

The Provision of Produce in Kansas City: Thinking the Global as a Local Space

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Abstract

In food geography there is tension between production systems delivering global produce and those with more local geographies. Without giving primacy to the global, research in Kansas City, KS and MO suggests that supermarket managers are beginning to look at the global in the same way they look at the local. This is especially true when it comes to produce. Production and delivery systems are becoming so efficient that, for those in control of the flows of food, the quality of the produce, as well as the scale of production, means that the produce is as good as or even better than that produced locally. Interviews with multiple stakeholders in the city provide ethnographic detail lending credence to the global as local and provide the forum to further examine and contribute to the global versus local debate in geography.

Keywords: Food Geographies, Global/Local, Kansas City, Ethnography, networks

Introduction

What is global? What is local? In the context of food, the dualities and the contrasts behind these two commodities has been argued by many researchers (Cook et al. 2006, 2008; Depuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2003; Kimura and Beld 2005; Morales, Szmigin and Carrigan 2010). This article articulates a different idea. Instead of the opposability of the two when using food as the commodity, I argue that the global is the local. This is especially true with fresh produce. Using research in the Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas metropolitan area I show how the philosophies toward availability enable supermarket managers to approach the sale of produce to consumers as though all crops are produced at a local scale and can be marketed as such. The research that underpins this paper highlights how they do not sell locally grown produce as a rule (although as will be seen below, they are not averse to suggesting they do), but how they equate their produce with the local in its freshness, wholesomeness and accessibility. What they are really saying is that, from the perspective of those in control of access to produce, the world is local space. I am not essentializing the global process nor staking its claim to primacy in the production of food at the various geographies of scale. I point out how this articulates Harvey's (1990) time/space compression concern but more importantly reinforces Hendrickson and Heffernan's (2002, 349) point: "In the global food system, power rests with those who can structure this system by spanning distance and decreasing time between production and consumption.

This reorganization of time and space indicates a great deal of power on the part of just a few actors that are able to benefit." This philosophy I call the localization of the global. The idea is good in some ways, of course. Availability and ubiquity through the removal of local seasons of production mean that consumer's do not have to consider ideas such as food shortages, famine, or the vagaries of nature, since the stores themselves will ensure food's availability. Any food chain that allows farmers "indirect access to markets at lower costs than individual small-scale producers would face" (Raikes, Jensen and Ponte 2000, 393) would appear to be one that consumers would welcome. We are not in isolation as consumers; rather, there exists an "equality of genuine relativism that makes none of us a model of real consumption and all of us creative variants of social processes based around the possession and use of commodities" (Miller 1995, 144). In essence, the globe has been reduced to the size and offerings of the market down the street or even your local farmers market. This idea resonates because "the local and its constructs -- quality, embeddedness, trust, care -- privilege certain analytical categories and trajectories, whose effect is to naturalize ... the local" (Depuis and Goodman 2005, 361). This world-as-local idea seems to be accepted almost with resignation in the food world and carries with it corollaries of indifference to the plight of local farmers and other local area participants in food provisioning (Harvey 1990). But the display at your local supermarket hides as well the 'we can provide the platform for any consumption' in the placeless foodscape (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000, 319) that will be articulated further in this article.

Additionally, the semiotics of those displays not only hide the reality of globalization, but also the fact that the supermarket will remain as a provider of food, no matter what the vagaries of the local may do to that food. This in turn allows the taking advantage of a ‘mutually constitutive, imperfect, political process in which the global and the local make each other on an everyday basis’ (DePuis and Goodman 2005, 369). As a window into globalization and the modern world, an ethnographic examination of the ways produce and people circulate through Kansas City, both at the street level and through those in positions of power, leads to a greater understanding of that important worldwide phenomenon. Taking a cue from anthropologist Daniel Miller that “the idea of being local can be a sign of our involvement in increasingly global relations” (in Mackay 1997, 25), this article defines our shrinking world through food. Through the reflexive discourse that individuals have with fetishized commodities, “the globalization project reifies not only the accumulation process, but also its individual recipients (consumers), whose loyalty is now to an abstract market devoid of community” (McMichael 1998, 111). There is a simple example of how retail supermarkets create the image of the quality of a food product merely by offering it for sale: “If it is in the store, it must be good!” This credo of trust is flawed, of course, because a supermarket’s checks of quality “usually relate to process rather than to raw materials” (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998, 332).

