (Davis 1997, Darling 2006) and cities themselves (Heynen et al 2006). The goal of these analyses is to examine nature and society as materially and discursively co-productive of one another, and to understand the historically-situated processes through which this co-production occurs. Urban landscapes and human-created technologies are envisioned not as different from or outside of the natural world, but as formed (and constantly reformed) by socio-environmental processes with material and ideological consequences. Other analyses offer deep readings of what are commonly regarded as “natural” places, analyzing them as materially and epistemically produced.

According to its adherents, the point of this literature is not only theoretically important. Many deploying this concept view it as capable of animating a new kind of politics, arguing that the erroneously perceived separation between nature and society justifies the exploitation of both people and planet. They argue not for the reunification of humans and nature pursued by many environmentalists, as present in that vision of reunification is an acceptance of present-day separation, but for a recognition that society and nature are always and already intractable as a starting point for political work (Heynen et al 2006, Castree and Braun 2001). This, these theorists believe, can lead to a politics in which environmental protection is inseparable from social justice (ibid).

Food is in many ways the ultimate socio-nature. Eating is a primary human need, and, while critical social scientists are often wary of claims that something is a part of a universal human nature, the need for food is certainly one of humanity’s essential components. The species of plants and animals that humans eat are certainly living things, but most have been bred by humans to take their current form (see, for example, Whamore and Thorne 1997). Corn, for example, did not exist prior to human cultivation, as it was domesticated from a wild grass called teosinte by indigenous peoples in the Americas (Braun 2009). Similarly, Michael Pollan offers a lively account tracing of the cultivation histories of apples and potatoes, as well as two non-food crops, in his best selling Botany of Desire (2002). With the exception of a few wild edibles, food begins as what Neil Smith (1984) calls external nature, which refers to the non-human species and landscapes before contact with humans, that is then dramatically shaped by human technologies, in order to become unified with and sustain human bodies, which are, of course a part of nature as well.

Much of the socio-nature literature involves revealing the hidden social in landscapes generally perceived as natural, or the hidden natural in landscapes generally perceived as entirely manmade. Politically, this project advances the hope that revealing the intricate socio-natural connections, and the historical, dialectic and techno-social process through which society and nature are co-produced, can inspire a new kind of socio-environmental politics. But that food is both social and natural is much more obvious; narratives of co-production are commonly held and widely culturally available. It would stand to reason, then, that some of the political possibilities associated with socio-nature, which have heretofore rarely been examined on the ground but see Gandy 2006) might be visible in the array of efforts to reform, transform and provide alternatives to industrial agriculture that are commonly known as food movements. Drawing on participant observation and interviews from a farmers’ market in Berkeley California that emphasizes the social and ecological benefits of local and organic food, as well as close readings of popular literature associated with popular food movements, this paper asks how, under what circumstances, and to what extent, food movement supporters conceptualize society and nature as co-produced, and how this affects their political goals and strategies.

I argue that food movement adherents generally describe the local, organic food they advocate for in terms that embody the socio-nature perspective. This food is both the product of nature and human labor. As such, movement supporters often attribute to it the potential to enact an array of ecological and social benefits including decreasing pollution, building healthy soil, creating vibrant rural and urban communities, and establishing local economic alternatives to corporate control of food systems and everyday life processes. Politically, this brings environmental and social change together, and also broadens the
environmental movement’s perspective on what kind of landscapes are to be regarded as worthy of sustaining. However, the understanding of socio-nature evidenced by food movement supporters is partial. Local, organic food is seen as resulting from the co-production of society and nature, but industrial agriculture is not. Although the farmer’s labor is recognized as a key component of this food, the movement redraws a dichotomy in which local organic food is natural while industrially-produced food is not. A fuller and deeper invocation of socio-nature might help the food movement to emphasize issues of power including the role of labor (beyond that of the farm owner), as well as questions of who is producing what kind of food (and through it, what kind of nature), for whose benefit, and to whose disadvantage. In addition, by diminishing the separation between local organic and industrial food systems, the concept of socio-nature might highlight the need to rework food systems as a whole, rather than merely creating niche alternatives.

This paper begins by reviewing the literature on socio-nature, paying particular regard to attention to the ways an examination of food movements might contribute to existing debates. After a brief overview of my methods and case, I will describe the various ways that the food movement, as seen through its popular literature and the Berkeley Farmers Market, evidences a limited understanding of co-production. I then analyze how this partial recognition of socio-nature affects their political goals and strategies, and speculate on the kinds of politics that might be forged from a deeper and more complete understanding.

