

## The Celebrity of Salatin: Can a Famous Lunatic Farmer Change the Food System?

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### Abstract

This essay analyzes Joel Salatin's celebrity as a sustainable farmer to explore the ways his public persona manages underlying tensions in the alterative food movement. Using his many film appearances as well as ethnographic notes from a full day workshop with Salatin as data, this paper explores how Salatin's celebrity status obscures many of the challenges facing food activists behind the veneer of the charming, folksy farmer and the rhetoric of freedom (freedom from the corporate food system and corrupt government practices). The tensions between Salatin's free-market, anti-regulation politics and the mainstream environmental movement, we argue, are managed and contained through nostalgic images of Salatin as the white, male, yeoman farmer and the masculinization of sustainability. By using an appeal to traditional masculinities to market sustainable food to the mainstream, Salatin's celebrity (like all celebrity identities) works to support consumption and market-driven solutions to current environmental and food justice crises. In the process, these solutions ignore how the market itself is culpable in creating such crises. By obscuring this tautology, Salatin's celebrity suggests we can consume our way out of the injustices of the current food system.

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## Introduction

The day before a daylong workshop hosted by self-described “lunatic farmer” Joel Salatin in our North Idaho town, we met up with a neighbor who was so enthusiastic about meeting Salatin that she joked about throwing her underwear on stage during his talk. At least, we hoped that she was joking. We weren’t quite sure how serious she was because, for our community of backyard gardeners, farmers’ market devotees and small-scale sustainable farmers, Joel Salatin’s visit was a major event. People were scrambling to sign up to spend a hot summer Saturday in an un-air-conditioned, corrugated steel building to learn about mob grazing and to get a glimpse of the most well-known sustainable farmer in the U.S.

The enthusiasm surrounding Salatin’s workshop made one thing clear: Salatin is not a simple farmer-activist. He is a celebrity, at least among the increasingly larger segment of U.S. society concerned with sustainable agriculture and changing the food system. Never mind that a number of our friends and colleagues had no idea who he was. In sustainable agriculture circles, Salatin is the “the high priest of the pasture” (Purdum, 2005). In addition to being a successful sustainable farmer and author of a number of books (including *Holy Cows and Hog Heaven*, *Everything I Want to Do Is Illegal*, *You Can Farm*, *Pastured Poultry Profit\$*, and *Family Friendly Farming*), Salatin is widely circulated as the face and voice of alternative agriculture. Discussion of his Polyface Farm occupies an entire chapter in Michael Pollan’s best-seller *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), and he appears in a variety of food films, including *American Meat* (2013), *Farmageddon* (2011), *YERT: Your Environmental Road Trip* (2011), *Fresh* (2009), and *Food, Inc.* (2008).

Only one of the authors was able to attend the event, but like most people who met a celebrity, she found that he did not entirely live up to expectations. He was shorter (and perhaps a bit portlier) than expected. But more importantly, the public performance put on by Mr. Salatin was quite paradoxical. On the one hand, Salatin was immensely charming and engaging as he crusaded for a new form of farming that respects and values the land and livestock — farming that respects the “pigness of the pig and chickenness of the chicken.” These ideas clearly align with the philosophies of ecofeminism, and in his own writing, Salatin has defended alternative agriculture as a sort of “sissy” form of farming that must be willing to break free from the masculinist perspective of conventional agriculture. Yet, in his demeanor and stance, he was every bit the patriarch, the wise sage imparting knowledge. Furthermore, he took a number of opportunities to deride environmental regulation — the Endangered Species Act was a favorite target — making his libertarian leanings quite clear while emphasizing the importance of

appealing to left-leaning academics and educated liberals as the consumer base for sustainable agriculture.

Comparing Salatin's workshop against his film appearances only makes these paradoxes more palpable, as his enthusiastic endorsement of alternative agriculture on screen is framed by highly nostalgic images of rural manhood and the White family farm. But such images also demonstrate the complexities of Salatin's food activism, indicating that any analysis of Salatin's role as an agent of change must address his status as a media celebrity. This approach recognizes that Salatin-the-celebrity is not simply an individual, but a complex and contradictory set of images, discourses, and ideas that are promulgated through films, books, news media, and staged public appearances. These various sources comprise his "star text," the accumulated cultural discourses that, taken together, represent Salatin as a public figure (Dyer, 1979). While seeming to promote Salatin as a real and authentic individual, however, his star text is actually a fragmented and, at times, contradictory repository of ideas that resonate precisely because they express the ideological contradictions of the sustainable food movement. Both exposing and managing the cultural tensions surrounding alternative agriculture — especially regarding the role of masculinity within sustainability and the contradictions between environmentalism and consumerism — Salatin's star text assuages such anxieties behind the wholesome and charming image of a gentleman farmer.