Methodology

Interactions with consumers, traders, distributors, and producers provide multiple lenses for understanding the movements of food. Based upon the results of a top-down approach to the research, this article reports information from a series of structured interviews with people in positions of power over the flows of produce in Kansas City. Interview subjects range from CEOs of major supermarkets down to owners of stalls and growers selling produce at farmers’ markets. If I could not talk with the CEO of a larger company, I asked for permission to interview produce section managers of supermarkets as well as dispatchers for produce businesses.ⁱ For smaller businesses including growers, I interviewed only owners of farms, feeling that they were able to offer personal as well as professional viewpoints. I do not compile the results for each question into a statistical framework, but instead present significant comments in succession as a narrative. There is no temporal order to the comments, I present various different ideas from interviewees as they relate to particular topics to strengthen my argument.

I believe the selection process was thorough and well considered. I began by gathering addresses for all supermarkets in Kansas City from metropolitan phone books, individual companies’ web sites, and an Internet search using Google. In doing so I discovered Kansas City differs from other major U. S. cities in that independent grocers, as opposed to national chains, have a relatively large percentage of local market share. This seems to keep some of the major companies out for reasons never clearly articulated. I contacted officials at all grocery stores for structured interviews. I identified the owner/operator of every produce wholesaler that distributes anywhere in the city as well as all independent produce growers who sell at any of the farmers’ markets of the city. My goal, again, was to interview a representative set of people associated with the produce trade in Kansas City.

I was not given access to management by spokespersons representing companies with a national geography including those who deal in bulk. I was able to overcome this problem of access to some degree by talking to people in the produce sections in these companies without too much difficulty.ⁱⁱ Other companies, however, including Dave Ball of Balls Foods and almost all of the growers at the farmers’ market, were not only happy to talk with me, but also served as gatekeepers or “snowball” informants to put me in contact with employees at their distribution centers, delivery drivers, and production personal for further discussion. Readers will also note that I did not interview anyone in authority from Wild Oats or Whole Foods, especially in light of the inclusion of comments and references to many organic or alternative sources for food.

When moving through supermarkets one unusual feature to note is the design of the stores for shopping. All stores except for bulk purchase clubs attempt to mimic or create the “feel” of an outdoor market or farmer’s market in the way foods are displayed. In the Kansas City area Hen House puts the produce section on the right side of most stores while Wal-Mart’s are on the left but even then offerings tend to include only one sample of each variety, for example, one type of red pepper. Produce is sometimes packed on ice in an attractive, creative manner, but still only one choice exists for most fruits and vegetables, color aside. In a supermarket, as you walk down the aisles of uniform displays, the distinguishing feature becomes only the amount of each item available. In contrast, farmers’ markets not only have more than one type of pepper, but each stall vendor will have them throughout each relevant growing season.

Choices at a farmers market are therefore exponentially greater, but, conversely, there will never appear to be a huge amount of an individual item available. Unless there is more on the truck or under the table, when the display is done, the farmer is out. Not so in the supermarket where there are vast storage bins out back. In Wild Oats and Whole Foods stores the displays are ever-changing, with those near the entrance always exhibiting the relevant seasonality of produce. Workers in Wild Oats and Whole Foods are very knowledgeable about their produce. This is in direct contrast to the clerks at many grocery stores whose jobs are limited to stocking shelves and where a strong back is the main prerequisite. Supermarkets have a lot of people who work for them and so while there are always people in the produce sections, interactions and information simply begin and end with what is out back as far as quantity or quality.

