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Flourishing Is Mutual: Relational Ontologies, Mutual Aid, and Eating

Alexis Shotwell

Abstract

We are frequently enjoined to eat in one way or another in order to reduce harm, defeat global warming, or at least save our own health. In this paper, I argue that individualism about food saves neither ourselves nor the world. I show connections between what Lisa Heldke identifies as substance ontologies and heroic food individualism. I argue that a conception of relational ontologies of food is both more accurate and more politically useful than the substance ontologies offered to us by certain approaches to both veganism and carnivory. Since relationality does not in itself offer normative guidance for eating, I ask how eaters might better practice relationality. With particular attention to Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer's invitation to settlers to "become indigenous to place," I suggest that forms of relationality based in anarchist practices of "mutual aid" better offer white settlers, and eaters more generally, a political approach to relational ontologies while resisting a tendency towards epistemic and spiritual extractivism. I argue that mutual aid approaches have much to offer to the politics of food and eating at every scale.

Keywords: food, eating, relational ontologies, anarchism, mutual aid, collectivity

Food places us in relation to the world—its materiality, its social patterns, its comfort or discomfort. While we eat because our bodies need sustenance, we make decisions about which food to eat and how to eat it based on many other factors. We might eat in accord with our ethical commitments, our religious practices, our politics, or our understanding of how food affects our bodies. Eating often feels like a personal decision, with effects on our own bodies that only we experience. And yet it has consistently also been understood as a way we can individually respond to big or systemic situations. Food is intimate, necessary, complicated, and interesting. Food is never, however, an individual situation, and it matters that too often even theorists doing important work on eating focus on individual eating decisions as the main locus of philosophical interest.

In this paper, I trace what usefully follows in making a move from asking, How should *I* eat? to asking, How should *we* eat? I begin by exploring two key trends in food individualism—eating to save the world and eating to save ourselves. Individual

food choices are, I argue, both incapable of fulfilling their stated ends and pernicious. Resolving to focus on the individual in response to big and systemic problems with food is almost automatically self-defeating; very little reflection is needed to show that our personal decisions do not solve the problems we wish they solved. The focus on individual actions is pernicious in that it deepens harms associated with consumption rather than solving them.

In the second section, I turn to Lisa Heldke's conception of relational ontologies of eating. I assess how a relational ontology of eating helps us think about collective situations such as white settlers appropriating or condemning Indigenous foodways in thinking about our own eating practices. I argue that we benefit from taking up an ethical approach to eating that acknowledges the complexity of our consuming relations, addresses the political despair that can arise out of that complexity, and offers guidance for collective responses.

In the final section, I argue that relationality alone does not provide us normative guidance and suggest "mutual aid" as a political and ethical orientation for eating. Making individual food choices can be a way to orient ourselves towards, and commit to, the necessarily collective solutions for the problems highlighted by consumption. Since the only way any of us take action is as individuals, we must start with our own actions. However, taking ourselves as an anchor, or a node, in a much broader collective situation gives us both traction for resisting the despair that can arise from complexity and an approach that continues to work for the "better," although we cannot achieve any kind of perfection, purity, or absolution from connection with harm. Making food choices as a form of relational mutual aid opens moral consistency to us as well as—we might hope—enabling more effective ethical and political action.

1. Using Food Individualism to Try to Manage Big, Complex Circumstances

Consider two ways we commonly individualize our eating practices: Understanding food choices as a core tactic in the overall project to not destroy the world and focusing on clean eating as self-salvation. Call both of these "food individualism."

Eating to Save the World

"Save the world" eating advice was exemplified in a 2017 study on how to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. This study received a fair bit of press for its recommendations for individual high-impact lifestyle changes to address the climate catastrophe. The top four changes were "having one fewer child, living car free,

avoiding air travel, and eating a plant-based diet" (Wynes and Nicholas 2017, 3).[1] Given that "eating a plant-based diet" was quite far down the list of greenhouse-gas emitting lifestyle changes that could be made (cutting less than half the emissions than avoiding car ownership), there is a perhaps surprising focus on the eating part of the debate. This emphasis may be because eating is the thing on this list that needs to be decided several times every day; eating also carries a different charge than decisions like whether to have a child, travel, or own a car. Plant-based diets have, however, long been identified as a way to address huge global problems, notably the effects of global warming on food systems (in North America marked by publication in 1971 of the recipe/save-the-world cookbook *Diet for A Small Planet* [Lappé 1971]*)*. It makes sense that individuals feel hailed to take up eating as an ethical response to worldwide catastrophe.

But all of these "high-impact" lifestyle changes share a problem: they take individual decisions as the main locus of ethical action. Implicitly, this focus posits that what is killing the earth and its inhabitants are the people making bad or selfish lifestyle decisions, and that the solutions we need thus require individuals to change their lifestyles. This approach does not identify the greenhouse gas emissions of industry, mining, and fracking, alongside complex situations like volcanic eruptions, forest fires, and melting sea ice that currently captures greenhouse gasses, as core issues to address. It does not allow us to analyze complex issues such as the trade-offs between mining rare earth minerals used in solar power generation and storage and the carbon costs of petroleum. The focus on individual decisions about children, air travel, cars, and eating also elides the social relations that unevenly distribute life chances and necessities.

As reproductive justice activists have definitively shown, we have a long way to go before eugenic practices such as forced sterilization of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized people are not at issue in the choice to have children. Questions of whose lives are worth living always involve how we understand and live disability and ability, and these issues are in turn entangled with the complexly coproduced lack of access to adequate health care, contraception, and abortion, as well as the inequitable decisions about whose children are taken away from them by the state. The question of who is able to raise their own children circles us back to questions of sustenance and the ethics of food; when children are taken into state custody because a social worker deems them insufficiently well cared for, how often is poverty a condition predicting what becomes (in the social worker's judgment) a parent's inability to sufficiently care for their kids? How often is eating a part of that equation? How ought we weight the historical practices of starvation as a genocidal state

[1] Around the same time, an influential article in *Nature* (Springmann et al. 2018) also made this argument; it is widespread.

technology in thinking about food and justice? How should we think about access to clean drinking water as a part of our understanding of consumption and justice? These are not questions easily answered by individuals; none of them are resolved by injunctions to change one's lifestyle.

