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How do producers imagine consumers? Connecting farm and fork through a cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty

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Abstract

The phenomena of meat production and consumption are related but often studied separately, funnelled into silos of agro-food and consumer-focussed research. This article aims to reconnect these spheres by asking: How do meat producers understand the role of consumers in the ethical meatscape? We draw from interviews and site visits with 74 actors engaged with the ethical meat system in Canada. We find that consumers loom large in the cultural imaginary of meat producers and are often framed as key drivers of food system change. We make a two-pronged argument that explains the complex, embedded presence of consumers in meat producers' cultural imaginary. Conceptually, we argue that producers draw from a cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty that frames consumer choice as a foundational element of capitalist societies. Empirically, we argue that ethical meat producers' direct relationships with consumers infuse producers' work with meaning and emotional significance, and this works to reinforce a normative valuation of consumer sovereignty. This

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research contributes to scholarship interrogating the implications of consumer-driven models of food system change.

KEYWORDS
alternative food networks, consumers, ethical meat, food system change, meat

INTRODUCTION

Meat is a contentious product linked with myriad health, environmental and animal welfare issues. Meat's contested status has spurred a market for more ethical[1] meat—meat that is sustainable and humanely raised, enables guilt-free meals and that taste delicious. To better understand the struggles and rewards that come with producing meat outside of the mainstream food system, we spoke with various actors in the alternative commodity chain including small-scale farmers, grass-focussed ranchers, as well as chefs and butchers focussed on whole-animal butchery and sustainable meat. In interviews, we were surprised by how frequently conversations veered towards consumers—their tendencies, their foibles and especially their power to change the food system. For example, after we asked a question about how the state could promote sustainability, a farmer, Russell Hill, remarked pessimistically that farming is 'an entrenched industry'. However, he then insisted that the power for change rests in the hands of consumers: 'it's totally up to the consumer. The consumer will change it. ....That's what will change the industry'. Russell's comments were commonplace in our interviews, and in this article, we work to make sense of the significance of the consumer in the imaginary of alternative meat producers.

Scholars have documented the emergence of an ethical foodscape offering products that appear more sustainable, humane and socially just for humans, animals and the environment (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 1782). The concept of a foodscape provides a way of appreciating the cultural dimensions of food, while also capturing the physical, material and political-economic realities that concretise food culture (Johnston & Goodman, 2015, p. 207; MacKendrick, 2014). The ethical foodscape involves a range of practices and standards (e.g., organic, fair trade), but is linked at the conceptual level by the idea that more conscientious, ethically engaged food choices can improve the larger food system. This idea forms the conceptual basis for a set of shared values driving the production and consumption of food within the ethical foodscape. Meat is an important part of the ethical foodscape, or what we term the ethical meatscape. The ethical meatscape links alternative producers with consumers looking to eat meat untainted with the negative associations of confined animal agriculture, cruelty to animals and environmental problems like climate change. Meat producers provide ethical meat products that are naturally raised, sustainable and free of antibiotics and hormones—those that feel good to eat.

Although the concept of an ethical foodscape conceptually links producers and consumers, scholars tend to study food production and consumption separately. While consumer-focussed research examines food choices, consumer markets and individual consumer psychology, agro-food scholars study food production, food systems and the motivations of specific actors like farmers, ranchers or labourers. This production/consumption divide has long been recognised. Nearly two decades ago, Goodman and Dupuis wrote of the importance of bringing 'consumption

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into rural sociology' (2002, p. 5). More recently, Carolan observed 'how these worlds [of production and consumption] interpenetrate has been given scant attention by scholars from either tradition' (2020, p. 1). The tendency to separate producer and consumer issues in food studies is especially true when it comes to topics of animals and meat (Bruckner et al., 2018). Our analysis builds on a body of critical food scholarship (e.g., Carolan, 2020; Conner et al., 2008; Goodman & Dupuis, 2002) working to connect analyses of the producer and consumer ends of commodity chains and uses interviews with meat producers to investigate the salience of the consumer in their thought processes.