UNPACKING SOCIO-NATURE

Scholars invoke the term socio-nature to examine nature as a social product. In his introduction to what is perhaps the defining book on this concept, Castree (2001) explains “nature is defined, delimited and even physically reconstituted by different societies, often in order to serve specific, and usually dominant, social interests. In other words, the social and the natural are seen to intertwine in ways that make their separation—in either thought or practice—impossible” (3). In this vision, nature is neither stagnant, nor in equilibrium, but is actively produced through human activity (Botkin 1990, O’Neill 2001, Zimmerer 2000, 1994).

Some of the best-known work on this subject has deconstructed the idea of wilderness, arguing that it is not separate from human social activity. The classic example here is William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness,” which described nature not as a “pristine sanctuary where [lives] the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature,” but rather “the creation of vary particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (1995, 69). Cronon looks to cultural constructs, such as the frontier and the sublime, to understand how and why wilderness is understood differently in dissimilar historical periods [Light (1995) offers a similar analysis of romantic and classical views of nature]). Extending this tradition, scholars have investigated how ecological imaginaries (Peet and Watts 1996), dominant conceptions of what nature is and should be, serve to legitimize particular land use and management practices. Whiston Spirn (1996), for example, describes how understandings of nature as wilderness affected the material practices of those designing urban parks, and Gandy (2006) offers a related analysis of how the garden city movement drew upon these tropes to seek a synthesis between nature and the urban form. Additionally, Robbins (2001) traces the ways that dominant understandings of trees as ecologically beneficial led to the planting of fast-growing but invasive and ecologically damaging species. In contrast to a popular discourse that regards nature as static and separate from human society, this research agenda demonstrates how socially constructed notions of the natural have various material effects.

Other scholars take a more discursive approach, analyzing the ways that in constructing nature, we construct meanings about society, particularly in terms of race, class and gender. Merchant, (2003) has written prolifically on the ways that dominant understandings of wilderness have been mobilized to maintain myths of gender difference and hierarchies. In the US, whites have historically posited racial differences as natural (Anderson 2001), and justified the marginalization of communities of color at various historical periods through a belief that they are closer to nature. (see Ellingson 2001 on
colonizers commonly attributed agency to nature in the countries they conquered, erasing the work of indigenous cultures (Mann 2005, Gandy 2006). Each of these works interrogates environments commonly thought of as natural to demonstrate the ways that social processes and cultural ideals influence not only the ways we think about them, but the material practices through which they are developed. Together they powerfully assert that even the landscapes most commonly seen as natural and pristine are socially produced.

Additional research further chips away at the nature/society divide by analyzing the presence of nature in urban areas. Some are influenced by (or aligned with) David Harvey’s commonly quoted assertion that “there is nothing unnatural about New York City.” Jane Jacobs, for example, whose emphasis on dense, lively urban environments inspires much new-urbanist thinking and planning, wrote that urban environments are “as natural as colonies of prairie dogs or the beds of oysters (1961).” Matthew Gandy (2002) describes how cities are not only akin to non-human nature, but constituted from it by tracing how raw materials were reconstituted to create a “metropolitan nature” in New York City. One of the key projects of this urban political ecology is to position cities as socio-ecological processes that are simultaneously human and non-human, organic and inorganic, dense layers of cells, technologies, and commodities (Swyngedouw 2006), in other words, to “re-nature urban theory… making the ‘materiality’ of nature a central concern for urban studies” (Heynen 2006, 2, Bakker 2003). Other scholars look for nature in even less likely landscapes. Darling (2006) examines New York’s Coney Island, not only asserting that the seemingly organic sea-side has continuously been shaped by, for example, truckloads of sand imported to widen the beach, but also exploring how the amusement park showmen used animals, natural disasters, “freaks,” and human sexuality to package nature for a public that was simultaneously frightened of and intrigued by it. Davis (1997) similarly looks to Sea World to examine how the Anheuser-Busch produces a vision of nature emphasizing environmentalism and education to drive public consumption of the themepark experience. And Price (2000) looks to everyday artifacts, including pink flamingos and The Nature Company, to show how consumerism mediates humans’ relationships with non-human species and landscapes. Each of these contributions demonstrates that a socially produced nature pervades all aspects of social life, both discursively and materially.