In this paper, then, we make use of a 2013 full-day workshop put on by Salatin, which included three talks: "Ballet in the Pasture"; "Scaling up to Full-Time from your Part-Time Farm"; "Locafood, Locagistics." One author, a sociologist trained in methods of ethnographic participant observation attended the event. The 22 pages of notes taken during the event included quotes from Salatin and observations about the space. In addition to observations from the workshop, we draw on examples from Salatin's numerous film appearances in order to show how the celebrity of Salatin is presented in this medium.

Using these sources, this article explores the limitations of celebrity food activists, questioning whether their promotion of sustainable food systems to a wider audience comes at the expense of more complex discourses and inclusive models of alternative food systems. Does Joel Salatin's charming celebrity activism, in other words, keep us from asking tougher questions about the future of sustainable foods? This is not to question Salatin's model of agriculture, which, by most accounts, represents a revolutionary departure from conventional agriculture and plays a major role in the sustainable food movement. However, Salatin is only one of many voices in a complex and multifaceted movement; so, why does he occupy so much

of the public's attention on sustainable foods? Why is Salatin so often considered to be the most appealing and persuasive image of sustainable farming today?

Ultimately, we argue that Salatin's celebrity status obscures many of the challenges facing food activists today behind the veneer of the charming, folksy farmer and the rhetoric of freedom, particularly freedom from the corporate food system and corrupt government practices. The tensions between Salatin's free-market, anti-regulation politics and the mainstream environmental movement are managed and contained through nostalgic images of Salatin as a White, male, yeoman farmer and the masculinization of sustainability. By using an appeal to traditional masculinities to market sustainable food to the mainstream, Salatin's celebrity (like all celebrity identities) works to support consumption and market-driven solutions to current environmental and food justice crises.

### **Celebrity, Ideology, and Activism**

Despite the common critique that contemporary celebrity culture epitomizes the vacuous superficiality of identity in the modern world (discourses that reference one Kardashian or another), stars and celebrities function as an important means through which ideas about subjectivity and identity are constructed within capitalist culture (Dyer, 1979, 1986/2003; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004). As P.D. Marshall (1997) claims, stars function as valuable cultural images for the creation of cultural identity: "Each celebrity represents a complex form of audience subjectivity that, when placed within a system of celebrities, provides the ground in which distinctions, differences, and oppositions are played out" (p. 65). Individual celebrities, in essence, become sites of contestation in which different forms of identity and ideological assumptions about the social world are embodied and negotiated. In fact, Hinerman (2001) argues that "stardom . . . is not a 'problem' but a blessing in the chaotic conditions of modern life" (p. 196), as stars provide connections across cultures and models of modern subjectivity.

This approach to celebrity culture has its foundations in Richard Dyer's work on the semiotics of stars and their relationship to ideology. Dyer argues that each celebrity offers a multifaceted, polysemic image whose signification is grounded in the ideological fissures of that star's cultural and historical context. Stars resonate in particular historical contexts precisely because they embody tensions and anxieties that can be overlooked behind the veneer of the "complete individual" (Dyer, 1986/2003). Recognizing that the concept of individualism itself is a social construction (where Western culture privileges ideals of individual wholeness over models

of identity that stress fragmentation and disjunction), this approach sees celebrity culture as a key model in constructing seemingly discrete identities out of contradiction. Celebrities, in other words, offer highly contradictory images that expose competing ideological visions. Yet, the popular construction of celebrities occludes such tensions, appearing to resolve them but really just hiding them behind the idea that celebrities represent an individual. For example, as an audience, we do not see a tangled mess of contradictions surrounding sexuality, innocence, and appropriate femininity; we just see “Marilyn Monroe.”

The management of cultural identities provided by celebrities, of course, always serves the interests of capitalist culture. The modern star system, after all, was created largely as an act of marketing and promotion — stars exist to market films, television shows, books, other products, or even just the idea of celebrity itself (as seems to be the case with the slough of reality TV stars). By promoting the idea of individuality and particular models of subjectivity, celebrity culture works to not only interpolate people into roles as consumer-subjects, but also to guide them to particular products based on the appeal of charming stars-as-individuals.

Given this relationship between celebrity, ideology and consumerism, the relationship between celebrity and social activism seems particularly fraught. Most often, celebrities manage ideological tensions in order to facilitate consumption, not represent particular ideological agendas. This is not to downplay the role of certain celebrities in social change, such as the humanitarian efforts of popular celebrities such as Bono, Angelina Jolie, or George Clooney. However, as Scott (2011) suggests, such celebrity efforts represent a technocratic, consumerist model of philanthropy (“philanthrocapitalism”) in which civil responsibilities are managed by private, heavily branded, non-profit organizations that often blur the lines between social awareness and consumption. Of course, this critique is aimed at popular celebrities who move into the realm of activism and diplomacy rather than activists whose work propels them to celebrity status, but the persistent links between celebrification and consumerism suggest the possible limitations of activist-celebrities such as Joel Salatin to articulate a responsible model of social change. That Salatin has reached some small level of celebrity, in fact, indicates that his mediated persona manages a set of tensions and anxieties that perhaps ought to be exposed rather than assuaged. The popular image of Salatin as a celebrity farmer offers a pleasurable and marketable vision of sustainability but one that occludes a series of contradictions and debates that must be addressed within the sustainable agriculture community.