As noted above, our interest in the relationship between producers and consumers emerged inductively, as consumers were a common, discursive presence in our visits to production sites. To analyse this relationship, we draw from two bodies of research: (1) scholarship examining the perceptions and understandings of producers operating outside the mainstream food system and (2) research in cultural sociology on cultural repertoires and consumer sovereignty. Building on this research we ask, 'how do ethical meat producers understand the role of consumers in the ethical meatscape, and more specifically, how do they understand consumers as agents of change'?

Our data reveal that consumers loom large in the cultural imaginaries of food producers and are often seen as key drivers of food system change—if not *the* key driver. This consumer-focussed vision manifested in a wide range of actors, including those with pro-market views as well as strong critics of capitalism and market relationships. To make sense of this finding, we make a two-pronged argument that is conceptual and empirical. On a conceptual level, we draw from cultural sociology research on cultural repertoires, which are shared cultural scripts that allow people to make sense of the social world and manage contradictions (Lamont, 1992; Swidler, 2001). We argue that producers are drawing from a widely shared cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty that frames consumer choice as a fundamental element of capitalist societies and a powerful engine for change. Empirically, we draw from our data to demonstrate and explain the ubiquity of the consumer in the cultural imaginary of meat producers. We argue that ethical meat producers' direct relationships with consumers infuse their work with meaning and emotional significance, and this helps us make sense of the important role of consumers in the ethical meatscape. The meaningful nature of these consumer interactions can work at a conceptual level to iteratively reinforce the idea of consumer sovereignty as a driving force for food system betterment.

Despite the longstanding tendency to study food production and consumption separately, our findings speak to the ubiquitous, embedded presence of consumers in the cultural imaginary of meat producers. This has important implications for food system literature, which has raised critical, big-picture questions about the transformative possibilities of alternative food networks (AFNs) and ethical foodscapes. One crucial question in this literature centres around the extent to which these spaces promote a neoliberal[2] ideology that relies on individual consumption choices and market mechanisms to address structural food system problems while minimising the importance of collective, state solutions (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Allen et al., 2003; Brown & Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2003, 2008). This scholarship raises vital questions about the capacity of alternative markets to harness social movement aspirations and generate meaningful systemic change. While we agree that it is important to be sceptical of downloading responsibility to consumers, our research helps to explain and nuance this critique by demonstrating how consumers are situated centrally both in ethical meat producers' imaginings of food system change and in the meaning they find in their work.

In what follows, we first outline the literature that underpins our research question, especially in relation to the ethical meatscape, producer understandings and the critique of neoliberal downloading to individual consumers. We introduce the concept of cultural repertoires and explain how

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it has been used to study how people manage contradictions, including contradictions around meat. Next, we introduce the producers that we spoke to for this research and discuss the methods we used to recruit and interview them, as well as our coding and analytic procedures. We then present findings that demonstrate how ethical meat industry actors conceptualise food system change, where they locate responsibility for that change and how they understand the role of consumers. We make note of producers' attributions of responsibility, and also analyse how producers' perceptions are shaped by both consumer culture at large and their everyday experiences within the ethical meatscape. Finally, the discussion section relates our findings back to questions about the cultural significance and potency of ethical foodscapes, especially the critique of a consumer-driven model of change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section outlines literature relating to ethical meat. Our goal is not to deliver an exhaustive account of meat production issues or AFNs, but to provide a general context for understanding the significance of connecting production and consumption scholarship while explaining the significance of meat as a case study. Our review aims to highlight the analytic payoff of connecting across academic silos, and more specifically, the benefits of conceptualising food producers' experiences using tools from cultural sociology.

Ethical meatscape

Contemporary public discourse obfuscates myriad issues surrounding meat (e.g., Chiles, 2017) while recognising some concerning elements, especially animal welfare, health risks and environmental issues (Bateman et al., 2019). The rise of 'conscientious omnivorism' (Rothgerber, 2015), where some consumers become discerning about where their meat comes from (see also García-Torres et al., 2016), has contributed to the growth of markets offering 'alternative', 'ethical' or 'happy' meat products. These products might bear labels like humanely raised, grass-fed and organic or simply imply an immediate relationship with a local producer. Together, these ethical meat products can be situated within a larger system of AFNs (Goodman et al., 2012), whereby 'alterity' is accomplished by framing products and farming practices against industrial, factory-farmed meat.