On one hand, socio-nature literature has established that both the discursive and material aspects of nature are socially produced. On the other, it has attended to the ways that nature comprises and informs all aspects of human social life. In this schema, either a landscape is inherently natural, like the wilderness, and scholars show how it is also social, or it is inherently social, like New York City or Coney Island, and the intellectual project is to reveal its naturalness. Working from both sides of the nature/society divide, this research pushes them towards each other. But at the same time, it also redraws the very binary it seeks to upturn. In a way, this approach naturalizes either those aspects of the object of study that are natural or social, while treating the other as something to be revealed and understood.

There are two approaches that attempt to resolve this remaining dichotomy. Political ecologists look to labor as the essential bridge between nature and society. From this point of view, nature is incomprehensible except as mediated by labor, and so labor becomes integral to an understanding of nature (Smith 1984, Heynen et al 2006, Swyngedow 2006). Humans use labor to meet basic needs for food, warmth, shelter, etc, but this process simultaneously produces new human needs, and thus requires increased labor. This produced nature is certainly social, and subject to social norms and processes, but is simultaneously natural in that it remains governed by biophysical processes such as gravity. Importantly, though, this social nature is produced unevenly. The socio-natural conditions that comprise various landscapes are controlled by elites and differentiated along hierarchies of race, class, gender and national status, manual versus mental labor, and many other divisions, creating a landscape capable of integrating wealth and poverty.

A second approach, actor network theory (Latour 1987, 1993), conceptualizes nature-society processes as networks, and assigns agency to both human and non-human actants (though this assignment is certainly asymmetrical given the potential for
Food can help to resolve some of the tensions that underlie the above-described debates. It is self-evidently both natural, in that it comes from non-human plants and animals, and the product of human labor. It is generally sold as a commodity, valued and distributed according to social standards and unequally available based on hierarchies of race, class, gender, national status. But as it is consumed, food once again becomes the stuff of nature in the form of human bodies. In this way, food brings actor-network theorists’ emphasis on the hybrid forms that simultaneously embody and include society and nature together with the political ecologists’ underscoring of labor processes, inequalities and uneven development. It is natural and social, produced through human labor, and unevenly distributed and consumed, creating further unequal landscapes that include health disparities, areas of pesticide drift and desertified soils. Moreover, food is the subject of the vast array of social movement activities comprising what Pollan (2010) refers to as the food movement, which includes efforts to make food more organic, local, slow, etc. According to the writings of its most prominent supporters, as well as its everyday adherents, the food movement sees food system change as capable of creating both social and ecological benefits, and is thus a key site in which a politics of socio-nature is being forged. For this reason, I now turn to the questions of to what extent, and with what effects, food movements embody and advocate for a vision of socio-nature.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The North Berkeley Farmers’ Market is managed by The Ecology Center, one of the city’s veteran environmental organizations. Its bylaws allow only organic produce from local growers, and all but one of its farmers comes from within 150 miles of Berkeley. Prepared foods must be at least 80% organic, use local ingredients whenever possible, and be served on compostable plates. The North Berkeley farmers market is a lively place. Friends and neighbors stroll from booth to booth, greeting one another and inquiring about families and common friends. Some seem to have run across each other unexpectedly while others have planned their meetings. Many patrons, especially women and young children, sit on the grass and savor their purchases while listening to a rotating cadre of live musicians. The North Berkeley Farmers Market is also extremely profitable for vendors. On the rare occasion that a space becomes available, potential applicants are evaluated on environmental considerations including organic techniques and the miles the food will travel. All together, it claims to provide economic benefits for small farmers and food artisans, social benefits for consumers, and ecological benefits for the plants, animals, soils and humans who would otherwise be harmed by the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. I attended this market weekly for 18 months as a participant-observer between 2005 and 2007, and have continued to patronize it in the years since. As a participant-observer, I took on the roles of customer, volunteer and occasional vendor (mostly by covering for vendors when they were on break). My observations allowed me to witness and analyze many of the interactions that comprise the farmers market. More specifically, I was able to get a feel for to the everyday discourses through which buyers and sellers linked the practice of growing, selling, buying and eating food to broader social and environmental themes. During and after these observations, I took copious notes, which I later expanded.
In addition to this ethnographic research, I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with customers, vendors and market managers. These interviews lasted on average approximately an hour, and allowed me to more deeply understand the worldviews and desires that led individuals to farm, work at, or shop at this particular farmers market. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed. I also conducted a survey of 100 market customers, using a sample of convenience. This survey provided not only demographic information but also data on the values and priorities of a larger swath of market patrons.