## The Free-Market as Regulator

Throughout his presentation, Salatin was clear in his belief that the food system — and by extension the environment — would be improved if only farmers were unfettered by governmental red tape. This includes everything from laws that make it illegal to sell raw milk in some states to the Endangered Species Act. One of the most persistent tensions in Salatin's vision of social change is his belief that changing consumer buying patterns — by offering them a superior product — is the lynch pin to improving the food system and the environment. His presentation and film appearances both offer discussions around the political economy of food production, exposing the ways various business interests collude with government organizations. These are valuable and important discussions. Yet, his conclusion (and the conclusion offered by many of the films in which he appears) suggests that the free market would somehow ameliorate the corruption of government and corporate power. Thus, his celebrity implicitly answers the question “is environmental regulation or the unfettered market a better solution to issues of food sovereignty?” by triumphing his success (both economic and environmental) within the free market and indicating the ways he would be more successful with less regulation.

During the workshop, this last point was made especially clear. As a libertarian who writes books with titles like *Everything I Want to Do is Illegal*, his belief system is fairly straightforward: government regulation in most forms is a hindrance to sustainable farmers. Environmental policy, in particular, is highly objectionable to Salatin. He took a number of opportunities during his workshop to rail against the Endangered Species Act, suggesting that this law was dangerous to farmers and ranchers. Furthermore, he frequently disparaged conservation policies as counter to a sustainable farming movement. For example, he appealed to the audience to consider farming land held by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM): “Think of the BLM land that's not being used. You don't even have to own land to farm!” Later in his talk, he referred to land that is not populated or managed by humans as “abandoned forests.”

Both of these assertions have found particular traction on the far right and, if taken to their logical conclusion, assume that only the free market is an effective regulatory tool. At the workshop, he reminded folks in the audience not to be swayed by the “cultural guilt complex where too many people are afraid to touch nature — cue the radical environmental agenda.” Then, channeling his (mocking) version of a “radical environmentalist,” he added: “Nature is too precious and sacred to be desecrated by human breath.” To the contrary, Salatin thinks that humans have long “manipulated” the natural environment with positive effects, offering up

buffalo jumps or lighting fires on prairies as examples. After working in several examples of natural environmental changes — “volcanoes, floods, droughts, glaciers, storms” — Salatin claimed that the “planet has been manipulated, moved around for a long, long time.”

Ironically, though, Salatin seemed aware that these positions are often at odds with those of the customers of sustainable agriculture, who tend to be more liberal and supportive of environmental regulation. Assuming that the audience embraced his libertarian perspective, he reminded this room of sustainable practitioners that their customers are “not our political or spiritual tribe.” He told the audience to remember that the people who would be their customers were “all the quacks,” specifically the wellness community, the environmental groups, and slow food people. He also reminded the audience that their clients were “all women” and probably not that informed about much of anything. He noted, “We don’t have any male customers — they are all women. Thirty years ago, people could process chickens; today, half of those people don’t know chickens have bones.” Putting aside (for now) the highly gendered implication that all the environmental “quacks” were women who knew nothing of the real world, it was still clear that he saw a tension between his (clearly superior) libertarian worldview and the regulation-loving environmentalist upon whom his business success rests.

It wasn’t surprising, then, that his position explicitly ignores issues of social equality and equal access to healthy, sustainable foods. He made it clear that the audience should not “use your emotional energy” on thinking about people in food deserts. Before his question and answer session started, he noted that he was relieved to be in a rural area because he knew he would not get the “what about the single mother in food deserts?” question that he apparently found tedious. Nonetheless, he followed up on his own rhetorical question by noting:

This [single mothers in food deserts] is 2% of the population, and you can’t use your emotional energy on this. Instead focus on the soccer mom with the lawn who drives to the soccer game. I realize these are tough nuts to crack, and I don’t have the answers for it, but if 98% would do it, it would fundamentally change the market.

Ignoring (if you can or will) that he is apparently just making up this 2% number, his conclusion is once again deeply invested in a free-market answer to changing the food system.

By his own accounts (and his results), Salatin is an excellent farmer who has been successful by many measures, and he certainly recognizes the urgency of this issue (“We need to heal this great earth”). Yet, this belief that changing consumption patterns will fundamentally change the world is simply incompatible with the material realities of capitalism, which demand constant growth and require inequality to function. Perhaps part of this stems from an (apparent)

underestimation in the number of people who are food insecure in the U.S. He is right that his best chance of generating a new customer is by focusing on the soccer moms, but this only underscores the challenges the food insecure face at accessing healthful food.

As Alkon and Agyeman (2011) outline, the challenges in bringing healthy food to disadvantaged populations are many and diverse, from the structural conditions that produce food deserts to the cultural Whiteness and middle-class-ness of the sustainable food movement itself. For example, African American neighborhoods are eight times more likely to have liquor stores that feature high-priced, prepackaged food as compared to White and integrated neighborhoods (LaVeist & Wallace, 2000). Meanwhile, individuals in the sustainable food movement naively focus on education as the only real barrier to healthy eating (Guthman, 2011).