An unexpected offshoot of the specifically political orientation towards plant-based diet as an ethical orientation towards saving the planet and the beings on it is a purity politics directed toward people who don't eat a vegan diet. These politics are ineffective at best, if the desired effect is bringing people into the plant-based fold. But they become particularly vile in their articulation with racism and colonialism. As someone who eats a vegan diet, I pay attention to how fellow vegans relate to social relations of oppression. PETA distills some of the most cringeworthy approaches, but they're evident also in formations like the recently renamed blog/cookbook formation "Thug Kitchen" and in responses to Toronto Indigenous food restaurant Kokum Kitchen serving seal meat. As I'll argue below, relational ontologies save us from politically useless food moralisms, including a particularly troubling form of whiteness manifest in certain eating judgments.[2] Relational ontologies offer a way towards explicitly antiracist and decolonial answers to the question of how we ought to eat.

Ordinary people frequently perceive the uselessness of treating personal eating choices as the solution to global problems. For people who care about global catastrophes and want to avert them, it can be dispiriting to understand the limited power of our personal choices to effect justice. On the far end of the dispirited spectrum, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (http://vhemt.org/) takes the stance that humans must die out in order for the planet and its creatures to continue. They argue for ceasing reproduction completely (their motto is "May we live long and die out") and leaving the earth to recover as best it can from what they frame as a cancer-cell-like overgrowth. Individualism about food produces the ethical and political problem of tending to discourage precisely the behaviour it means to encourage. I want an answer to the question of how to eat that doesn't lead to a kind of fuck-it despair *or* the aspiration to live long and die out.

Eating to Save Oneself

Then there are individually oriented eaters constellated under the sun sign of hundreds of blogs called some version of "eat this and glow from within" and the rising sign of gym culture enjoining eating right as a way to make gains: the clean eater who can look and feel amazing despite the collective contexts in which we are placed,

[2] Julie Guthman's (2007, 2008, 2011) work on the white-coding of food ethics, and her investigations into the spatial fixes of capitalism in the bodies of agricultural workers, is vital here.

and whose food practices can actually heal the deleterious effects of capitalism. Touted by uncountable Instagrammers alongside innumerable more conventional celebrities, clean eating has its own magazine, cookbooks, and, of course, critics.[3]

Clean eating involves eating at the top of the food chain through, perhaps counterintuitively, eating at the bottom of the glycemic index. Indeed, the frequent clean eating injunction to consume unprocessed foods doesn't actually mean eating unprocessed foods; it frequently means eating foods that are processed through the bodies of other beings rather than through the labour congealed in machines. So, royal jelly, cheese, yogurt. Grass-fed beef rather than grain-fed beef; honey rather than refined sugar. Not eating "processed foods" means eating whole foods that have been kept from decay through unseen sorts of processing, through plastic cases around oranges, refrigerated shipping containers, or controlled atmosphere storage that keep apples fresh using either a regulated mix of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and temperature, or something like SmartFresh, in which 1-methylcyclopropene (1-MCP) prevents the apples' ethylene uptake.

Clean eating, especially in its paleo formations, aims for dense nutritional values; frequently the density of those values tracks as well densely congealed relations of human and nonhuman labour. We might think that eating, as the hackneyed Michael Pollan suggestion goes, foods from the outside edge of the grocery store that our grandparents would recognize as food also reframes our ethical relations to those foods. But, of course, although it does carry ethical implications, clean eating is not an ethical orientation. That is, clean eaters are not making choices based on their ethical regard for the world and beings in it; they are aiming at body-management through eating the most nutrient-dense foods available and through abstaining from certain forms of calories (refined sugar in particular). The relationship is extractive, distillatory, refining. And refining produces remnants, slag, dross, which must be distributed downstream in the form of *E. coli* from feedlots coating romaine lettuce leaves or in lakes of whey left over from making "Greek" yogurt.

So this form of clean eater is again answering the question of how *I* should eat, though this time in pursuit of personal vibrancy and flourishing rather than political purity. Often clean eaters of this variety also have the money and time resources to spend a lot of time on food choices and effects. Clean eating in this mode also slides quickly into practices of food- and body-management that can manifest as dysphoric eating or not eating.

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[3] See, e.g., Bee Wilson, "Why We Fell for Clean Eating," *Guardian*, August 11, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/aug/11/why-we-fell-for-clean-eating; and Ruby Tandoh, "The Unhealthy Truth behind 'Wellness' and 'Clean Eating,'" *Vice*, May 13, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/jm5nvp/ruby-tandoh-eat-clean-wellness.

Clean eating's origin story is disability; diets that now are purported to allow us to manage the externalities of capitalism (being exhausted, lifeless, having bad skin, and so on) began as ways to manage conditions like epilepsy, celiac disease, or conditions that currently are difficult to diagnose. Diet injunctions translated from disability care can still manifest healthism, the assumption that people are morally responsible for managing their personal experience of collective or systemic health wrongs, especially when they arise in rigorously individualist and disability-hating spaces. So, we see regressive people deeply committed to healthism, individualism, and eugenics disavowing their disabilities through promoting eating practices that are in fact supports for living disabled lives.