I then scrutinized these notes and interview transcripts, and began to code them. This search for patterns from within a wealth of available data allows the observations and interviews to give rise to the analysis, and minimizes the risk of researchers merely replicating their own perspectives (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The themes of environment/ecology, human community, and social reform were immediately evident in my data, and I used focused coding to search for patterns concerning how those I studied regarded these ideas (Emerson et al 1995).

Because of its focus on local organic food, the North Berkeley Farmers Market coheres particularly closely with the language of the food movement. This does not, however, make it unique, as it is similar to farmers markets found in other predominantly white, liberal, affluent and highly educated areas such as Ann Arbor Michigan, Madison Wisconsin, or the Union Square market in Manhattan. The North Berkeley Market is particularly closely tied to the food movement because of its association with some of the movement’s most lauded spokespeople. Alice Waters’ Chez Panisse restaurant, which many claim to be the birthplace of a “California cuisine” emphasizing local, fresh and organic food, sits just a few blocks from the farmers market. Indeed, building relationships with farmers has long been one of the restaurant’s hallmarks, and many North Berkeley market farmers sell them produce and have been featured on their menus. Waters does not regularly attend the farmers market, though Chez Panisse chefs are among its regular customers. Waters, along with the neighborhood’s other most well-known resident foodie, Michael Pollan, are often on hand for special events such as the Berkeley Farmers Market’s 30th Anniversary party in 2008. Many North Berkeley vendors, managers and customers hold food writers and chefs like Pollan and Waters in high regard, and often discuss their work and similar ideas during visits to the farmers market. For that reason, I use the writings of food movement authors to supplement my primary data.

NATURE AND SOCIETY AT THE FARMERS MARKET

The central argument of this paper is that food movements are an important standpoint from which to explore the political potential of socio-nature because farmers market vendors, managers, and customers regularly regard the food they grow, buy, and sell as the inextricable product of nature and human labor. With regard to nature, the language through which farmers market participants describe local organic food, and the places where it is grown, very much resembles the way that advocates for wilderness preservation describe the places they seek to preserve.

John Muir wrote of the Hetch Hetchy Valley that “no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man” (1912, 249). Proponents of farmers market also draw from this spiritual regard for nature. Invocations and allusions to spirituality were common explanations for participants’ attraction to local organic food. For example, Judy LaRocca, a biodynamic grape farmer and winemaker, expressed that for her, “farming is like a religion, something similar to Wicca. My husband is born Roman Catholic, and he might identify as a Christian, but he’s really a farmer.” Judy expressed great admiration for the work of Rudolf Steiner, who is often credited with founding biodynamic agriculture, though many of its techniques have long been used by people native to North America. These techniques include not only organic cultivation but also the use of fermented herbs and composts and a planting schedule guided by an astronomical calendar. Indeed, Steiner describes the practice of growing biodynamic food as “reading the book of nature,” coming to understand and provide for the plants’ various needs and desires through creativity and experiments.

In this way of thinking, food not only embodies a vision of nature similar to
preservationists’ description of the wilderness, but is the vehicle through which wildness becomes a part of the urban landscape. One customer, for example, describes a recent visit to a market farm. “It’s amazing to have a sense of where the food comes from because I can feel the energy of that space in the food,” she said. Through her consumption of the food, the nature energy of the farm she visited becomes a part of not only this customer’s worldview but her physical being. These words are reminiscent of Alice Waters’ (2005) well-known assertion that “if we don’t care about food, then the environment will always be something outside of ourselves. And yet the environment can be something that actually affects you in the most intimate — and literally visceral — way. It can be something that actually gets inside you and gets digested.” Through food, external nature becomes social, and when it is consumed, becomes nature again.

In addition, ecologists tend to advocate for the wilderness through an argument in favoring biodiversity. North Berkeley market farmers offer a parallel narrative emphasizing their agricultural biodiversity, further connecting their productive landscapes to the wilderness ideal that has inspired many environmentalists. Most market farmers produce an array of crops aiming to mimic the vast genetic diversity found in nature. While cultivating numerous varieties is a practical strategy to avoid environmental hardships and their economic consequences, farmers also emphasize the importance of biodiversity for ecological sustainability. For example, the website of Riverdog Farm, which grows a wide variety of produce, emphasizes biodiversity as a strategy to avoid reliance on pesticides, which negatively affect the soil, water and workers who produce the food. By advocating for the planting of a wide array of crops, and several varieties of the same crop, organic farmers emphasize that their food is subject to the same bio-physical processes as all other lifeforms, and work to give it the best chance of survival.