Ethical meat products can be conceptualised as part of an *ethical meatscape*, an idea that builds on *ethical foodscapes* that offer 'food defined variously as healthy, low-carbon, fairly traded, local, organic, free-range, cruelty-free, natural and/or slow' (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 1782). The ethical meatscape contains conscientious meat eaters but also sustainable meat producers including farmers and ranchers, chefs, cookbook authors and butchers. It includes an element of cultural imagination (e.g., the ideal free-range chicken) as well as political–economic relationships and material practices (e.g., pasture-raised livestock). The ethical meatscape is stitched together by a normative ideal shared collectively by various actors operating within it suggesting that carefully raised animal products provide a collective good, offering a decent life for animals, revived rural economies and healthy delicious meat.

Despite admirable goals, agro-food scholars raise questions about the transformative possibilities of ethical foodscapes, including meat. They question whether ethical foodscapes promote a neoliberal idea of food system change centred on privileged individual consumption choices that

do not address systemic problems of inequality and un-sustainability (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Alkon et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2003; Brown & Getz, 2008; Guthman, 2003, 2008). Faith is commonly placed in individual consumption based on the assumption that maximising consumer choice is both a necessity and a solution for eco-social problems—an assumption that obscures the unequal distribution of consumer choice (Allen, 2010, p. 300; Guthman, 2003). Ethical food projects may want to provide all consumers an opportunity to support local farmers and eat delicious, healthy and locally grown foods, but when viewed collectively, these aspirations can fall short. For example, Schupp's (2017) research on the distribution of farmers' markets across the US shows minimal expansion into places that are poor, rural and racialised. This is not to diminish the accomplishments of specific food movement actors but to point out the thorny gap between the normative ambitions of ethical foodscape actors and the empirical realities of specific food projects.

The ethical meatscape must be considered in the context of the aforementioned critical literature that raises important systemic issues of equity and sustainability. To be clear, our goal here is not to 'solve' these critiques and offer the final word on whether the ethical food/meatscape generates meaningful food system transformation. Instead, our aim is to take these critiques seriously and (1) investigate how producers understand the role of consumers as agents of change in the broader food system and (2) inductively analyse the data to unpack why consumers are symbolically laden and meaningful to meat producers.

The producer/consumer divide

Scholarship going back more than two decades has identified a persistent tendency to study food production and consumption as separate, discrete domains (Carolan, 2020; Goodman & Dupuis, 2002; Tovey, 1997). This divide sometimes manifests as a gap between rural sociologists interested in food production and political economy and culture and consumption scholars focussed on foods' symbolic capaciousness (Tovey, 1997). Goodman and Dupuis (2002) argue that despite the episodic entry of the consumer in agro-food studies, rural sociology remains reliant on productivist frameworks that are separate from consumer issues (2002, p. 7); likewise, culture and food scholars tend to neglect the production side of food (2002, pp. 11–12). More recently, scholars have remarked on the production/consumption divide and worked to weave together strands connecting political–economy and production with culture and consumption (e.g., Belasco, 2008, p. 3; Goodman et al., 2012). We do not want to suggest that this divide is easy to overcome, but we do believe it remains important to acknowledge and work through. Ethical foodscapes call on us to continue working on the production/consumption divide, as they involve realms of consumer politics, markets and social movements seeking to change the way meat is raised, produced, distributed and consumed.