For example, Mikhaila Peterson and her father, Jordan Peterson, have become popular exemplars of meat-only diets, in which the eater consumes only meat, salt, and water. They are less often identified as people who talk often and openly about being disabled, largely because their accounts of disability are articulated through their own raging ableism. Perhaps because of Jordan Peterson's regressive and antifeminist politics, or because of the tendency outlined above equating plant-based eating with caring for the world and other beings, their food choices are often read as political statements (*Mother Jones*, 2018). However, as the Petersons and others eating a meat-only diet demonstrate, eating can be experienced or prescribed as a way to escape disability, even as it simultaneously enforces the ableism that produces disability. Both Petersons express their turn toward an exclusively beef-only diet as a form of unexpected and welcome freedom from illness, something they would not have chosen but which carries amazing benefits. In Jordan Peterson's case, we receive detailed descriptions of his overwhelming mental health challenges, along with systemic and idiopathic physical suffering; Mikhaila Peterson has a disabling chronic condition that has only been helped through extremely restrictive eating. Experiences like theirs show up in testimonials from carnivory communities online. Although most of the carnivore-diet groups online seem to focus on the health benefits of eating only meat and water, frequently with really wrenching accounts of how ill someone had been before making the switch, there are also frequent references to the possibility that eating only meat will save the planet. The World Carnivore Tribe, a Facebook group started by Shawn Baker (a former doctor whose license was stripped in 2017), one of many groups devoted to the good of carnivory, says about itself, "We are demonstrating the effects of a carnivorous diet for excellent health! Meat and water! Saving the world one steak at a time!" (https://www.facebook.com/groups/worldcarnivoretribe/).

Baker hosts also the non-Facebook site "MeatRx," which has a "Success Stories" page (https://meatrx.com/category/success-stories/) where people can submit their stories of winnowing down their diets, usually in response to real suffering, until they

are eating only meat. Michael Goldstein, who is active in bitcoin development, curates a more supposedly scholarly list as "Just Meat" (https://justmeat.co/).

Meat-only eaters as well as organic-only, paleo, gluten-free, vegan-for-health-reasons, raw fooders, and people who aim to manage health problems through diet, are varieties of clean eaters. Again, clean eating in this form is an individualizing imperative, a form of healthism, such that we are held personally responsible for managing the effects of huge, complex systems that affect us. Strangely, plant-based eating as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—a political rather than immediate health impulse—can also be seen as an individualizing imperative, and one that is, in this case, a form of politics. It is perhaps surprising that both veganism and carnivory aim to solve large, complex, or bedeviling problems through personal food choices, where the success or failure of the solution is measured by how good or bad an individual feels because of their individual choices. Or perhaps this is not surprising at all! After all, food individualism is just one expression of a more general practice of subjectivity, whereby to be a proper human we must manifest as a sovereign subject, master of our desires and bodily being, rational, and in control. The fundamental messiness and vulnerability of food, its intake, excrement, and excrescence, quite naturally disturbs this bodily subject. The epistemic position of the super-knower who understands the real effects of food (evinced by both the Petersons and my more self-righteous vegan or anti-sugar comrades—wake up, eating sheeple!) manages some of the discomfiture of the unsovereign eating self through constructing delimited culinary identities. The knowing and being of an in-control eater manifests, then, a kind of purism of both subject (the eater) and object (what ought to be eaten). As I'll explore below, this is ultimately a sad and doomed project, and we would do better to sit with the real messiness, relationality, and mutuality of our eating selves.[4]

Food individualism arises from very different seeds, taking the form either of the lie that plant-based diets can solve big and systemic problems like global warming or the imperative to personally eat clean so as to manage complex health problems. In their focus on personal lifestyle, from very different origin points, they share the unintended—and perhaps explicitly disavowed—fruit of foreclosing collective political and ethical action. I want an answer to the question of how to eat that is not classist and ableist to the core and that relies neither on individual purity practices of self-abnegation nor encourages rampant consumption as individual solutions to collective problems.

In the next section I begin with an account of relationality as a more accurate account of food ontologies and as a ground for necessary collectivity. In section 3 I argue for the specifically political implications of taking up relationality.

[4] I thank the anonymous reviewer who invited elaboration on these points.

2. Relational Ontologies and Making Collective Trouble

I think of Brecht's poem "To those who follow in our wake." One stanza says:

> They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad to be among the haves!
> But how can I eat and drink
> When I take what I eat from the starving
> And those who thirst do not have my glass of water?
> And yet I eat and drink. (Brecht 2008)

Probably written in 1939, while the author was in exile from Germany, the poem's context is profoundly different than ours. And yet, when Brecht writes: "I ate my food between slaughters / I laid down to sleep among murderers / I tended to love with abandon," I find that he speaks to questions that remain current: How can we consume food and water, knowing that many people do not have enough decent food to eat, or water to drink, knowing the conditions under which people harvest and process our food? Should we just ignore reality? Brecht's answer to the question "But how can I eat and drink / When I take what I eat from the starving / And those who thirst do not have my glass of water?"*:* Make trouble for the rulers. When you are betrayed to the slaughterer, hope that your death causes the people in power to sit easier on their thrones—which is to say, before the slaughter, while we eat and drink although (and sometimes because) others starve and thirst, make rulers sit on that throne with less ease. In this moment of late capitalism and climate catastrophe, the rulers we might aspire to make uneasy are still the "haves" of Brecht's poem: the billionaires gleefully promoting global warming for profit, and the people benefiting from the racial order of capital. And these beneficiaries are not discomfited by people making different personal food choices—they simply monetize those choices and carry on. Food individualism under capitalism carries with it a faulty theory of change, to the extent that it has one at all, because it focuses on making lifestyle choices rather than articulating a space for collective political response. In that focus, it produces political despondency and immobilization rather than collective possibility.

