Digging In

Abstract: Sugar beets grown in the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota are the most important source of American-made sugar. Contemporary sugar production and consumption provoke some bitter disagreements. Local growing and processing of sugar beets is an essential economic driver in the Red River Valley region, yet these gains would not be possible without massive federal subsidies. Moreover, genetically modified sugar beets are refined into a substance that is directly linked to national epidemics of diabetes and obesity. This article explores lessons the author learned by moonlighting as a truck driver for the sugar beet harvest. Rather than dismiss industrial food as fake on the one hand or “foodies” as entitled on the other, the author looks for how the quest for authenticity can transcend this divide. He argues that food work offers ways to see differently the priorities of people invested in both local food and industrial food systems.

Keywords: sugar, sugar beets, authenticity, labor, industrial food
timelines across the country and live in their cars, tents, or RVs). Sugar beets can survive a killing frost because they grow underground, protected by their leafy green tops. And if they are delivered intact, they store well frozen. After overseeing the dumping of beets at a massive machine called a piler, temporary plant workers add airflow tunnels so that the crop won’t rot before the brutal winter—with regular lows of –20ºF (–29ºC)—arrives and offers free refrigeration until early May. The beets are processed year-round, and residents in the towns surrounding these plants know the smell all too well.

No matter how efficient the harvest, our combined effort will be a vain attempt to meet the world’s unslakable hunger for processed food. This soon-to-be pure white sugar I’m hauling will tempt the 29 million Americans living with diabetes and the 86 million diagnosed with pre-diabetes (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2014). Nearly 36 percent of the American adult population is obese, and our work will only make this problem worse (National Institute of Health 2012).

Of course I take my instant coffee black.

But that’s not the entire story. Like so many of my generation, I’m an academic who does not find himself on the tenure track. I got into this profession for the time and space to read and write, but I don’t make enough from teaching to pay all my bills. Given my precarious position, I often feel alienated from the rest of the university. As a knowledge worker, I likewise feel alienated from “real” labor, that is to say, manual labor.

I also drive because I enjoy it. As perverse as it sounds, I drive a huge truck from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. seven days a week for a few weeks because it feels like honest work. Finishing each shift makes me feel like I’ve accomplished something. I come home exhausted, with black dirt caked all over my Carhartt double-front work pants and with boots so muddy that I need to pick at the tread with a broken chopstick. And local agriculture laws are so lax that I don’t even need a commercial driver’s license to do so. I didn’t even need to show my normal license to the farmer who hired me, even though I had never driven anything bigger than a rented pickup.

Few academics I tell about this work believe it could be enjoyable. I respond by noting that there is no bureaucracy during the sugar beet campaign, no enrollment numbers to worry about, no students evaluating my ability to explain assignments, and there’s nothing to grade. Best of all, the work is done when my shift is over. Until, of course, I wake up and go to school. I sacrificed much to get a job that requires me to think all day. In turn, I relish the chance to work with my body, even if that just means pounding my right foot on oversized pedals and hopping up and down on my seat to stay awake all night.

My four years working the harvest have forced me to reckon with a troubling conclusion: making food, even artificial food like white sugar, can feel more practical than making knowledge. To be fair, I am a person who thinks a lot about my food. I examine the origins of the provisions I buy because it feels like a place where my consumer decisions can help make changes I want to see. I enjoy cooking for myself because it helps me to understand the food I eat while also allowing me to monitor the levels of added sugar and salt, a kind of control that processed food prohibits. Yet I also take pride from aiding in the production of this industrial foodstuff that I try to rarely purchase or consume myself. I hope that working through my own hypocrisy can offer insights toward a definition of the real in real food. I suggest that the allure of feelings of authenticity on both sides drives people further into themselves and further away from an
ethical understanding of contemporary American foodways. Those who tend their own gardens or only buy organic and local invest in concepts of “whole,” “traditional,” and “slow” food. On the other hand, those who participate in industrial supply chains produce the vast majority of food that the world eats, while writing off “foodies” as inefficient and idealistic. In what follows, I explore the virtuous feelings that come from food work to try and transcend this divide.