But, while Salatin focuses on converting White, soccer moms to sustainable meats and produce, there are many farmer-activists who work to improve access to healthful food for poor people of color. Will Allen of Growing Power is perhaps the best known, providing workshops and outreach to bring sustainable, urban gardening to diverse populations. Challenging the idea that sustainable farming is for rural landowners and that the central market for sustainable foods is liberal, middle-class White women, Allen's organization promotes a model of sustainability that brings healthful foods to the populations least able to access them. The fact that Allen is not a household name (i.e., not a celebrity) suggests that ideals of social justice are pushed aside in the sustainable food movement, offering instead a more palatable and marketable discourse: that the real barrier to access to sustainable foods is personal priorities (children's soccer games and lush lawns) rather than economic or structural barriers such as poverty or food deserts.

By disavowing these structural concerns, Salatin represents a consumption-oriented and highly individualistic vision of sustainability that posits consumerism instead of environmentalism as a solution to the food system. At its core, Salatin's perspective views food as a simple commodity where his role is to provide and market a "better" commodity that consumers will choose because of its apparent quality. Yet, a project such as Allen's acknowledges that food is more than a commodity — it is a communal resource that has the power to transform communities and social relations if we can rethink how we grow and share food with one another. As much as Salatin challenges the reigning system of corporate agribusiness, his perspective fails to challenge the basic assumption of food as a consumer product that has led to the system of corporate agribusiness in the first place. Ironically, this position also better suits the cooptation of sustainable and organic foods by corporate food producers.



Or perhaps this is not ironic, as Salatin's worldview is deeply invested in the ideologies of capitalism. Thus, while Allen's organization has become an important part of many urban communities, its mission of "supporting people from diverse backgrounds, and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities" is in direct contrast to Salatin's discussion at the workshop, which was largely focused on how one can extract surplus value from the land. While Allen's goals are rooted in a multicultural sharing of resources, Salatin is a creative and innovative capitalist with suggestions that stress that no building should ever sit empty if there is a way to extract capital from it. Is your barn not used during part of the year? Then, host a barn dance! Do you have a dark, wet corner on your farm? Grow mushrooms! In fact, Salatin began the entire event by saying that "We all love to be 'victim' of education, terrain, climate, education, spouses — we can all make excuses. We are hardwired to concentrate on what stops us, dwelling on what can't be done." The purpose of this (anti-) pep talk was twofold — to convince us that a guy from humid, hot (and populated) Virginia could tell us how to farm in dry, cold, far-flung North Idaho (he was pretty convincing!); and to remind us that if we were not succeeding, then we only had ourselves to blame (which he also successfully managed to do — see for example: the chicken-coop the authors erected after his visit).

However, this charming appeal to Puritan work ethic in the service of sustainable practices only works to obscure the more complex questions about the role of government in the development of alternative agriculture. Salatin's rhetoric manages to simultaneously denigrate industrial agriculture (but not, importantly, the farmers who practice it) and government regulations. His argument (rightly) centers on government subsidies for conventional farming. Yet, this argument ignores the role governments should have in insulating citizens from the very nature of industrial capitalism. If one needs any examples of this, examine the impact of Sinclair's (1906/1988) *The Jungle* on the U.S. food and labor policy or ask anyone who flew into LA during the 1970s and during the 2010s about how effective emissions laws have been in curtailing air pollution. In short, polluting the environment is free for the polluter (in purely economic terms) in a completely free market system, but it costs money to take the necessary steps to make sure it is not polluted or to clean up any pollution. However, just because it is free to pollute (or would be free in an unfettered market) does not mean that pollution does not have both tangible and intangible costs associated with it that the general population are forced to bear (e.g., the parents of an asthmatic child who has to pay for medication to control a condition caused by someone else's pollution). Furthermore, environmental destruction may even raise the GDP because it means we are spending more on, for example, asthma medications, which

is a form of growth. In another classic example, an oil spill (at least temporarily) means potentially thousands of people cleaning up the spill, earning money, and buying food at local restaurants. It may be a true boon for an economy, but one would hope that it would be clear even to the most ardent capitalist that this is not in anyone's long-term interest.

In other words, we should expect and need the government to regulate aspects of the economy. Particularly when it comes to environmental issues, a free market is not designed to account for externalized costs from production. As Wallerstein (1999) argues:

We need to use trees as wood and as fuel, but we also need to use trees as shade and as esthetic beauty. And we need to continue to have trees available in the future for all these uses. The traditional argument of entrepreneurs is that such social decisions are best arrived at by the accumulation of individual decisions, on the grounds that there is no better mechanism by which to arrive at a collective judgment. However plausible such a line of reasoning may be, it does not justify a situation in which one person makes a decision that is profitable to him at the price of imposing costs on others, without any possibility for the others to intrude their views, preferences, or interests into the decision. But this is what the externalization of costs precisely does (p. 10).