The questions

I asked three questions during the structured interviews. The basic form of the three was as follows:

1. Globalization's effect upon the modern food-delivery system provides consumers with many choices for their meals. I am thinking here of the ways different foods flow into and through the city and consumer choices of what to buy based upon availability year-long. What do you feel prompts consumers' choices of one type of food, say mixed greens in a vacuum bag from California in February versus waiting to eat fresh greens from a local farm in May?
2. Beyond the obvious difference between a farmers' market and a supermarket, from your experience, how do you think the consumers of Kansas City make decisions on the availability and desirability of the food they wish to consume?
3. Your job gives you a connection to food that is elemental and essential in the sense of a connection to the land that is missing from much of our modern understanding of food. Perhaps it works through you as an integral part of life, but most consumers have few direct cultural connections to the foods they eat. In what ways do you try to bridge that gap with your customers? Or is it simply not something that ever comes into the equation of local food?

I must acknowledge that the wording of each question changed for different actors depending upon their particular circumstances. This was done so that I could more appropriately frame the question towards their unique and individual situation. On question three, for example, I do not want to imply that a CEO has a direct connection to farming. But conversations reveal that it is an integral part of a local farmers life. The CEO would be more familiar with prices and sources of global produce than a farmer, while vendors at the farmers' market will adjust to particular daily market prices or local fluctuations in availability. Local farmers are not immediately affected by the capriciousness of nature in other parts of the world although they will charge more if there is a shortage (a type of profiteering that often goes unexamined in local food production (). The reaction of the local market in Kansas City to the loss of the tomato crop in Florida after the hurricane season of 2004 is a good example. Prices went up dramatically even though there had been no change in the availability of local tomatoes.

Supermarket interviews

Kansas City is unusual among major American cities in that independent grocers rather than national supermarket chains dominate the market (Smith 2004). Mark Hamstra, retail editor for *Supermarket News*, a New York-based trade publication, has commented on this, writing "The larger chains want to increase in size to increase their buying power. For independents to have a dominant share of the market is unusual." Although this is true in one sense, as I will detail below, these independents are major stores in their own right, not the "mom and pop" local markets of the past. Tom Zauca, president and chief executive officer of the National Grocers Association in Arlington, Virginia, alluded to this indirectly by saying that: "With diversity comes strong price competition, variety, quality, service. A marketplace like Kansas City provides a very high level of diversity and therefore consumer value (Smith 2004, D20.)

The primary mover behind the success of independent markets in Kansas City is the co-operative American Wholesale Grocers (AWG), founded in 1924 and headquartered in Kansas City, Kansas. Associated Wholesale Grocers operates on a global scale, simply providing produce to anyone who is a part of their organization regardless of consumer insights into food. They have the means and the economics of scale to dictate both price and in some cases even availability regardless of season. Ball Foods Stores and Cosentino's Food Stores, the two largest of the independent dealers in Kansas City, are AWG members. According to AWG sources, so are most of the smaller stores.

According to the Director of Produce for Kansas City for AWG the philosophy of AWG is that “More and more produce is available due to globalization; it offers consumers much more choices. For example, right now, red grapes from Chile, hothouse tomatoes—we have them nine months of the year—but they are grown in British Columbia under greenhouses. ... Bananas come into Miami, or Freeport, Texas, but most of our food comes into Philadelphia because it is the best deepwater port. It’s not bad though, two weeks from Chile, good time frame, quality remains high. Safe handling, one stop from Chile to Philly, only our export. So globalization plays a big role for us. Some items need special handling; ninety-five percent is by truck; berries and herbs come by plane. We won’t do rail though, unreliable, really negative, even for onions or potatoes.” He came back to globalization again, stating: “There are other places, of course; Ball has a smaller warehouse where he can handle some things, also the icon status of some goods that, of course, we can’t do. Local is Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska, nice-sized farms, good food, but they all fall back on AWG.” Although this Director represents the corporate philosophy of AWG, his personal feelings were evident in the interview.ⁱⁱⁱ