Each of these examples serve to indicate that farmers market farmers and customers regularly recognize and emphasize the naturalness of the food that they promote. But they also emphasize at least some of the human labor that makes this food possible. The most common trope through which this occurs is an expression of regard for the hard work that farmers must undertake in order to produce food. For example, one afternoon, I overheard the following exchange between a farmer and customer. The customer had picked out three heads of baby gem lettuce from among the farmers’ brightly colored choices.

“That’s two,” said the farmer, about to give him a price.
“No, three,” replied the customer.
“Best policy,” the farmer said with a smile.
“No sense gypping you,” exclaimed the customer. “You guys are like the hardest workers. No one works harder than farmers” (emphasis ours).

Discussions of farmers’ hard work are common among food movement supporters, and are sometimes even evoked as a defense against criticism of the food movement (as in, ‘you shouldn’t be so critical of farmers; they work so hard’). And of course, there is Wendell Berry’s well-known assertion that “Conservation is good work” (1990), which argues that in farming lies the key not only to ecological preservation but the creation of a human culture that “honors the source of its materials;… honors the place where it is done;… honors the art by which it is done;… honors the thing that is made and the user of the made thing.”

In other words, the food movements’ broad understanding of socio-nature allows it to create a politics that weds the improved ecological health (as constructed through ecological science) to the betterment of human society. The place to be preserved is not a place devoid of human life, but a farm in which humans and non-human species are engaged in a complex socio-natural process that results in the production of human sustenance. And this process, according to food movement advocates such as those who populate the North Berkeley Farmers Market, also helps to create landscapes that better support non-human life, from the micro-organisms more common to soil untreated with chemical pesticides to the greater number of fish found in rivers that do not collect runoff from pesticide-ridden fields. Further, according to this logic, preserving the farm also helps to preserve the city. Farmers markets provide access to food that supporters believe is better for human health, tying their own well being to that of non-human landscapes and
organisms. This is an important departure from an environmental movement focused largely on places in which humans do not live (or, as in the case of Native Americans who once inhabited protected lands, were removed from). Indeed, the ecological aspects of the food movement are aimed at places where people “live, work and play,” which is precisely the definitional shift called for by the environmental justice movement.

Moreover, in contrast to an environmental politics that sees humans as separate from nature, food movement adherents argue that their ecological practices can also benefit human society. They are constantly described as lively public spaces where individuals can meet one another in a warm, friendly atmosphere, providing an increased level of social connectedness and a sense of community character. Michael Pollan (2010) and others often refer to a study showing that people have ten times as many conversations at the farmers market as they do at the supermarket (McKibben 2007, Halweil 2004). Farmers markets are also said to create what Lyson calls civic agriculture, which inspires greater involvement in the interconnected “economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions of community life” (2004, 28). And lastly, food movement adherents cast farmers markets as essential to the economic life of the community, arguing that dollars spent there are often re-spent at area businesses, creating greater general prosperity. Certainly some of these claims are problematic. Many authors have written about the ways that the food movement’s dominant construction of community elides issues of inequality, their emphasis on small businesses detracts from attention to workers rights, and their romantic appeal to the local can invoke nativist and other regressive sentiments (Alkon and McCullen 2010, Allen 2004, Guthman 2008, DuPuis and Goodman 2005). However, by recognizing and working to protect landscapes that are simultaneously natural and products of human production, and by crafting a response that weaves together perceived benefits for human communities, plants, non-human animals and landscapes, the food movement represents a politics of socio-nature that moves toward regarding the social and the natural as co-produced.

THE LIMITS OF SOCIONATURE IN THE FOOD MOVEMENT

Co-production

However, this recognition of co-production is partial, and this partiality shapes and in some ways limits the scope of food movement activism. First, food movement advocates such as those populating the North Berkeley Farmers Market, recognize the food they desire and advocate for as simultaneously social and natural. But the fruits of industrial agriculture are described not only as immoral or exploitative, but as somehow unnatural. For example, one evening at the farmers market, I overheard the following conversation between two customers in front of the homemade pasta stand:

“Ooh, smoked salmon ravioli,” said a man to the woman beside him, gazing longingly at the pasta displayed in front of him.

“It’s Atlantic smoked salmon,” she responded warily.