The Sugar Beet and the Arrival of the American Century

In her 1986 novel The Beet Queen, Louise Erdrich chronicles the ways the sugar beet forever altered the Red River Valley that divides eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota—the same valley where I drive truck. Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, south of Fargo, and she has made it clear in interviews that the fictional setting of her book (Argus, ND) is based on her childhood experiences. In the novel, local entrepreneur Wallace Pfeff gushes about the enormous potential of the sugar beet in the early 1950s. “I live in a flat, treeless valley where sugar beets grow,” he observes in an interior monologue. “I am the one who is bringing beets to the valley, beets that have yet to fail as a cash crop anywhere, beets that will make refined white sugar every bit as American as corn on the cob” (Erdrich 2006: 160).

More than just representing the changing agricultural practices of this highly productive swath of land, what’s remarkable about Erdrich’s novel is how it shows changes in the infrastructure and culture of the valley after the adoption of sugar beet farming. Characters in the novel blame sugar for marking the end of simpler days. The proprietor of a family-owned butcher shop even accuses the beet of encouraging customers to expect “one-stop-shopping-convenience” (213), which is prophetic given beet sugar’s consistent use in processed food today. Another character complains that after the beet, there are “so many new streets that sometimes we hardly know where we are” (225–26). Although the Red River Valley has long been an agricultural and rural place, Erdrich’s characters observe the arrival of large-scale beet growing as the turning point toward industrial production and thus the region’s induction into modernity. Moreover, Pfeff’s take on the beet boom summons comparisons with other boom cycles in North Dakota history. Much like “crude oil,” Pfeff explains, “the beet needs refining, and that means Refinery. That spells local industry. Everyone benefits” (160). This is the entrepreneur talking, of course. In fact, much of the novel’s drama comes from the ways these benefits are unevenly distributed across class and racial lines.

I can attest that many in the Red River Valley have benefited from the sugar industry. American Crystal Sugar is a farmer-owned cooperative whose shares sell for $2,650.
each at the time of writing. If you don’t own stock, you can’t process beets at the refinery, thus these stocks are highly sought after. Nearly every truck that passes through the weigh station into the refinery proudly displays a family name on the side, often a group of brothers. The farm that employs me, for instance, was celebrating its 141st harvest in 2016, and thus grew food for fourteen years before North Dakota became a state in 1889 (and only eighteen years after Minnesota did). This farm started growing beets in the 1930s. However, domestic sugar beets have been grown domestically for over a century; the venerable seed company Burpee started selling sugar beet seeds in 1888 (Harveson 2016). Sugar beets have proven to be consistently profitable as a cash crop, and an American industry worth protecting with enormous federal subsidies. Just as Erdrich’s characters suggest, the success of this particular crop has forever changed life in this valley, especially by helping some small family farms to insulate themselves against losses in other more volatile markets such as wheat and corn. This transition also cemented the racial divides between White farmers and the Native Sioux and Chippewa people who often farm these lands as well, but rarely the more lucrative beets. Case in point, I have never seen a recognizably Native family name on the side of any truck, but I have seen plenty of temporary workers whose features and aspect suggest Native ancestry.

To that end, it is worth pointing out that the fertile shores of the Red River and the valley’s harsh weather account for the prevalence of sugar beets here, rather than elsewhere in either state. North Dakota and Minnesota are two of the largest sugar beet–producing states in the nation because of the particularities of this region, but a little more context helps put the fiscal importance of the harvest into perspective. Sugar beets receipts totaled $1.5 billion in 2015–16 and $1.6 billion in 2016–17. This exceeds domestic sugar cane, whose earnings were $1.066 billion and $962 million during the same period (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018). North Dakota leads U.S. production in many important crops including wheat, barley, honey, canola, flaxseed, and edible dry beans. The state also ranks second in sunflowers (oil and non-oil), lentils, and, notably, in oil production (ibid., “Annual Statistic Bulletin”). Despite these impressive statistics, it is telling to note that North Dakota ranks exactly in the middle (25) for total agricultural receipts, which thereby shows clearly just how much of the overall market is dominated by soy and corn. Nevertheless, sugar beets account for a staggering 13 percent of the U.S.’s available crop acreage, only half as much as corn, but a remarkable amount by any standard (ibid.). Far from being special to me alone because of my background, the Red River sugar beet harvest is exceptional in terms of how it differs from agriculture in the rest of the states and its demand for temporary labor in this region. It is not representative of farming practice across these states or the Upper Midwest. And these remarkable returns come at a high cost to taxpayers.