David Ball is the chief operating officer and president of Balls Food Stores Inc. Mr. Ball suggested that, “there is a second level of produce in Kansas. If it is not shipped directly from those producers on either coast, or from a distribution center near to production, it must pass through either Des Moines or some other hands. We use AWG as a secondary source, a back up. Many others, particularly smaller stores, use AWG as a primary source. But we don’t have any difficulties to speak of in bringing produce here, we have a 40,000 square-foot warehouse and we only take 400 or more cases from individual farms.” To ensure product availability “we feel that directly from the grower or packer travels best. The stuff that is closer to being too ripe is sold closer to production. In a way, this gives us the best shot at really good produce. It isn’t in the interest of producers [in California] to ship produce that arrives spoiled; that is not good business. The lines of supply or distribution are the key players. If there is good quality food in the system then we will provide it.” Mr. Ball stated that the company really believed that. He felt that the produce they were offering, especially in their Hen House stores, was as good as anywhere in the country, even in the production areas themselves.

Public information about the Cosentino’s line of stores suggests the operation is divided into two separate entities, but an assistant produce manager indicated that he controls produce for both. Their belief is that “Absolutely, people prefer local product, it’s a given. But it’s also quality driven. You must have outstanding product or people will shop elsewhere. But also it is apparent that consumers understand how good the produce is in our stores no matter where it comes from. We are very global; you must be in produce these days. Our food comes in mostly by truck, some rail. What we don’t get ourselves we get from AWG.” He said that they have relationships with numerous places around the country. The difficulty is in getting it to Kansas City: “Very hard, Chile is by boat, nothing comes through Des Moines, or any other distribution center, only direct, truck and rail but it’s becoming more difficult.” He said that acting upon information received from customers is one of his company’s philosophies that benefit them the most: “Lots of feedback from our customers. It’s our best indication of what is going on.” When pressed further, he finally said that “Brookside [The location of one of their stores but also one of the more upscale farmers’ markets.

Brookside is located south of the Plaza area of Kansas City] gives us the best feedback--more educated consumers, [they] understand food, want food”--but did not mention the farmers’ market there. “We get lots of feedback, it’s daily, it’s positive. Vegetables are not a canned good, so we get it from retailers by fax, email, phone. The more produce is available by volume, the lower the price. A market with high product availability is good for quality, bad for pricing. We are aggressive, volume pricing, but it’s also scale. Look at the trouble with melons and cantaloupe. This is also one of the drawbacks; any melon problem anywhere hurts us by extension. They say ‘why is the produce not good, or why is it high priced?’ rather than remembering what happened earlier in the year. It’s big news at the time but then it’s gone. It also can be something again that the local will drive. California lettuce simply may not sell at local prices, has to be cheaper. Consumers have short memories. We think along the lines of three months. They won’t remember this freeze [winter 2006] by mid-summer. They have already moved on from the California frosts of early winter when lettuce was expensive.”

Locally grown produce in Supermarkets

All of the supermarket interviewees were most emphatic about the role of farmers’ markets in Kansas City in creating positive images for food. One said “Oh absolutely, we compete with them, there are some real good growers out there. Farmers’ markets can generate demand for quality—not big enough to cover out needs though. For example, if a farmer has fifty cases but we need five hundred, we can’t even be sure that the fifty will show.”

David Ball suggested “We try to carry some local producers, but of course, they can not ensure us enough product for every store, so we have to be careful. But overall the farmers’ markets and local producers really help us quite a bit. There is an awareness of local-grown foods; we carry as much as we can get, of course. We do a lot of local direct purchasing, not through AWG, or anyone else [i.e. other wholesalers]. Local is Kansas or Missouri, perhaps Iowa, but we get very little from them.” When I asked if it went to other companies in the city he declined to answer. I meant Hy-Vee or some other competitors. “We really like the farmers’ markets,” he continued, “We welcome them because they make our job easier. Of course, we think of ourselves as one [i.e. a farmers’ market] and seven days a week, not like one [day], [we are] better because we will always have it. Again, it’s quality driven, people are smart enough to recognize good quality produce and they don’t think about where it comes from. Or, if they do, they don’t actualize their feelings.”