Troubling our food rulers starts with turning our attention to what it would take to answer the question, How should *we* eat? While this reorientation starts with shifting to a relational understanding of consumption, it calls up as well a number of useful questions about what, politically and ethically, constitutes a "we." My thinking in this section begins with asking how white settlers might practice respect for Indigenous legal and political orders as regards food sovereignties and responsibility for land and place, in part through understanding the very concept of relational ontologies as an Indigenous concept that travels without being appropriable in non-Indigenous contexts (Hunt 2014; Daigle 2019; Todd 2016). However, to understand food individualism I turn to settler philosophy.

Relational Ontologies of Food

Lisa Heldke (2012, 2018) argues that many of our ethical decisions about food come down to what she articulates as a misunderstanding: We often think of food as a substance, when actually food is a relationship. She characterizes many of our eating decisions as based on what she calls "substance ontologies": some particular thing is to be eaten, or not eaten, based on what materially constitutes it. So, if you have decided for reasons to not eat meat, all you need to know is if some given food contains meat to decide whether you'll eat it. The eating decision comes down to determining the substance of what you propose to eat.

As Heldke (2012) notes, substance ontologies seem to give traction for individual decision-making—they have the appearance of clarity of classification, and their epistemic demands are fairly mild. The clean eater is enacting a substance ontology in their conception of food. In thinking about the specifically ethical and political dimensions of what to eat, substance ontologies are less helpful. Substance ontologies do not explain why an eater might prefer to eat the eggs of free-range chickens, to eat tomatoes harvested by people who were treated with dignity, or to not eat chocolate that was produced using enslaved children as labour. A chemical assessment of chocolate made by a worker-owned co-op growing cacao in sustainable ways would not show the absence of enslavement in its production. But a substance ontology approach—what's in this food?—can't answer the question of why we prefer nonslavery chocolate to slavery chocolate. When people criticize vegans for consuming almond milk, although the treatment of pollinator bees in the orchards of California is atrocious, they are reaching for a critique of substance ontologies. The working conditions that produce something we consume are part of a broader context, a relation. Thinking about all food choices as relational constellates them as congealed relations; this orientation opens ethical and political questions so that we can consider our responsibilities to a much broader and more complex web of interconnection (Boisvert 2010). A relational ontology of food allows us to say that, for the purposes of eating, the slavery chocolate and the nonslavery chocolate have fundamentally different natures; the context of their production changes what they are for us.

Beginning with the relational ontologies of food, we can see that "*living things eat each other. Persistently. Regularly. Of necessity*" (Heldke 2018, 258). This approach immediately resonates with Val Plumwood's (2000) argument that we can generate an ethics of eating based on understanding ourselves as living within an ecosystem of eaters who are ourselves eaten, in kin relations with food webs rather than at the top of a food pyramid. Plumwood (2000, 287) critiques what she calls ontological veganism, the idea that nothing "morally considerable should ever be ontologized as edible or as available for use." I agree with her that as a political

practice, ontological veganism remains (even in recent academic texts espousing it) incoherent and vacuous, entailing, as she writes, "moral dualism, a neo-Cartesian insensitivity to non-animal forms of life as beyond moral consideration, and an abrupt moral and biological break between 'animals' and 'plants' which is out of step with what we know about the continuity of planetary life" (301). I read Heldke's and Plumwood's accounts as consonant with the praxiographic approach theorized by Annemarie Mol, through which we can understand that ontologies multiply depending on the practices subtending what seem to be fixed entities. As Mol writes, "*Ontology* is not given in the order of things, but that, instead, *ontologies* are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices." She continues: "If reality is multiple, it is also political" (Mol 2002, 6–7). There is still some distance to go between recognizing ontologies as relational (and therefore multiple) and articulating the politics that might follow from those ontologies, but consider what we've gained already.[5]

Immediately, starting from a relational conception of ontology unsticks previously frozen decision-making; instead of judging the ethical and political relationships of consumption based on the substances being consumed, we can ask about the relationships congealed or enacted in the consumption. We're not eating things; we're participating in relationships, and responsibility to those relationships is contextual. There is no edibility-determinant that will remain constant for everyone, everywhen, or everywhere. The context and meaning-making of consumption is situated in relation not only to the distribution of power, harm, benefit, and more as it's practiced in the present; that context is also a trace of the history that shapes the material conditions of eating, drinking, and so on. Heldke (2012, 80) suggests that there is a kind of moral absolutism frequently bundled with substance ontologies that actively gets in the way of attending to the relations involved in making something food. Substance ontologies lend themselves to delimiting bright lines of ethicality because they seem to ask simple questions with clear answers: Is this food something I have determined I am (ethically, politically, for reasons of health) to eat? Relational ontologies can still generate bright lines, but they require more care.

How a Relational Ontology Approach Might Help Settlers Practice Better Relations

Consider the work in places like Curve Lake First Nation to nurture relationships with wild rice, opposed by settler cottagers, dramatized in Drew Hayden Taylor's play *Cottagers and Indians* (Rhyno 2020; Taylor 2020). Substance ontologies focus on the rice; is it good or bad to eat local, wild-harvested rice? Relational ontologies look at the context in which rice is tended, harvested, related with, and

[5] James Stanescu's (2017) case for ontological pluralism as a ground for ethical and political decisions about food and ecologies is compelling here as well.

the web of historical and present relationships that make up what we are. From a relational ontology approach, it is not only that the settlers asking to put chemicals in the lake water to kill the wild rice should be refused—they also likely shouldn't harvest that wild rice, there, or eat it, at least without being in a specific relation with the Ojibwe people who are in historical and present relation with that rice harvest. Food and place are connected (Watts 2013). These relational ontologies are not fixed by, for example, categories like "Indigenous" and "settler," nor do Indigenous peoples' practices of relationality with hunted animals translate to settler practices of eating factory-farmed meat.