In this way, Salatin's insightful critiques of government agricultural policy (which explicitly benefits and subsidizes conventional agriculture) easily slide into an extreme libertarian position that celebrates the outcomes of the free market and derides the role of important environmental regulation.

In his popular media appearances, however, Salatin's libertarian politics are often pushed aside in favor of the image of the charming, innovative, folksy farmer standing up for sustainable practices. Seemingly aware of the tension between his libertarian worldview and the environmentalist bent of his consumers, Salatin in his film appearances offers his usual rural charm and quirky love of farm animals combined with philosophical musings about using the natural world as a blueprint for agricultural practices. Such utopic rhetoric about respecting nature positions Salatin in relation to the broader environmentalism movement in the U.S., as is clear in his appearance in *YERT: Your Environmental Road Trip* (2011). Following three friends on a year-long, cross-country road trip, *YERT* chronicles a variety of environmental issues and activist movements around the U.S., from the politics of corn as biofuel in the Midwest to experiments in living off the grid in Idaho. Salatin's profile, typical of all his film appearances, has him wrangling chickens and riding pigs as he waxes poetic about the natural world, naturalizing his placement in the film alongside environmental movement figures such as Bill

McKibben. Discussions of farming BLM land or references to environmentalists as “quacks” are best left for other farmers, it would seem.

By keeping his libertarian politics out of his popular media appearances, Salatin is able to align himself with the mainstream environmentalism of his consumers, selling his product — himself, more than his meat products — to a wide audience. Examine, for example, his profile in *Food, Inc.* (2008). Overall, *Food, Inc.* offers a scathing critique of the corporate food system, including the ways that corporate agribusiness buys money and influence in the U.S. government to ensure that food policy in the U.S. supports corporate farming models. In contrast to this highly industrialized and powerful model, *Food, Inc.* proffers up idyllic images of Salatin’s Polyface farm as the “natural” alternative to corporate farming, complete with images of Salatin in his signature straw hat working with animals or exploring open pastures. By contrasting Salatin’s more aesthetically pleasing farming practices against the visual horrors of industrial agriculture (grainy images of factory farms and mistreated animals), the film aligns Salatin’s operation with a popular, albeit vague, vision of environmentalism. In addition, much of Salatin’s screen time is devoted to issues that might be framed as environmental: the farming practices and principles that mark his farm as an alternative to the horrors of conventional food production. But this construction of Salatin as an environmental steward clearly obscures the nuances of his politics; by positioning him against conventional agriculture, audiences can assume that he represents a general vision of liberal environmentalism.

Yet, the “freedom” from corporate agribusiness that Salatin promises is essentially still just another model of consumerism, suggesting that individuals can only engender social change through buying different products and failing to question the whole enterprise of consumerism as a major source of environmental degradation. As Lindenfeld (2010) argues, *Food, Inc.* “adopts an anthropocentric perspective on food that relegates environmental issues into peripheral status” (p. 381), appealing to an individual’s right to consume healthier foods rather than invoking a social responsibility to protect the planet. From this perspective, Salatin and others profiled in the film are heroically ensuring that people can have options when they “vote with their fork.” By documenting the political power of corporate agribusiness to influence government policy, the choice to consume alternative agriculture is constructed as the freedom from corrupt government policies (appealing to the right) and the freedom from corporate power (appealing to the left). By providing a clearly appealing spokesperson for this battle over consumer spending, Salatin’s star persona naturalizes the consumerist assumptions of this popular vision of environmentalism, diverting attention away from the more radical questions of governmental responsibility to curb the excesses of capitalism.

Even in a film that explicitly embraces the libertarian politics of sustainability, Salatin's politics are pushed aside to promote an idyllic image of the ideal sustainable farmer. The documentary *Farmageddon* (2011) sees alternative agriculture through the lens of individual freedom and the right to produce and consume without capricious government regulations. Largely concerned with the government's strict regulation of raw milk, *Farmageddon* is insistently libertarian as it describes truly awful circumstances in which small farmers are subject to overly zealous government interference, sometimes including armed raids on family farms. Structuring the issue around a family's right to consume whatever food products they deem appropriate, the film provides a bleak narrative of corrupt and callous government power.

Salatin's profile in the film, however, generally avoids politics, even though his writings are aligned with the film's worldview. Preferring instead to focus on the practical routines of Salatin's operation — from the rotation schedule of his moveable chicken runs to the conditions of his pigs — *Farmageddon* only includes a short nod to Salatin's libertarianism as he describes the inefficient requirement that his pigs be slaughtered at a federally-approved facility. Instead, Salatin discusses how sustainable operations should be “aesthetically and aromatically romantic,” as the film lingers on long shots of his cows grazing on beautiful open pastures. Relying on idyllic pastoral representational tropes, the “natural beauty” of Salatin's operation is meant to visually align him with a vague sense of popular environmentalism. In this way, *Farmageddon* performs the same ideological move as *Food, Inc.*, alluding to a general sense of consumer-friendly environmentalism while pursuing a line of logic that is often at odds with conservationism and environmental regulation.