The U.S. Farm Bill is one of the most hotly debated pieces of legislation, a sprawling document where the fortunes of the entire global food industry are determined. Plenty think that sugar is too big; select industry pundits go as far as calling the U.S. sugar program “Stalinist” because it both limits imports and domestic production, thereby inflating prices to twice that of imported sugar (Smith 2018). What’s more, the American sugar business consists of only 4,500 farms, and thus these large subsides are distributed to a relative few—not an oligarchy, but a sucro-plutocracy.

Beyond the political fray, however, the commercial future of beet sugar is less than guaranteed. Hershey, for one, recently announced that it would stop including beet sugar in its chocolate in response to mounting concerns about the safety (and marketability) of genetically modified (GM) organisms. Around 99 percent of sugar beets are genetically modified and classified as “Roundup ready,” that is, resistant to Monsanto’s widely popular brand of the herbicide glyphosate (Meersmen 2015). Hershey’s decision seems to suggest that non-GM sugar sources are becoming more desirable than homegrown sugar produced by a reasonably well-paid, but mostly temporary, labor force. Farmers and industry representatives alike defend their decision to plant GM seeds with the straightforward contention that these produce higher yields than non-GM competitors. Public health rarely enters into the discussion.

Just as Erdrich ties the birth of the modern Red River Valley to the sugar beet, modern global history can also be narrated through the growing demand for sugar. As consumer culture grew in the eighteenth century, more people yearned for the luxury of imported sweeteners that could take the bitter edge off their imported tea or coffee. To tell the history of how this demand was met, one needs to delve into many bitter topics: slavery, imperial conquest, racialized violence, war, and trade embargoes. Domestic sugar production is less dubious today, but sugar consumption is more dangerous than ever. A 2012 NIH report suggests that the average Americans consumes 130 lbs of sugar per year (Walton 2012). Another more recent study reports that roughly 60 percent of Americans’ daily calories come from “ultraprocessed” foods that usually contain added sugar and other sweeteners (Park 2016).

Many of the calories Americans consume today are produced by farmers in the American Midwest; this is nothing new, although the source of these calories has changed over time. This evolution stems from global food production and consumption as a whole, but the specific change can also
Sugar beet farming is the heir to bonanza farming, the wildly profitable wheat farms in the late nineteenth century that combined huge acreages, “black gold” soil, and modern industrial farming equipment. Note, however, that Erdrich’s characters blame the beet, not wheat, for modern ennui. In a sense, beets finalized the changes first implemented by wheat. Today, the refining of beets and wheat occurs locally, not at the end of the train line in the twin cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Indeed, the history of North Dakota agriculture can be told as the fight for local refining of the abundant agricultural products of the state. The Red River Valley today features the only state-owned flour mill in the United States in Grand Forks, ND, numerous potato and sunflower processing sites, and five American Crystal Sugar factories that all run year-round, two on the North Dakota side, three in Minnesota.

Processing food locally means making products capable of being shipped long distances—even overseas—for human or animal consumption. Suffice it to say, that’s where the lion’s share of the food produced here ends up. In the Red River Valley, most “local” food (besides potatoes) you could buy at a high-end grocery store comes from southern Minnesota (near the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul) and even western Wisconsin, some 350 miles away. Local and organic food movements don’t always require large consumer bases, but, in general, middle America has a hard time supporting community-scale agriculture because of both cost and taste preferences. For much of America, especially the Grain Belt, this kind of farming seems like an untenable dream at best, and wealthy, coastal, liberal elitism to most. Simply, without sugar revenues, many Red River farms could not afford to produce any food at all. The world’s breadbasket could not feed itself with wholesome food alone.