As Margaret Robinson (2014) has argued about veganism and Mi'kmaq legends, turning towards what are called "traditional practices" can emphasize rather than negate the situational and transformational quality of being, in her case, Mi'kmaq. I pay attention to Mi'kmaq thinking and political struggles because my family immigrated to Nova Scotia when I was fourteen, with the sanction of the Canadian government but without invitation from Mi'kmaq people there. So my thinking about settler food practices is helped by thinking with people like Robinson about what it would mean to be a settler in better relation with histories of Mi'kma'ki and Mi'kmaq peoples, even as I now live in unceded Algonquin land.

Robinson writes: "Traditional practices are often framed as being pre-contact, as if the absence of colonial forces and their influence denotes a cultural purity. However, the Mi'kmaq culture is a living culture, shaped by interactions with other Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous visitors long before colonialism, and enduring despite ongoing colonial oppression" (Robinson 2014, 673). Within that context, Robinson begins from the understanding that everything is alive, and can be understood to have personhood: "Not only animals, but also plants, rocks, water, and geographic locations can have an identity, personality, and spirit" (673). She compellingly shows that relationships—to culture, oral history, land, animal relations, and more—are both situated in relation to their history and malleable, in process. Thus, Robinson roots her vegan practice in her own Mi'kmaq traditions of respecting animal personhood, without denying that her ancestors ate a significantly animal-based diet. Relationships are collective, and they change over time. Crucially, relationships are only determinable to the people with standing to nourish them.

I have seen settler vegans assert that because Indigenous peoples harvest wild rice, we should harvest wild rice; I have seen settler meat-eaters assert that because Indigenous people hunt game, we should eat meat; and so on. Usually these assertions are broad strokes; they are not speaking about particular places or Indigenous nations, and so they're expressing a generality, not a relationship. Conceptions of relational ontologies may help settlers understand both that it is possible to be in relations of consumption without purity *and* that no relation is transferable. Instead, relationships are situated and personal, collectively shaped and

intimate. Taking a relational ontology approach changes the conversation we're having about what we should eat; it invites us to clarify the stakes and the reasons we're making one decision and not another. Rice is not the same rice to different people with different histories. Because our histories are different, the ontologies we engage are specific, and thus multiple. Relational ontologies of food allow us one way "in" to understanding the politics that constitute our place in the world and that dictate difference forms of responsibility.

At a stroke, white settler vegans can stop asking whether Indigenous people should eat that seal meat and turn instead to asking what relations we are placed within when we make food choices. We can stop ascribing or assessing their eating practices at all, in fact, or trying to leverage philosophical theory out of settler readings of Indigenous foodways. Proponents and critics of ontological veganism alike who turn to Indigenous thinkers to shore up their theories would do better to ask what forms of relational responsibility we can theorize without resorting to epistemic extractivism. For example, although I am very sympathetic to her account, Plumwood's move to carve out a conception of "sacred eating" as a model for hunting ethics itself replicates a tired theoretical trope of native people who are in good relation in a way that settlers could take up—even as it inscribes a sacred/profane dichotomy thoroughly imported from Christian settler regimes (Tallbear 2019, 67).

At the same stroke, white settler omnivores can stop talking about Indigenous people thanking the deer for offering his life to the hunter as they bite into a fish burger made from tilapia imported from China. Understanding that the fish, rice, or deer are not the same thing to Indigenous and settler eaters, because we are in different relations, is a good starting point for asking, what are the relations we are in? In the Canadian context, starvation regimes were integral to the genocidal practices that established what is currently Canada (Daschuk 2013). The distribution of nourishing food and water continues to be a technology of Canadian genocidal racism, in a state-sanctioned delineation of who lives well and who thirsts and starves. As I write, farm workers who have tested positive for COVID-19 are being forced to continue working in food harvesting in Ontario. How would we settlers change the relations we're in?

The Contradictions and Challenges of Thinking Relationally about Food

This turn from substance to relational ontologies intensifies rather than resolves the contradictions and imperfections associated with consumption. Or perhaps it is better to say that it refuses the lie that there is any way to eat or drink that is free from suffering. In practice, I would say that few vegans actually believe that eating a vegan diet frees them completely from implication in relations of suffering. There are the self-righteous among us, such as a colleague who eats a vegan diet and believes that everyone should adopt it as a lifestyle, advocating, for example,

for a departmental policy that all food served at colloquia will be vegan and critiquing people who eat animal products or wear leather or wool. This colleague feeds her cats chicken, which is completely appropriate and necessary to being a good nurturer of obligate-carnivore animal companions. So in practice, although she is avowing a substance ontology, she is enacting a relational ontology, one in which she holds her own behaviour to one standard but respects the boundaries of her companion animals' needs. I believe being honest about these kinds of relational decisions liberates us from hypocrisy and a particular form of purist self-deceit; it may also be a kinder way to get on together.

A relational ontology of eating invites us to perceive the act of eating as only one nodal point in a distributed web of connection and co-constitution, of consumption and waste management. Instead of taking the boundaries of our bodies or of the substances we take in as the source of the answer for how we should eat, we can turn outward to look at the conditions of the production of food—what relations are nourished in the soil when things are grown in one way or another? Whose hands tend the plants, and what are the conditions of their lives? Who processes the substances that become food? How is the waste generated by that processing handled? Where does the water that nourishes the animals and plants in their growing process come from? Where does it go? What microbes are encouraged to proliferate by which practices of using low-dose antibiotics in feed of various sorts? What are the practices of sewage management that handle the material afterlife of our eating—do we shit into drinking water that then needs to be treated? What are the carbon costs of consuming food that is shipped long distances versus eating foods grown in heated or cooled greenhouses nearby?