Not surprisingly, *Farmageddon's* exploration of sustainability is exclusively White and highly gendered, structuring the issue of food systems around a mother's right to feed their children whatever products they see fit. Indeed, much of the visual argument of the film focuses on the traumatic experiences of women and children during government raids, using a highly melodramatic logic to make the case against regulation. So while the rhetoric emphasizes freedom and choice, the real freedom being supported in the film is the freedom of consumption for fairly privileged populations. Yes, government policies should be more adaptive to local systems of agriculture instead of using the same regulations that they use for large, agribusiness. Let the privileged White folks drink raw milk, but under the logic of deregulation made in the film and in Salatin's workshop, will the free market ensure that poor minorities in urban centers will not get sick when corporate milk producers do not have to ensure product safety?

Of course, the utopic freedom proffered by Salatin and films such as *Farmageddon* is clearly appealing and aesthetically pleasing. Salatin offers a future where folks like him are allowed to do what they will with their land and, frankly, it is a pretty lovely future. His PowerPoint presentation is full of happy-looking people, cows, chickens, rabbits, and pigs, and the images of his farm across the films emphasize the natural beauty of his farming style. Yet, this is an argument that assumes everyone will arrive at the decisions Salatin arrives at, that all farmers will want to consider the “pigness of the pig” in their ethical, sustainable approach to farming and ranching. Ultimately, Salatin offers yet another stylized consumer commodity — the beautiful and idyllic sustainable farm — and hopes that it can compete with conventional agriculture. As long as food activists can sell this image to the average consumer, then we will not need those pesky government regulations trampling our freedoms. But this vision of a consumerist paradise, where people only need to be swayed in their consumption habits, ignores the long history of consumer capitalism facilitating environmental degradation and unsustainable systems. Salatin, then, perfectly performs the role of the celebrity more than that of the activist, marketing a particular vision of sustainable consumption in its attempt to compete with corporate agribusiness rather than raising complicated questions about the public good and equal access to healthy foods.

### **Sustainability and Masculinity**

A central means through which Salatin’s celebrity assuages the tensions among libertarian freedom, government regulation, and the role of consumption within sustainable practices is, quite simply, his charm. On film, but especially in person, he offers a highly engaging physical presence. In his trademark straw hat and oversized glasses, coupled with jeans, polo shirt and suspenders, Salatin is a warm, benevolent father figure whose 100-watt smile only brightens when he gets charged up about how “idiotic” the system is. He is immensely likable and captivating, helping to sweep any concerns one might have about his conservative positions under the rug.

However, this charm cannot be understood outside contemporary discourses of sustainability and masculinity in the U.S. Salatin’s role as the “the high priest of the pasture” reflects the reframing of masculinity within sustainable farming. His celebrity carves out space for a masculinity that is more in tune with nature rather than asserting its domination of the natural world. Salatin insists that nature is not to be controlled (a common worldview of masculinized, conventional agriculture), but is to be respected and used as a model for

agricultural practices. Rural sociologists have already been analyzing these shifts, examining how men involved in alternative agriculture must redefine traditional notions of agricultural masculinities. Barlett and Conger (2004) find that the shift to sustainable agriculture has created a new type of masculinity similar to Kimmel's (1996) description of a "third wave" masculinity for some urban men. Coldwell (2007) and Peter, Bell, Jarnagin, and Bauer (2000) similarly argue that part of a male farmer's successful shift to sustainable agriculture is a shift in his understanding of the relationship between masculinity and farming. After all, the very things that help to reinforce a conventional male farmer's masculinity — the use of big machinery, control of the environment through fertilizers and pesticides, and competition — are the very things that sustainable farmers are supposed to reject. In rejecting these elements of farming, the men have had to reconstruct what it means to be a successful male farmer.

In his writings, Salatin (2006) often makes this reorientation of masculinity explicit, discussing how his model of sustainable farming denies male farmers the domination of nature as a means of affirming their manhood:

In the western scientific cult, nature does not speak. Besides, to listen to nature is decidedly feminine. What macho farmer feels empowered if he comes into his beloved's embrace after a long day and to her idyllic question, "Well, my big hunk, what did you do all day?" He exclaims, "Oh, dear, I made the cows happy!" Somehow, to a culture that idolizes pig iron under male thighs, such a day's activity scarcely embodies the western notion of manliness. A much more manly response is, 'Oh, I ripped up 500 acres, killed 2 million earthworms, sprayed 20 pounds of lethal insecticide, and sent 500 tons of topsoil tumbling down the river. I am a man!' (pp. 2-3)

But in order to accommodate this reorientation of masculinity, Salatin's celebrity persona asserts other forms of dominance. For example, his persona asserts the natural authority of male farmers within both sustainable and conventional agriculture, distancing itself from the feminine associations of sustainability and environmentalism.