His mood immediately changed from desire to anger. “Atlantic Salmon is all farmed and really bad for the environment,” he said to the woman working. “The only salmon that’s any good from an environmental standpoint is Alaskan. It’s all wild. It’s like real fish! And they have good governmental protection in Alaska so it’s good to support that. In the Atlantic, though, it’s all farmed. They keep the salmon in cages in one place, which has a disastrous effect on that bit of ocean, and then move the cage to another. It’s like slash and burn!”

It is certainly consistent with a socio-nature approach to evaluate the ecological effects of various practices. But in referring to wild-caught fish as “real fish,” this customer implies that farmed fish are something other than natural. Again, the nature/society binary is redrawn with wild fish being a part of nature, and not at all social, and farmed fish cast as socially-produced and not at all natural. This is really reminding me of becky mansfield’s work on nature childbirth. I think you are making some parallel arguments here.

This comment also resembles the way that farmers market participants and food movement adherents construct genetically modified foods as non-natural. For example, the opening sentence in “The GMO experiment,” a short video created by Greenpeace, describes genetically engineered crops as “a worldwide experiment on people, animals and nature.” Casting the creation of these crops as an experiment “on nature” certainly precludes
the possibility that such crops include nature, even as a hybrid creation of nature and technology. In addition, one of the food movement’s most compelling framings of GMOs uses the term frankenfoods. This is, of course, a reference to Mary Shelly’s novel in which the fusion of human remains and techno-science create a monster. This story’s warning against human intervention into natural processes of life and death is in many ways precisely the opposite of the concept of socio-nature, in that not only does it view society and nature as separate, but regards this separation as both moral and necessary.

Indeed, for many food movement supporters, it is not only farmed fish and GMOs that are constructed as entirely socially produced, but industrial agriculture more generally. The blogger at “Aisle of Confusion,” who names Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan as her greatest influences, writes that, “There is nothing natural, acceptable, or necessary about modern industrial agriculture.” Similarly, Francis Thicke’s book, A New Vision for Iowa Food and Agriculture, contains a chapter called “How industrial agriculture differs from a natural ecology.” This chapter sets out the two paradigms, describing the former as a monoculture, dependent on herbicides, pesticides fertilizers and fossil fuel that leads to the depletion of ecological capital and the leakage of pollutants. Natural ecology, on the other hand, is characterized by biodiversity, energy efficiency, self-renewal, resilience and the recycling of nutrients. While these are not the best known authors in the food movement, their description of organic farming as natural while conventional farming is not is common to the movement’s platform. Indeed, Michael Pollan regularly encourages his audience to eat “food” rather than the “edible food-like substances” produced by industrial agriculture (2008).

The food movement certainly describes local organic food in terms that reflect an understanding of society and nature as co-produced. The food and the farms in which it is grown are depicted both as natural and as the product of human labor. Industrial agriculture, however, is depicted as somehow contrary to nature, despite the fact that it is comprised of plants, soils, water, etc, and produces the goods that become the stuff of human bodies. This partial understanding of co-production limits the political possibilities and strategies chosen by the food movement. By contrasting their preferred foods with an “unnatural” industrial agricultural system, food movement adherents create a romantic vision of local organic food that infuses much of their literature and everyday discourses. While the food movement’s romanticism does not negate their recognition that a landscape (in this case, local organic farms) can be both natural and socially produced, it simultaneously leads to a more utopian politics in which particular discourses and actions are presupposed by a small subset of people and legitimized through their claim to naturalness. Such an approach necessarily yields a politics of conversion through which these discourses and practices are brought to others, who are then judged based on their desire to enroll (Childs 2003, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Guthman 2008c).