Regarding locally grown produce, Mr. Ball told me that: “We try to follow the same principles as Deb Endicott, you know, ‘Bridging the Gap’ and her group [see below] when it comes to local. Within two hundred or three hundred miles, in no sense is Colorado going to be considered local.” He believed that the relationship the company was building with places such as Endicott’s organic beef farm was working because it “uses the icons [place names] to sell products; it’s our only way of teaching about the foods. In answer to your question on flows of knowledge, if our cherry grower is in a store talking to customers about cherries, he is still only reaching 15 percent of each store’s potential business, just not big enough to get results. So the ads [primarily newspaper] put us close [to the consumer], [the] signature items make for a connection in some ways. What we don’t like is the use of food plants to produce finished goods.” He was referring to the ways that some canned and boxed foods now use iconic advertising to suggest place, specifically canned tomatoes or the use of the trees in Florida orange juice ads where the farmer picks the carton as if it were an orange.

The warehouse foreman at the Hen House supermarket at the corner of 83rd and Mission Road, “Ron” agreed to speak to me but not give his last name. He said that his store obtains produce from a number of places [contrary to David Ball who suggested that Hen House is only supplied from the Ball Foods warehouse or AWG], but if they have an emergency that the main warehouse can’t cover, then they get it from Liberty Produce or from AWG. He suggested that Hen House customers don’t realize how good they have it in answer to question one. “Personal relationships are valuable between customers and buyers, between buyers and the wholesaler, but only with certain things--Hen House is very good with specialty items and so the price is really low.” But he thought it funny that Olathe Corn is not grown in Olathe, but is instead a brand name from Colorado. Still, for most of his clientele, Colorado is local. Ron told me that: “Many of our customers won’t eat Mexican [produce] because of the alleged human waste water being put on the fields. Chilean [produce] is getting better and better, especially peaches, but Mexico is getting a bad rep, it’s beautiful produce!”

Because of the intense competition between the many different food retailers, new ways to attract and keep customers must emerge. David Ball mentioned how Hen House Markets have been working in association with Good Natured Family Farms to bring local products into their stores. A pamphlet entitled “Buy Fresh, Buy Local More than a Slogan” (Endicott 2005), also has addressed this issue. Deborah Endicott, the head of the organization that promotes “Good Earth*Good Food*Good Life,” has been criticized by some in the Kansas City Food Circle for compromising her integrity by dealing with Hen House. But Endicott countered this by suggesting that a person must take one’s best advantage to survive in today’s world. She told me: “It’s not enough to be totally committed if you have no market. Better to sell my beef [although she promotes all types of food] where consumers can see it and perhaps benefit from it. I do not apologize for working with David Ball and his stores because I think he is sincere” (Field note, April 2, 2006).

Local growers interviews

“If you are asking about supermarkets that buy local produce, it is a growing movement,” the owner of a Kansas CSA and Merriam farmers market trader suggested, “Ball Foods... is working with local growers to supply their markets. They are promoting the ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’ campaign. ... A couple of markets, Whole Foods and Wild Oats, contacted growers about setting up booths at their stores on Saturdays. But when I contacted Wild Oats (which I have a couple of times) they indicated that they are a national chain and can’t have local foods. They wouldn’t even talk to me about purchasing herbs. I understand that I could become a local supplier if I filled out about eight pages of information and showed proof-of-product liability insurance. I do have the insurance (which costs me over \$1,000 per year) because of the pumpkin patch and pick-your-own strawberries. I don’t need the hassle.”

Another interview, a partner in a farm near Osceola, Missouri, sells their produce at the company's stall at the Brookside Farmers' Market. Globalization is a reality she said: "Customers buy the produce because it is there. No one in their right mind would buy those tomatoes in winter, but it has just slid into place in consumer's minds. It's there all the time, they can't go without. People are so used to having food in the stores, it's not even something that comes into play. They are going to be very surprised when there isn't at some time in the future. That lack is not even a thought to them and this is a huge amount of people."