This is also in some ways reflected in the success of Will Allen, who is a former NBA star. Yet, as a Black man running a community organization designed to rethink how food is distributed and grown (and who frequently notes that he is the grandson of sharecroppers), Allen certainly disrupts the image of the White family farm. Of course, the fact that Allen is much better known than his daughter, who co-directs the organization, may reflect a gendered vision of sustainability. But in contrast to Allen's more culturally-challenging vision of Black masculinity and farming, Salatin becomes the major celebrity of the movement, with his yeoman farmer

image drawing upon a cultural nostalgia for the White family farm to shore up a paternalistic vision of sustainability.

Salatin's popularity as the face of sustainable farming, then, suggests the complex ways that hegemonic masculinities are being drafted into popular definitions of sustainability and environmentalism. In a 2007 article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Thomas Friedman outlined one vision of this process, describing the need for a "muscular green ideology" that would appeal to American men by dismissing the common notion of environmentalism as "sissy." Yet, as Rogers (2008) explains, the rising cultural power of environmental discourses are often constructed as a threat to traditional masculinities organized around strength and dominance over the natural world (e.g., primitive, meat-consuming masculinities are promoted in advertising to shore up the feminized threats of vegetarianism and environmentalism). Such attempts to disavow the "sissy" threat of environmentalism to contemporary manhood showcase the intersectional nature of power and dominance. Building from an ecofeminist perspective modeled on Shiva's (1989/1991) analysis of industrial agriculture as a masculinized attempt to "dominate" the land, Rogers (2008) argues that the "dualisms at the heart of the master identity and the logic of domination (nature/culture, primitive/civilized, body/mind, feminine/masculine) are not only interconnected and mutually supportive, but can be reversed" (p. 285) when such reversals are necessary to maintain cultural dominance. In other words, when a dualism such as nature/culture — which insists on masculinized, individual control over the natural world — is re-oriented culturally thanks to the increasing power of environmental and sustainable discourses, the system of interconnected dualisms can compensate in other areas to re-affirm the general hegemony of privileged positions such as White, heterosexual, and men.

So while Salatin offers a radical departure in the gendered vision of nature and culture, insisting on a "new" masculinity based around stewardship of the natural world, this alteration can be accommodated only through reassertions of dominance in other areas of masculinity, heteronormativity, and race. This accommodation is most apparent in his film appearances, which disavow any discussion of masculinity and power, instead offering a highly idealized and naturalized vision of Salatin as an old-fashioned farmer. In particular, the films *Food, Inc.* (2008), *Fresh* (2009), and *Farmageddon* (2011) use the imagery of "natural beauty" to represent Salatin's farm, associating an idyllic rural aesthetic with nostalgic, agrarian, White masculinity to affirm the wholesomeness of Salatin's work as a farmer. Depicting Salatin riding vintage tractors or guiding cows down small country roads — all with Salatin in his customary suspenders and straw hat — the aesthetic used to construct Salatin as a farmer alludes to nostalgic U.S. visions of agrarian masculinity. *Fresh* makes this nostalgia explicit by using old black and white photos

of the Salatin family to tie Salatin's current sustainable endeavors to a "simpler" agrarian past, pre-industrial food production.

Suggesting a return to agricultural practices that pre-date the rise of corporate agribusiness in the films, however, also invites a return to the social and cultural norms of that era as part of the film's nostalgic project, particularly the ideal of the White family farm. Constructing Salatin as a benevolent patriarch and steward of the land, the films featuring his farm unquestioningly affirm this social and agricultural structure as inherently "natural." *Fresh*, again, proves fairly explicit in this affirmation, including highly gendered scenes of Salatin's family dinner, with Salatin's sons manning the BBQ while his wife and daughters set the table to get ready for an idyllic outdoor dinner. By idealizing images of the White family tending to the land, films such as *Fresh* promote a nostalgic perspective of the family farm that obscures the long history of oppression and discrimination that has excluded women and people of color from farm ownership and agricultural entrepreneurship in the U.S. (and elsewhere). In an age of multiculturalism, these images of Salatin-as-fatherly-farmer assert that there is a new gentler, better kind of farmer in town and, in the process, obscure the Whiteness, the straightness, and the maleness of this particular brand of farmer. The work of ecofeminism is then, in part, to make this "raced, classed, gendered, and specied embodiment visible" (Mallory, 2013, p. 187).

Salatin's profile in the film *American Meat* (2013) takes this logic even further, implying that his vision of rural masculinity can restore American manhood in an age of corporate agribusiness and white-collar labor. Exploring the current state of U.S. meat production with an emphasis on chicken and pig farmers, *American Meat* approaches its topic from an ostensibly politically neutral stance, comparing and contrasting large-scale livestock operations with Salatin's grass-based processes. The film's examination of corporate agribusiness is generally unconcerned with issues of environmentalism or humane conditions for the animals, depicting conventional farmers as hard-working, decent men who pursue the noble task of feeding the world. But if there is a problem with corporate agriculture, according to the film, it is that the uncertainty of the global market and the farmers' vulnerable economic position is creating a crisis in the farmers' role as patriarchal stewards of their communities. All the conventional farmers profiled discuss issues of inheritance and legacy, all hoping that their farms can be passed along to their children (mostly sons). However, they all realize that economic conditions and the dwindling number of farmers (as a result of technological advancements) mean that family farms are constantly going under, decimating many rural towns and challenging the farmers' ability to hold together their families and their communities.