**Beets and the Politics of Liberty**

The farmers I know in North Dakota and Minnesota are a proud bunch, as I bet they are across the nation. Their sense of pride brings me back to my own feelings of self-satisfaction that I get from participating in the agricultural economy by driving a beet truck. Part of my lingering doubt comes from
the fact that there is no denying agriculture’s impact in the creation and sustenance of American exceptionalism. Americans would not think of themselves like they do without the massive, fecund continent that they spent their nation’s history conquering. There is no more poetic defense of American agriculture than the writings of Thomas Jefferson. In a letter written to John Jay in 1785, Jefferson stirringly describes his idealistic vision of the American agrarian philosophy: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty by the most lasting bonds” (Jefferson 1785). Liberty, arguably the most representative of all the classical American ideals—and the most incongruous coming from the pen of a slaveowner—seems to arise directly from working the land. Getting dirty harvesting food seems to be the surest path toward the American state of mind. I doubt if contemporary Midwestern farmers would even register as agrarians to Jefferson, given that farmers can now monitor their fields with drones and other digital equipment so that they can live at a comfortable remove from the land they cultivate.

Many people who share my political and environmental outlook would likely identify with some aspects of Jefferson’s optimism about the moral value of producing food. Farmers of North Dakota and Minnesota also seem to generally support this libertarian view of agriculture, if not politics more broadly. For me, taking an active role in the agricultural process, even at the industrial scale, is a form of democratic participation that harkens back to a worthwhile American past. While driving a beet truck, I felt as if I was tapping into the same sense of utility and honor that encourages many of these farmers to keep working at food production despite its narrow profit margins, adverse impact on public health, and steadfast reliance on government handouts.

But my own feelings of authenticity are constructed all the same. Critics like Peter Frase are right to question the ethical and social effects of “produceism” (Frase 2011). Indeed, Frase might critique my own valorization of a part-time job as arising from just this kind of category mistake. But we should not forget that work can also provide a sense of meaning for the worker. This problematic sense of “honesty” can be valuable if it reminds people like me that they are capable of doing any kind of work there is to do. The desires of these same people who are often dismissed as “entitled,” “foodies,” and “hipsters” are, in fact, analogous to those of the people working the land in the middle of the country. One big reason why many millennials start craft food and drink businesses is because they yearn for a sense of making meaning through embodied work.

I know firsthand how well a humanities education encourages intellectual risk, but it sometimes has the negative effect of discouraging bodily risk out of hand. Those predisposed as studious are told by an older generation of bookish types that the life of the mind is the paramount route to a meaningful existence. In return, many people like me have subscribed to this vision to the detriment of embodied experiences. A skeptical perception toward the world is an invaluable asset, but farm work offers ways to derive a more complete conception of the lives of others, and others who come from very different places and situations. The bumper sticker proclaiming “No Farms, No Food” is a common sight on roads across America. But the alternative slogan “Know Farms, Know Food” seems like an even more relevant complement to this discussion. Various factors in contemporary life make it less likely that we ever listen to those with whom we disagree. Even as services like Amazon Fresh, Yelp Delivery, and Blue Apron attempt to disrupt these industries, most Americans still decide to shop for food in person and enjoy going out to eat. Those who care about the public sphere need to explore all the ways by which food can bring us together.

Making Meaning

My work for the beet harvest has forced me to directly confront the paradoxes I explore above. One night during my shift, my farmer-boss came over the CB radio. “What’s the deal with your bumper sticker?” he asked me. His question was more direct than was to be expected from the famously passive-aggressive “Minnesota nice” personality, but I still struggled to compose an appropriate answer. I tried to redirect by explaining the uncredited quotation from the Pixies’ song “This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven.” “No, the other one,” he insisted. He was referring to a Bernie 2016 sticker.

Over the radio, his radio, in the cab of his truck, I tried, and failed, to play it cool. “I support the 99%, not the 1%,” I said, hoping that he would identify with the populist slogan, being a small businessperson himself. He responded with a “harumph,” and said no more. But he didn’t let it rest there. He invited me over for coffee and cookies on a few occasions to talk more about this issue, because he wanted to hear what he called, with a whiff of condescension, “an expert’s perspective.”