Frequently we won't know the answers to these questions. Indeed, answering them—in both the sense of "knowing the answer" and in the sense of "doing something to change the conditions of food production"—requires a scale of knowing and doing way beyond the neoliberal subject. Framing eating as a private consumer act occludes the vast public and institutional policies that undergird food, from immigration law to the chemical classification of fertilizers and pesticides. If we learn a little about the conditions of food production at industrial scales, we might collectively make policies that look like substance decisions but which actually track our best approximation of holding relations in view. Collectively holding a relational ontology of food could involve increased government regulation and inspection from the fields to the processing plants. As I'll discuss below, determining what kind of public policies ought to govern food relations needs normative guidance, similarly to the way that making individual eating choices does.

Individually, we can do an analysis of the costs and effects of one eating decision or another, and use particular predetermined benchmarks as our guides. "Eating local" might be a synonym for "I try not to eat food grown in drought-ridden

areas stealing water from diminishing aquifers and processed by people living in conditions of agricultural slavery." But, of course, local food wherever we are is frequently tended by people who are precarious workers experiencing tremendous harm in their work. As with any ethical delineation, this will be a limited and impure decision. Oddly, holding a relational ontology in view as one of our guidelines for asking how we should eat allows us to recognize that there is only, ever, unclean eating. We cannot get it right, we will always cause other beings to suffer and die in order for us to live, and we cannot individually solve the scale of problems given us simply by living on this earth, nourishing our bodies and excreting waste.

In the context of constitutive and necessary impurity, recognizing the futility of thinking that any individual actions can address the vast problems of just existing, is there any point at all in eating one way rather than another? Or should we all just throw in the towel and ally ourselves either with the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement or the neoliberal rulers of late capitalism? Although it is impossible to be perfect, it is possible for things to be much better.

3. Finding Political Guidance in Mutual Aid

We can find useable normative guidance for eating together in a way that embraces the possibility for living as humans who could help rather than hurt the world. In this section, I aim to move from a concern with the problems of individualist ethics towards an understanding of the intertwined necessities of holding in view how our individual activities can contribute towards collective ethical contexts; simply rejecting individualism is inadequate to the ethical demands of food. As I have argued, our focus on individuals tends to elide collective responsibilities. This matters because directing our concern only towards individual behaviours predicts, in turn, continued assessments of ethical success at individual levels, along with a conceit that individual ethical success as regards food choices is ever possible. Individualism paired with substance ontologies tends to coproduce ethical immobilization. However, since we only take action as individuals—even individuals holding in view collective contexts—it is useful for us to consider how we might bend our individual behaviours towards collective ends.

Mutual Aid as Normative Guidepost

Put more strongly, simply orienting ourselves towards relational ontologies in practice does not give us normative guidance for making ethical decisions, especially in making politically salient ethical decisions. Indeed, merely articulating entanglement can short-circuit action (Giraud 2019). For this normative guidance, I turn to anarchist conceptions of mutual aid, putting them in conversation with queer and feminist practices of fermentation and composting. Allegiance to a practice based on mutual aid may be one of the most direct ways to distinguish between right

libertarians and left libertarians; if we think that society could be based on free individuals in a free society, to reprise a common formulation of anarchist politics, there is a question about the place of solidarity and care for one another. Only people who care about others will be compelled by a turn to relational ontologies as a part of collective care for ongoing shared worlds. Understandings of mutual aid begin from the view that generosity is foundational to human and nonhuman worlds.

Mutual aid has come into broader conversation with the inspiring widespread community responses to COVID-19, including substantial new theoretical attention (Spade 2020). The foundational text in anarchist conceptions of mutual aid is Petr Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution,* although Kropotkin himself was part of a lively broader conversation about science, collectivity, and human nature. Responding to simplistic understandings of Darwin's work on natural selection, especially as they manifested in troubling conclusions from social Darwinism that naturalized racism and colonialism, Kropotkin argued that sociability and cooperation were at least as important to species survival as competition. As he wrote:

> The first thing which strikes us as soon as we begin studying the struggle for existence under both its aspects— direct and metaphorical —is the abundance of facts of mutual aid, not only for rearing progeny, as recognized by most evolutionists, but also for the safety of the individual, and for providing it with the necessary food. Within many large divisions of the animal kingdom mutual aid is the rule. Mutual aid is met with even amidst the lowest animals, and we must be prepared to learn some day, from the students of microscopical pond-life, facts of unconscious mutual support, even from the life of micro-organisms. (Kropotkin 1955, 14)

Mutual aid, for Kropotkin (1955, 6), is "a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy—an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution, and which has taught animals and men alike the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life." For many anarchists today, mutual aid signals a way of being together as humans far more than it calls up the evolutionary narrative, centrally including animals, bees, and microorganisms. However, I return to the more expansive sense Kropotkin evoked because I think that mutual aid in this broader conception offers us traction for a practical ethics grounded in relational ontologies.

Orienting ourselves toward mutual aid makes the difference between being an anarchist who acts out of care for the collectivity and being a neoliberal lifestylist committed to healthism. We make food choices in the settled and historical context of an unjust distribution of living and dying and in the context of maldistributed

planetary abundance. So in our lives, deciding how we ought to eat means moving away from personal decisions. We take responsibility for choices in the settled and historical context of an unjust distribution of living and dying. Orienting through mutual aid means, as well, a shift from practices of self-care, exemplified in the injunction to put your own oxygen mask on before aiding others. I mean, in literal airplane crashes this is important advice. But in this world, we do better to ask how we can make public drinking water safe for everyone to drink than we do getting really good filters for our personal water bottle. Mutual aid can be in this sense a more thorough way to care for our selves; when we aim for everyone to have good air to breathe, food to eat, and water to drink, we are part of that everyone. When we work to make sure that no one experiences the harms of living downstream from industries or feedlots, we too don't experience those harms. Mutual aid can be understood as an ongoing, situated practice of political caring.