The notion that local organic food is natural, and that industrially produced food is not, certainly has widespread appeal, particularly among the predominantly affluent, white subjects who are generally hailed by the movement’s romantic discourses (Robbins 2007, Alkon and McCullen 2010, Guthman 2008). But it seems possible that, rather than turning away from local organic food, a discourse that relied less on questions of what is or is not natural might instead turn more explicitly to issues of ecological consequences and of power. Ironically, abandoning a focus on the natural might bring the food movement back to the environmental considerations that were at the heart of its early rhetoric. Food procurement practices could be evaluated not for how natural they are, but for their consequences for humans, plants, animals and landscapes. It may be no more natural to pollute a river than to protect it, but protection remains beneficial to fish, soils and humans. In addition, a greater emphasis on the co-production of nature and society in both industrial and alternative agriculture might create the space in which a more overt discussion of power can take place. Instead of discussing what is or is not natural, food movement supporters might turn directly to questions of who is harmed by, and who benefits from, what kinds of agriculture. This is precisely the shift called for by many scholars of socio-nature, who argue that the point is not to merely understand the co-production of nature and society but rather to highlight the need to make political and moral judgments about which landscapes
In addition, the food movement demonstrates an incomplete understanding and valuation of a second element of socio-nature, namely labor. For political ecologists, labor is the primary way to understand the co-production of nature and society. While the food movement understands that both nature and the labor of the farmer are necessary for the production of organic food, they simultaneously ignore other, equally necessary labor. Farmers are both physically and discursively all but absent from the food movement. The predominantly immigrant, Latino/a workforce who cultivates the bulk of US crops are generally absent from farmers markets like North Berkeley, though many farms do hire individuals, predominantly white and in or recently out of college, to staff their farmers market stands. The most progressive participants in the North Berkeley Farmers Market attempt to mark this absence. For example, when asked to describe why the market is important, one manager acknowledged labor as well as environmental issues: The Ecology Center tends to put environmental goals together with social goals. At the same time as saying sustainable agriculture is a really important part of preserving our planet, [we also emphasize] sustainable employment practices. A lot of farms use really cheap labor and the people who are working on the farms live in horrible circumstances. She went on to describe several farms featured in the Berkeley farmers markets that use unionized labor, rely solely on the labor of farm owners, or who have financed the purchase of land by their former farmworkers. The latter farm had also participated in the 2007 May Day immigrant rights protests, supporting their workers’ decision to strike. Rather than canceling that day’s market, white farm owners and interns arrived with one small table full of produce and a statement claiming that this meager amount was what they were able to accomplish without the help of their Latino/a workers. They also wrote an article in their community sponsored agriculture newsletter describing the situation. However, while individual farm owners and market managers see labor as essential to the market’s socio-environmental goals, this is not an integral part of the farmers market’s mission. Participating farms are screened for their environmental credentials (organic certification, local, etc) and ownership structures (family or cooperatively owned). While the Berkeley Farmers Market guidelines also mention farm labor practices, that criterion is much less often applied. Nor are the previously described exemplary farms given preference within the farmers market. Indeed one evening, a woman approached the managers table to ask why Swanton Berry Farm, a vendor at the Saturday farmers market and the first organic farm in the US to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers (UFW), was not present on Thursdays. Limited spots at the small Thursday market were offered on a first-come, first-serve basis, explained another market manager. “We totally support the UFW. It’s just that they didn’t apply.” Despite managers’ individual support for this farm’s exceptional labor practices, no institutional effort was made to extend them this opportunity. Additionally, The Ecology Center does nothing to encourage other market farms to follow this example. Moreover, there are several ways in which the literature describing local and organic food serves to discursively erase the presence of this group from the image of community that farmers markets construct. The market’s directive to “build community with the people who grow your food,” as one manager put it, emphasizes connections between farmers and consumers, but ignores the laborers performing much of the actual cultivation. Indeed, the food movement’s reverence for small, family farms, mistakenly convinces many customers that market farmers do not employ non-family labor when nearly all of them do. In addition, while all of the food at the North Berkeley Farmers Market is local, those who cultivate it are not. Farmers markets’ emphasis on the local obscures the difficult, costly and sometimes even deadly journeys of those who travel thousands of miles in order to produce the food found there (Alkon and McCullen 2010). The farmers market clearly embraces an understanding of co-production because it views
local, organic food as the product of both nature and human labor. But the labor it regards
is limited to that of the farm owner, while farmworkers whose labor is essential to
cultivation are not treated as an essential component of the socio-natural system the food
movement seeks to produce.

Better attention to labor would strengthen the food movement’s understanding of
socio-nature because it would provide a more complete picture of the human labor (and
nature, in the form of human bodies) involved in the co-production of organic food. But
socio-nature is not just about the recognition of co-production, it is a research agenda for
understanding how co-production occurs, and a political agenda that works from the
inextricability of society and nature to work for the betterment of both. Increased
understanding of how food is produced will help the food movement move toward a place
of both environmental health and social justice where the lives and livelihoods of workers
are an integral part of its advocacy.