This farmer is a tall, lean man whose brow is compulsively dyed-in-the-wool. He looks younger than his sixty-ish years, and I have seen him lift, bend, and twist himself in ways that anyone would recognize as remarkably fit. During the harvest he stays up most of the night with the rest of his team. He earned a college degree in agriculture from a state university. He votes Republican and he has all his life, although he told me that his grandmother was a “dyed-in-the-
wool Roosevelt Democrat.” His aloof disposition is at odds with his willingness to talk politics. People hailing from this region are famous for not talking about controversial subjects at all.

Our longest political discussion came on a November morning just after we had finished the harvest. I had stopped by the farm to drop off loaves of sourdough bread I made using wheat grown on the farm. Standing in his yard, you can make out two central landmarks over the perfectly flat horizon: the cloud of steam billowing from the Crystal Sugar factory and the enormous towers of the North Dakota state flour mill, just across the river. This farmer needs only to send a truck driver just over two miles southwest or southeast to have it processed by a publicly supported refinery: federal subsidies for sugar and North Dakota state levies for wheat.

In this conversation, we ended up tilling familiar ground. The farmer brought up his recurring example of a “taker,” an obese man who got his expensive treatments covered by Medicaid. I’m not sure where this example came from, but it contained enough detail that it must have come from personal experience, or at least his Facebook feed. In contrast, the farmer believes that he himself “makes” food. However, this also means that he makes the sugar that goes into many of these ultraprocessed foods that the Medicaid recipient consumes. One demands what the other supplies.
The dialogue remained civil, but unresolved. He called out what he saw as idealism and naivete on my part while I tried to push back against what I saw as narrow-minded and exclusionary. Then I brought up government subsidies. The farmer freely admitted that his farm counts on those subsidies, without acknowledging any flicker of hypocrisy as he stood in the proverbial big shadow cast by what big government has built. When I described that I was disappointed to see Clinton being pulled to the center, he said the opposite, saying that Sanders had pulled her too far to the left. The kicker, though, is that even though he predicted that Clinton would plan to keep subsidies at their historically high levels, he still could not convince himself to change his party line. He would rather vote for his own economic uncertainty than for her, despite his reluctance to support Donald J. Trump.

I still struggle to make sense of the farmer’s perspective. If nothing else, his division of making and taking grossly oversimplifies the situation. The subsequent oversights are not just philosophical problems, but practical ones. In taking government subsidies to make sugar while criticizing the size of government at the same time, the farmer denies the helpful role that the state could take in promoting all kinds of other useful programs. Furthermore, the need to value one’s own work above all others pushes people away and creates distrust. What my experience driving for him taught me was that doing different kinds of work, even if just for a few weeks at time, builds empathy and understanding in ways that few other practices can. Since we all need to eat, working with food is an ideal place to come together. Taking pride in “making” anything is an ideological construction, of course, but complicating the line between making and taking food enhances the active, engaged, and communal elements of the former while overriding the passive, racialized, and individualist components of the latter.

I admit that I am free to idealize my hard work because it is a temporary respite from my white-collar desk job. I would
feel otherwise about the character of this effort if I had to work on the assembly line, processing these beets day in and day out for fifty years or until my body quit on me. Still, working differently offers different ways of living as well. During the beet harvest, I don’t interact with my farmer as a customer; I interact with him (and the other people he works with) as a colleague linked by a shared purpose, despite our profound disagreements. It’s not for nothing that the sugar beet harvest is often called a “campaign.” For it was Napoleon who helped popularize the crop in response to the British naval blockade of French sugar cane plantations (Abbott 2010: 203). The camaraderie implied by the term lives on today. Thousands of workers all fight the same battle against time and weather. We are all in it together until every last beet comes out of the ground. This work makes me feel like more a part of my local community than any of the academic work I have done here, despite that much of it is styled to be public-facing. The university is a community unto itself, but one that too often stands apart from people who live nearby.