As the KC Organics & Natural Market at Minor Park, east of the intersection of Holmes and Red Bridge, winds down, an older vendor who says that she noticed me hanging around talking with people, motions me over: "Consumers expect to be able to eat fresh food 365 days a year, regardless of the food's origin. They've been trained by years of availability and few think much about it until spring arrives and along with it the choice of a farmers' market. ... Face it--bagged greens from wherever are pretty good, as are most store bought-from-whenever veggies. ... And most of our customers think Wild Oats or Whole Foods are good places to get "fresh" fruits and vegetables when the local stuff is out of season."

The movements of foods

More refined research into network models extend the search for meanings embedded in the commodity (e.g. Cook and Crang 1996, Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Hartwick 1998; Leslie and Reimer 1999). Under such a microscope, the food product in question is examined from its point of origin such that it abandons "its chimerical world of stable, unchanging, unitary cultures. The immediacy of the production point is lost to the adulterations of commodification" (Jackson 2002, 9). In other words, the food takes on an identity separate from its point of production. Sometimes a tomato is simply a tomato. The locale from which it came is irrelevant because it is just a tomato, not "an organic tomato from right outside your door." Although one can watch metaphorically the movement of points of origin for tomatoes from Mexico to Florida to Arkansas to local farms to industrialized greenhouse tomatoes in Canada and back again through the course of a year simply by reading the labels on the packing crates, in the supermarket the fruits are simply ovals five inches by six inches in circumference, sometimes bright red, sometimes paler, but always that same size and assumed ripeness. All of the other salient aspects of the tomato--its taste, smell, color or, organically, point of origin--are largely lost. The sheer economies of scale required to bring tomatoes to market reduce the local impact of freshness to possible irrelevance because the universal availability seems (at least to the providers of that food) to eliminate whatever local weather or transportation difficulties might arise (Barndt 2002). Once again it is simply a tomato in the market.

Conclusion

The relationship that is most important to the major supermarkets is also one that their customers take solace in knowing: a trust that food of some basic quality enforced by a basic standard will always be available. One of my *a priori* conceptions about farmers' markets and those who sell at them was that there would be a sense of shared responsibility to other vendors and to the market as a whole. I thought all involved would believe that it was in their best interests to have the market succeed. But I now think that it is the larger supermarkets and produce distributors, the people who by rights should be the most capitalistic and want their competitors to fail, who are more dedicated to ensuring that produce will be available. It seems odd, but in Kansas City, American Wholesalers Groceries has a greater vested interest in seeing large chains such as Ball Foods or large restaurant produce distributors such as Liberty Fruit stay in business than a Brookside Farmers Market organic farmer does in seeing a fellow market vendor do the same. Although she would not wish ill on her fellow vendors, or hope for the Brookside to fail, local vendors can easily move elsewhere and sell goods if the market closed. There are many different venues to sell in throughout Kansas City ().

If one local farmer has a bad year (that could entail many different things from frost to drought to pests to illness in the family), no one except the immediate family involved will give them produce to continue selling at the market. The community of customers that builds up around a particular vendor would suffer from the loss of the relationship, but those customers would quickly move elsewhere to get fresh food. Supermarkets on the other hand, will always have produce for sale. It is expected, it would be inconceivable for some amount of produce not to be there. For supermarkets distance from the perspective of world-as-local is not approached in the same manner as consumers might when, for example, they decide how far to travel to a store. If the price of fuel to bring produce from Chile goes up, the costs are passed on to the consumer. If some climatic catastrophe, an unexpected frost or hurricane, affects availability, consumer memory loss about natural (about two months) will enable the stores to soon overcome potential negative customer inquiries.