Asking how we should eat is a good way to approach the question of how we might respond to the extinction crisis we call the Anthropocene, particularly if we tune the question towards a thick practice of material, relational ontologies informed by an ethical and political orientation towards mutual aid. Mutual aid as a heuristic offers a way to refuse the idea that eating decisions can happen on the level of individual lifestyle choices, a way of asking what else is involved in eating. My favorite result of this refusal is an orientation towards the constitutive complexity and coproduction of ourselves with the world, particularly, to return to Kropotkin's throwaway comment about microbes, to the unseen beings and relations that allow us to live and that we need to be in better relation with if we're planning keep living, and eating.

Potawatomi ecologist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer's important book *Braiding Sweetgrass* offers, with incredible generosity, an approach to being co-constituted with the world and responsive to it that shares some practices with anarchist understandings of mutual aid. She returns again and again to the formulation that "*all flourishing is mutual"* (Kimmerer 2013). *All flourishing is mutual* means that when we consider the web of life, or the node of that web we can discern from where we sit, we are called to think about the vastness and the variety and the complexity of the world we simultaneously call home and make strange to ourselves in the very act of considering it; without understanding mutuality we cannot really grapple ethically with complexity and complicity, nor can we really consider what it means to understand ourselves in context, ourselves in history, ourselves as seeds for new histories that we create as we act, even as we feel ourselves flung forward into the future by the past and by the context that we do not control and cannot fully understand. Mutuality offers a normative space for flinging ourselves on although we do not understand, and maybe even because we do not understand. *All flourishing is mutual* reconfigures our orientation toward the world such that our individual

placement as eaters can be understood as also always collective. We can, as Kimmerer suggests, think of the earth as offering abundant gifts and ask how we humans might in turn become a gift for this world. However, right alongside taking up Kimmerer's formulation, and because of my commitment to practices of mutual aid toward collective flourishing, let me raise a concern.

How Might White Settlers Build Nonappropriative Relations of Care?

Like many white settler readers, I am immensely moved by Kimmerer's work. I think of her reflection on teaching students in a general ecology class. In a survey response, the students were asked to "rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was 'none.'" Kimmerer (2013, 6) says, "I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and environment?" She goes on to tell the creation story of Skywoman, a story that I have heard a number of times because it offers a guiding narrative to many of the Anishnawbek peoples in whose places I am an uninvited guest and with whom I try to act in solidarity. Skywoman is an important figure in understanding particular Indigenous practices of reciprocity and care for the world—she is able to make a home on earth, thanks to being in necessary relation with the people already living here, with whom she makes relationships.[6] Kimmerer says,

> It was through her actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it. (2013, 9)

Kimmerer continues, reflecting back on her students in the ecology class:

> Most of my students have never heard the origin story of this land where they were born, but when I tell them, something begins to kindle behind their eyes. Can they, can we, understand the Skywoman story not as an artifact from the past but as instructions for the future?

[6] For the most part I capitalize "Indigenous," except when I am directly referencing Kimmerer's noncapitalization, since it may be that she is making a subtle distinction between becoming Indigenous in the sense of being a collective political formation and becoming indigenous in a more rhetorical sense. My argument applies to both potential uses.

> Can a nation of immigrants once again follow her example to become native, to make a home? (9)

I love the generosity of these questions, and I believe in living as though the future matters, and yet I think the answer to it is "probably not." I do not think that white settler colonists can practice ethical and political action through trying to "become native." This is an invitation we should not accept.[7]

Or rather, white settlers cannot accept this invitation without substantially transforming the material conditions in which it is offered. We cannot become indigenous to place while at the same time continuing the work of genocidal colonization, or while continuing to defend private and state land ownership. Kimmerer suggests the model of "becoming naturalized" in the way that plantain, a low-growing, broad-leafed plant also called White Man's Footsteps, has become a useful part of ecosystems rather than a harmful introduced species. She writes, "Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities" (Kimmerer 2013, 214–15). Asa migrant who has formally naturalized under the Canadian state—a naturalized citizen of what is temporarily Canada—I do not believe it is possible for me to personally practice the different kind of naturalization Kimmerer envisages in the context of the Canadian state's ongoing land politics. These politics are intimately related to food and water, as many reserves continue to have no clean drinking water, as Indigenous subsistence hunting and fishing ecosystems are poisoned, as food in the North is impossibly expensive, and as the Canadian state actively practices petroleum politics that advance global warming.

I'm particularly interested in rejecting the spiritual extractivism of people thinking that we settlers ought to approach resisting global warming, or creating food justice, and so on though taking up practices of responsibility grounded in various creation stories (the Skywoman story being only one) that situate humans as the youngest members of creation, or the newest arrivals to Turtle Island. We settlers should not approach relations of responsibility for the land on which we currently live

[7] Here I am for the most part talking about white settler responsibilities to transform genocidal relations. Racialized settlers have different relational ontologies in light of the unjust histories of chattel slavery, forced migration, indenture, and contemporary globalized racial capitalism. I attempt to be precise here about when settlers generally might have political responsibilities and when white settlers in particular are called to particular responsibility.

as guests,[8] let alone take down the social relations that shape us as beneficiaries of colonialism, as though we were Indigenous. The creation stories that in many cases place people in relations of responsibility for their places are not, I believe, available to settlers.

Following my colleague Sonya Gray's analysis, I hasten to add that creation stories and historical relations of responsibility do not limit the forms of care that Indigenous people practice now. Gray examines Tlingit practices of care for land and place that are new, not limited to territories they held in relation at past moment(s) of contact and colonization. And this form of care is foundationally based on seeing places, or things like glaciers, as also having their own say in those relationships. Gray argues compellingly that settlers are part of the history and context of these relationships such that we can and should take responsibility for taking action in them (Gray, personal communication, 2020). So, while settlers concerned for food justice can and should ask what follows from starting with relational ontologies, in pursuing ethical and political practices of promulgating mutual flourishing we cannot simply do that as though we were Indigenous. Formulations of mutual aid arising from the anarchist tradition may be a less-appropriative site from which settlers can begin to respect other peoples' lifeworlds while also building solidarity approaches to the relations manifest in food. As many racialized people's collective projects show, mutual aid is not the property of white people. It is, however, part of an intellectual and collective tradition more critical of epistemic extractivism, and this is one reason I think it gives white settlers traction for collective action and solidarity.