Other beet truck drivers don’t sign on for the same reasons I do, but it’s not as different as one might expect. I’ve heard from drivers that they take vacation time from other jobs so that they can drive. Some are retired except for the harvest season. Many students who attend university in the region find a way to (literally) moonlight by driving. Even my next-door neighborhood drives. I read this phenomenon as a localized version of the ideology of hard work that permeates the American Midwest. Working harder than others is a source of pride. Other drivers don’t drive because it feels authentic like I do, but they do drive because of the way it makes them feel—tough, industrious, manly, whatever the case may be. For example, I discussed the topic with the guy who drives my truck during my twelve off-hours. He mentioned the good money first, but then, with childish glee he said, “And I get to drive big trucks!” In this I see an important overlap between the lot of us. Many of the migrant workers who work at the factory do so because it offers easy money on a short timeline; the drivers work for that reason and because it lets them work differently for a while. Sure, if tax preparation paid at least twenty dollars an hour and was over in one to three weeks, some of these drivers might do that instead, but I doubt half as many would. There’s something that feels virtuous about making something together even while the foodstuff itself is dangerously delicious and used in addictive, highly processed foods.

In this shared feeling of pride, I see possibilities of communal participation. Organic, small-scale, community agriculture surely offers analogous opportunities, but honestly engaging with industrial agriculture may as well. This kind of cultivation invites communal participation above and beyond the allure of providing “real or “whole” food for ourselves and our families. As Jedidah Purdy argues in his essay on artisanal killing, his evocative description of butchering one’s own meat, greater participation with your food “insists on the importance of work, which the industrial food system conceals” (Purdy 2014). This doesn’t mean that doing it yourself is purer than other forms of engagement, but simply that it offers something distinct from the politics of ethical consumption. Purdy explains that “consumer choices only change the inputs to that system…[and] can only ever produce its little exempt spaces, its own gardens to cultivate” (ibid.). Sometimes changing the food system means looking the many people who work in it squarely in the eye. Ethical eaters cannot just buy local, slaughter their own meat, or eat their own backyards, but must also work to make the labor of industrial food workers more visible. Producerism doesn’t fix consumerism outright, but these embodied experiences can teach makers things that they couldn’t learn anywhere else. It may even teach them about how much makers also need to take.

Foodie culture is often spearheaded as elitist, white, and precious. And this is too often true. It doesn’t have to be that way. All food work offers the promise of intimate experience. Digging with hand tools in my backyard to plant heirloom Cherokee Purple tomatoes is authentic. Driving a quad-axle diesel Freightliner truck overflowing with genetically modified cash crops linked to ill health across the world is authentic, too. Both acts tap into the same reservoir of meaning because authenticity is a feeling, not a stable state of being. Engaging with artificial food can be authentic, because that action connects with present-day standards of our world. Pure authenticity is a farce, but the quest for it is anything but. Taking refuge in local and organic foods is one compelling strategy for food justice, but we still need more strategies that dig in rather than opt out.

Those who care about the politics of food need to resuscitate meaningful work from the mechanizing impulses of globalized industrial agriculture. We can’t all moonlight for farmers or grow every morsel of our own food, but neither can we afford to disparage predominant American foodways. The more one indulge this impulse, the more truthful the criticism of foodie culture as elite, selfish, and naïve starts to sound to everyone not already contained within that echo chamber.

Like it or not, industrial food is our reality; to improve it, we must admit the scope of the many pleasures we all derive from it. Industrial food is no less authentic than real food, but the realities that bring it to the world are worthy of our mental and physical labor because it offers chances to meet all kinds of other hungry people. The reform of real American food will not be accomplished from the moral high ground, but down in the dirt.
NOTES
1. “Drive truck” is the common phrase used by those working on a campaign to describe the job. I’m not sure exactly where the construction comes from, but driving a truck is the easiest way to sound like an outsider in this community. I thus codeswitched early on.
2. American Crystal Sugar does operate a single beet factory on the North Dakota/Montana state line. Nevertheless, the Red River Valley accounts for nearly all of the sugar beet production in the American northern Great Plains.
3. Hughlett 2015. Workers at American Crystal Sugar underwent a lockout in 2013 and the company seems poised for another labor dispute with the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers Union. Major disagreements included retirement funds and pensions.

REFERENCES