Of course, this same indifference to distance does not trickle down to the local level. Here the costs are very real and a part of everyday concerns. Rising fuel prices, for example, directly impact local farmers in that they may have to sell for less and reduce their profit margins in the face of consumer uproar for fear they will lose their market. The conclusion drawn from literature on the local (Hinrichs 2002, 2003) is that for most consumers shopping at the farmers' markets of the city, the relationships they have with the farmer are what drive the transaction. This type of trust, however, is vastly different than the one discussed throughout this article. Globally, it is not one of health, organics, and possibly sustainability, rather, it is the trust of ubiquity and convenience, one of value through the lower prices scalar production provides. The reducing the global such that it is the local. Several common threads run through the above conversations. The geographer Louise Crewe (2001, 630) writes that globalization requires us to "more fully realize the relationships between practices associated with the provision of food and the consumption of that food." Although the above interviews are not at the level where consumption for bodily existence happens, consumption of another type takes place along the various networks ultimately resulting in the final purchase (Whatmore and Thorne 1997). One major theme that develops is that all my interviewees reduce globalized produce to a same-as-local idea. The philosophies of these companies toward availability enable their managers to approach the sale of produce to consumers as though all such crops are local.

A second theme is more practical - local producers simply cannot grow enough to fill the needs of the bigger entities. Thus only the global chains can fill the needs of consumers. Whether or not everyone was being sincere in these conversations, it still is evident that one of the ways major dealers can avoid contact with local producers is to suggest that those growers simply do not possess the proper economies of scale to supply the needs of the larger stores. None of my informants outside of the major players addressed the issue of size directly, only that of rules and regulations. The changing dynamic within the supermarket industry as many consumers express interest in more organic foods constitutes a third theme. Such converts in this study tended to shop at Whole Foods and Wild Oats for their specialized products and Wal-Mart, Costco or other discounters for their bulk items, eliminating the traditional supermarket entirely (Warner 2005). Wal-Mart is now a major player in the organic movement and, while one produce manager said Wal-Mart is no real threat to the organic movement, David Ball suggested to me that the volume of product currently needed to stock Wal-Mart's is such that smaller organic stores are forced to seek supplies outside the country with a major loss of transparency that this distancing entails.

All of major players I interviewed seemed not to think about the social implications of their actions. While this may be outside the scope of this article, it is still an important point--any line of questioning that addresses lives beyond the direct consumer links to Kansas City would be unacceptable. To them, food is food, not social relations or the "finger of exploitation" (Harvey 1990). In contrast, several interviews at farmers' markets commented on how difficult farming is and their doubts on whether anyone would choose to replace them. Others thought that if a small farm comes off of the local grid, another would simply move into the gap but had no proof that this is what actually happens. No one, not even the small growers, specifically discussed the human element involved in any of the networks. This lack of confrontation with the specifics of farming is in contradiction to the challenge and opportunity of commodity research. Theorists say that networks are supposed to expose the social problems of food production (Harvey 1990), but this is not so in Kansas City. This willingness to avoid the ramifications of globalization, the 'disconnecting' from social issues, one can argue, is what allows the largest companies to succeed.

Hy-Vee and AWG have no need for any sort of fetish in their produce. In fact, it behooves them to make the produce a part of the faceless foodscape to ensure that the availability is unquestioned by the consumer. Ball Foods, though, must straddle both worlds as they operate in the marketplace. Not only must they ensure food availability to customers, they must also insist that, in some ways, where this food comes from is also important. The last theme that is obvious to me is the way all of my interviewees imagine produce as a simple linear delivery system. The produce director of AWG spoke casually of Miami and Philadelphia in the same way that your local farmer thinks of the farmers market in their town. To him, it is a simple progression, easily facilitated by the delivery system they work with. The idea that food can leave Chile and arrive in Kansas City with the same ease and low cost as if were brought from a nearby town such as Desoto, KS, in a rusty old truck makes the world a very small place. The literature suggests that many different transactions take place along the way for AWG's produce to move to the city; governmental regulations have to be negotiated, the vagaries of nature overcome, and much more. But to the folks at AWG, it's simply Chile, Philly, and Kansas City with no problem. Only some major outside interference such as a change in a producer nations market principles or the closing of the Panama Canal would upset their produce worlds.

ⁱ A useful guide to these businesses appeared recently in the Kansas City Star business section (Smith 2004).

ⁱⁱ Because of the nature of the questions, most of the interviewees were not willing to give their names.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have to suggest that this happened in all of my interviews.

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