Mutual aid currently manifests as a practical, collective approach to keeping people alive in moments of emergency and crisis. Dean Spade writes,

> The contemporary political moment is defined by emergency. Acute crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change-induced fires, floods, and storms, as well as the ongoing crises of racist criminalization, brutal immigration enforcement, endemic gender violence, and severe wealth inequality, threaten the survival of people around the globe. . . . In the face of this, more and more ordinary people are feeling called to respond in their communities, creating bold and innovative ways to share resources and support vulnerable neighbors. This survival work, when done in conjunction with social

[8] I have benefitted from thinking with Jinny Yu's installation, *Perpetual Guest* (http://jinnyyu.com/Projects/perpetual-guest.html), which asks what it might mean to think of ourselves as guests, wherever we are, and deepens the question of whether practices of responsibility require a deeper sense of rootedness and grounding than is afforded by guestdom.

> movements demanding transformative change, is called mutual aid. (Spade 2020, 1)

As Spade elaborates, all large, effective social movements have included mutual aid as part of their daily culture—from the Black Panther Party's Survival Programs to AIDS activists providing food and care for sick comrades. As applied to the question of how we should eat, it is instructive that overwhelmingly collective movements for justice and dignity start from the position that all people deserve sustenance—and, frequently, that position manifests in feeding people. This happens in church basements and activist potlucks and Food Not Bombs's street food service and home kitchens. Activists and ordinary people alike practice the general principle Kimmerer lays out, that all flourishing is mutual, in food practices that respect eaters, what we eat, the ecosystems that grow food, the humans and nonhumans who help it grow, and the systems that process waste.

As a normative principle, mutual aid also plays well with feminist approaches to ethical complexity. We might follow Myra Hird in thinking at scales down to the microbial; she urges us "to consider the vast majority of relations within the biosphere as independent of, and largely indifferent to, human input." Further, we can "observe that our symbiotic relationship with bacteria is obligate for humans (that is, essential to our survival) but not for bacteria" (Hird 2012, 69). Here I note also that mutual aid as a political response to relational ontologies does not imply exchange relations based on fungible equivalents; we can be in relation with others in ways that reveal our fundamental vulnerability and dependence. Bacteria, fungi, and other small beings in the world definitely offer us more than we offer them. Building an ethical response to being in relation with countless unseen others who keep us alive asks how we can offer back to them what we have, even if our abilities are far outstripped by our needs.

We know that often when we eat, we're not actually feeding our bodies but rather feeding our microbiome, parts of which then convert various substances into either things for other microbes to eat or for our bodies to take up (Yong 2018). And we know that this is very situated work—the *E. coli* that does us no harm inside our gut can be tremendously difficult for us on our lettuce. Microbes on our skin, in very particular formations, help shield us from viruses. Playing in the dirt may help us nourish a more complex and robust gut ecosystem, as might eating fermented foods of various sorts. And plants, animals, algae, and fungi flourish or die in part because of our waste practices. Ladelle McWhorter's reflections on compost and becoming dirt helps me think about a reorientation towards feeding the soil as an ethical orientation toward the proliferation of, as she puts it, the good of the world remaining "ever open to deviation" (McWhorter 1999, 164). Since plants eat dirt, "what you do is feed the dirt" (165). In this moment of major world cities coming to the end of their

water supply while we use drinking water to carry away excrement, when China has stopped accepting recycling from other continents, when tailings reservoirs threaten major water systems, it might help us to turn towards practices that support the microbiota that make soil something plants can eat.

Ethical eating decisions are actually choices about relationships, not food. This matters because substance ontologies betray exactly the world-making activity they are ostensibly aiming to protect—substance ontologies seem to get us off the hook of taking responsibility for the impossible ethical task of taking in nourishment and processing our excreted waste. Substance ontologies are gentle lies, but they are lies. Thus, we could consider what relational ontologies give us for an ethics that is more adequate to the entangled world we care for. Holding a relational ontology of consumption with mutual aid in mind might invite practices best exemplified by composting and fermenting—what world might we cocreate in eating towards a world in which many worlds can flourish? Donna Haraway called the communities in her speculative fabulation about transformed reproductive relationships "Communities of Compost," imagining that in that future, "living-with was the only possible way to live-well" (Haraway 2016, 162). We are already living-with, but for the most part in ways that disavow the relations that we in fact rely on for every breath and heartbeat. My favorite outcome of holding relational ontologies as a ground and mutual aid as a lodestar is that all of us—individually, collectively, and socially—will have different practices of pursuing living well. Our ontologies differ. But we can be sure that no one who takes invitations to mutual flourishing seriously will legislate enslaving others, poisoning the soil or water, or proliferating suffering because it makes more money.

With a shift from asking how *I* should eat to asking how *we* should eat, we group with that "we" ourselves, alongside other humans including undocumented farm workers, grocery store shelf stockers, people in prison, Indigenous people practicing sovereignty through responsible relations with their land, soil microbes, gut bacteria, fungi, viruses, the clouds and their rain, rivers, lakes, city-run compost facilities, worms, mushrooms, and all the other seen and unseen beings who support and sustain us. Thinking about how we ought to eat as a form of mutual aid might help us practice our relational ontologies with more hope for continuing to live, to deviate, to flourish. Walking alongside Kimmerer and many others, settlers in particular can begin to build politics based on the understanding that, for real, all flourishing is mutual.[9]

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