*American Meat's* detailed documentation of Salatin's farming practices, then, presents not only an account of how his grass-based system works, but an implicit argument that his model can revitalize rural masculinity. While conventional farmers worry that their legacy cannot be passed to their children, Salatin works closely with his son on the farm, and the film includes images of his young grandchildren helping out, suggesting the line of inheritance that ensures Salatin's legacy. While conventional farmers must invest in increasingly expensive technology that mediates their relationship with their animals and the natural world, Salatin's inexpensive and jerry-rigged inventions insulate him from the scale of industrial production and showcase his ingenuity. While the conventional farmers are most often shown working in isolation, Salatin is constantly surrounded by enthusiastic young people wanting to learn from him, indicating his role as a caring and paternal community leader. From this perspective, Salatin's model of farming can alleviate the masculine anxieties of conventional, rural manhood.

What is more, *American Meat* suggests that this vision of masculinity can save urban men from the degrading conditions of capitalist labor, as it profiles the countless people (almost all men in the film) who have given up on urban office work to start small-scale farms, from young men out of college who turn to farming instead of entering the job market, to middle-aged Wall Street executives who yearn to work with their hands. As Salatin argues in the film: "If you can be paid a nice wage for working with your hands, something that was healing . . . would you give up your globalist-agenda, Dilbert-cubicle job? A lot of people would." Images of rural masculinity, of course, have long functioned to reify U.S. manhood in general, and the idea that turning to farm life can "save" overly-domesticated men is not a new one (Campbell, Bell, Finney, 2006). But *American Meat* reorients this cultural logic, positioning sustainable farming as the real heart of rural manhood.

The film sees sustainable farming as the only way to escape the corporate globalism of conventional agriculture *and* the corporate globalism of urban professionalism. Positioning sustainability between these two poles, Salatin's image masculinizes sustainability by claiming that it — not the economically vulnerable world of conventional farming — best reproduces the idyllic myths of patriarchal family farms at the core of rural masculinity. The irony of using global corporatism as the emasculating "Other" to Salatin's patriarchal model, of course, is that Salatin's free-market vision of sustainability relies on precisely the same concepts of consumerism and commodification that gave rise to corporate globalism in the first place. This tautological argument assumes that changing consumption habits will radically alter farming practices rather than acknowledging that the idea of sustainability might instead become a

brand, a fetish that corporate agriculture can exploit without fundamentally rethinking how food is produced.

## **Conclusion**

The conventional food system is broken, and the effects of this broken system are written in our communities. One only has to look around at the increase in poverty and meth use in rural communities or the lack of healthful food or the omnipresence of fast food and liquor stores in poor urban communities. It is written on our bodies as the “obesity crisis” (or perhaps more accurately the “obesity moral panic”) would suggest. Regardless of political ideology, we all see that something is not quite right with our food system. How this problem is framed suggests the solutions that we arrive at. The celebrity of Salatin offers specific resolutions to those problems — solutions are offered as “obvious.” However, Salatin’s solutions are not politically or environmentally neutral. In fact, they are essentially just ways in which to frame another model of consumption. These resolutions to issues of environmental degradation and food access argue that individuals can create social change through buying different products, failing to question the whole enterprise of consumerism as a major source of environmental degradation and social inequality.

This is not to suggest that Salatin is not a great farmer or a responsible steward of the land (he actually calls himself “a lover of nature, a caresser of nature”). Yet, his celebrity creates a highly pleasurable spectacle of rural farming that imagines a solution to the problems of conventional agriculture without actually addressing the fundamental structural issues within the U.S. food system (from food insecurity to protecting and accessing farm land, to the need to see food as a community resource and not a commodity). In fact, the resolutions offered by Salatin’s celebrity explicitly rely on the same systems that created these challenges and inequalities in the first place. They are repackaged — “rebranded” if you will — but they are solutions saying that the only fix is less regulation and more consumption. Like most celebrity discourse, Salatin promotes consumption. His role is to get more people to consume sustainably produced food, but his vision does not consider the social and economic challenges to that proposition. Moreover, the culturally powerful image of the White, male, rural farmer does not reimagine, complicate, or even update the image of the farmer to create a space for new farmers and different models of food production. Instead, his role as the farmer patriarch (who inherited land from his father) reaffirms the image of the yeoman farmer. In the process of creating Salatin’s

celebrity, neoliberal, individualistic solutions are the only solutions that are offered to the conventional food system.

This is not to say that there are no solutions to these problems. There are solutions, but they require political, financial, and social will. The environmental problems and food justice issues that we have need large-scale, collaborative solutions. These are problems that we cannot buy our way out of or that can be assuaged by the reassuring charm of a celebrity farmer.

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