Scholars of socio-nature have critiqued romanticized visions of the wilderness as
serving to justify the brutality of industrialization (Gregory 2001). The food movement
participates in a parallel romanticism of organic farms and farmers, but to a very different
political end, namely to promote farming practices believed to be less harmful to plants,
animals and soils. Despite these more progressive political ends, the food movement’s
romanticism remains problematic in that it prevents a particular idealized conception of
socio-nature. In a way, it legitimizes the labor of the farmer, literally naturalizing it by
casting it as inseparable from the natural processes that yield food production, while erasing
that of the farm laborer. Better attention to the role of labor might also help to remove some
of the romanticism from the food movement’s rhetoric. The harsh conditions faced by
farmworkers, even on organic farms selling locally, are certainly at odds with this romantic
view. But highlighting these experiences might help the food movement to create the kind
of discursive reflexivity in which multiple constituencies can discuss the kind of nature and
society we wish to promote and protect, rather than attempting to enroll others in a pre-
formed vision.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article has been to examine to what extent, and with what effect, the
food movement conceptualizes society and nature as co-produced. Food is one of the more
obvious examples in which nature and human labor are inextricable, as most food cultivars
are plants that have been bred by humans, become part of the human body through
consumption, and part of the landscape again through excretion. In addition, scholars
drawing on the concept of socio-nature argue that it might serve to foster a new kind of
environmental politics that is less romanticized, and more attuned to dialectics and the
dynamics of human labor, and more inclusive of the multiple positionalities and meanings
that can be attributed to nature. For these reasons, and because food is currently the subject
of a vital social movement, it comprises an important standpoint from which to examine the
politics of socio-nature on the ground.

Based on my data from the North Berkeley Farmers Market, as well as the wider
food movement literature, I argue that the movement has an important, yet limited,
understanding of co-production. Food movement supporters understand local organic food
as the co-produced by society and nature. Because they see local organic food as nature,
food movement supporters advocate for it through a discourse that borrows heavily from
the language through which environmentalists advocate for the preservation of wilderness,
particularly themes of beauty and biodiversity. And yet, by simultaneously emphasizing the
hard work required by farmers to produce food, movement supporters recognize local
organic food as a product not only of nature but of human labor. This understanding of co-
production fosters the creation of a politics that weds improved ecological health to the
betterment of human society. It brings the place to be preserved out of the wilderness and
into the farms, homes and bodies where human life takes place. This spatial shift facilitates
a stronger connection between the environmental politics of the food movement and
advocacy for environmental justice that prioritizes the places where ecological processes are
more immediately intertwined with human health disparities.
However, the politics of socio-nature embraced by the food movement is partial. First, awareness of co-production is limited to local and organic food and farming. Food movement supporters continue to regard industrial agriculture not only as ecologically and socially damaging, but as unnatural. This discursive move allows food movement supporters to maintain a romantic vision of local organic food and a utopian politics that naturalizes one set of socio-natural relations as right and legitimate rather than a more open discussion of what kinds of agro-ecological landscapes should be preserved and why. Secondly, while the food movement incorporates the labor of farmers into their understanding of co-production, they marginalize the tremendous contributions of farmworkers in both local organic and industrial agriculture. An additional focus on labor would more clearly bring questions of power into view, requiring a reflexive discussion of what kind of agricultural landscapes should be produced, by whom, and for whose benefit. One could imagine answers to these questions that diverge widely from typical food movement responses, particularly on issues of pesticide drift and its health consequences (Harrison 2011).

One possible insight to glean from the food movement’s partial embrace of the idea of socio-nature is that the term social is quite ambiguous. In some cases, such as Cronon’s writing, social refers to the mere presence of humans and to a need to understand human practices. But for many political ecologists, social refers more specifically to the processes of human labor and to the ways that uneven power relationships are institutionalized under capitalism, producing unequal access to both material and discursive dimensions of nature. This distinction is reminiscent of debates around the social dimension of sustainability, which is sometimes defined as thinking broadly about human society, but other times defined more specifically as accounting for inequalities. It also brings to mind Jill Harrison’s insights concerning the ideal of justice. Harrison argues that constituencies involved in the management of pesticides define justice in utilitarian terms (doing the most good for the most people), libertarian terms (best pursued through the market) and communitarian terms (located in local communities). None of these definitions prepare their constituencies to account for the disproportionate effects of pesticide drift and its tremendous health consequences on low-income Latino/a immigrant workers and their families and communities. Harrison’s argument that only a notion of justice that explicitly addresses structural inequalities seems to provide some direction for scholars concerned with the politics of socio-nature. Like justice, social may be too ambivalent a lens to shape a politics of socio-nature. A stronger and more potentially transformative politics needs to be unequivocal in its assertion that issues of nature are inseparable from inequalities of race, class, gender, national status, etc and from the capitalist processes that are so foundational to their (re)production.