Goodman and Dupuis note that 'there are many possible ways in which bridges between the sociology of food and agro-food studies could be built' (2002, p. 15). Indeed, there are varied bridging attempts with work ranging from studies of the connections between animals, producers and consumers in Austrian alternative agriculture (Bruckner et al., 2018) to investigations into how consumer labels convey meanings about the lives of animals (Evans & Miele, 2012). Carolan (2020) has also noted the persistent gap between production and consumption scholarship and worked to connect the divide between ethical consumption scholarship on 'good food' and agro-food research on the 'good farmer'. Carolan writes that 'critical agrifood scholars have long talked about needing' to connect production and consumption, but 'each continues to focus on their

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particular "end" of the supply chain', with minimal attention given to 'how these worlds interpenetrate' (2020, p. 2). Drawing from interviews with urban food activists and farmers, Carolan examines how urban understandings of 'good food' are incorporated and received in rural spaces. He finds that rural growers feel misunderstood and devalued by 'metropolitan ethical eaters and urban good food advocates', a sentiment that reinforces a rural–urban divide (2002, pp. 15, 18). For example, Carolan observes that 'good food' nutrition discourse focuses on fruits and vegetables, especially leafy green vegetables, which is 'especially painful for potato growers as their commodity was not just ignored in these evaluations but, from their standpoint, *demonized*' (2020, p. 13). While our methodology does not involve a comparative sample of urban activists and rural producers like that used by Carolan, we respond to his invitation to 'have a conversation across … literatures' and similarly seek to better understand how cultural ideas of consumption and good food manifest in a rural context (2020, p. 18).

Ethical meat producers

Next, we sketch what is known about the producers who occupy the ethical meatscape. We use the term meat 'producers' to include farmers and ranchers as well as other actors like slaughterhouse owners, meat-focussed chefs and whole-animal butchers (e.g., Ocejo, 2014). Taking a bird's eye view, ethical meat producers can be situated within a larger rubric of AFNs (Goodman et al., 2012). These projects aim to 'follow the food' to make the process of production more transparent, just and ethical.

While AFNs have been well-studied, less attention has been paid to meat and the perspectives of meat producers (Bruckner et al., 2018; Driessen, 2012). Scholars have examined the idea of ethical or 'happy' meat from a critical animal studies perspective (e.g., Cole, 2011; Gillespie, 2017; Stanescu, 2010), but less research has examined how people care for animals outside of mainstream industrial agriculture. Bruckner et al. (2018) seek to address this gap by studying meat in Austrian AFNs. Using Haraway's concept of 'natureculture', they find that human relationships with animals involve moments of natureculture connection when an animal's life and death are explicitly acknowledged and celebrated. They also document moments of disconnection (e.g., slaughter) when animals are othered as resources or commodities. Relating these findings back to our objectives suggests the importance of investigating conceptual linkages and disconnections in meat commodity chains and avoiding pat assessments of the ethical meatscape that rely on monolithic romanticisation or generalising denunciation.

We respond to Bruckner et al.'s (2018) call for more nuanced research on alternative meat producers while building on research on ethical meat production. For instance, scholars have documented the environmental motivations for producing meat outside the conventional meat industry (e.g., Heiberg & Syse, 2020) and pastured poultry (e.g., Hilimire, 2012). Ethical meat has been studied as part of a 'quality' turn, where private systems verify higher sustainability and animal welfare standards through various labelling schemes (Buller, 2013; Buller & Roe, 2014, p. 142). Research also suggests the importance of paying attention to how producers' perceptions of ethical meat vary across national settings (e.g., Miele et al., 2013; Van Huik & Bock, 2007, pp. 32–35), and how human–animal relationships are shaped by farm setting (e.g., hobby farm vs. commercial) and the relationship context (e.g., meat animals vs. breeding animals; Holloway, 2001; Wilkie, 2005). Speaking specifically to meat's contested alterity, cross-national European research has shown that intensive husbandry systems make it more likely for animals to be understood with detachment, as animals are conceptualised as part of large groupings that are de-individualised

and even de-animalised—as when chickens in a large flock are seen as inanimate units in a production system (Bock et al., 2007).

How do we understand producers' perceptions of ethical meat in a context where meat is increasingly challenged as a problematic food (Bateman et al., 2019; Otto et al., 2022)? Scholars are beginning to study how ethical meat producers understand their work in the broader food system, especially given the persistent demand for meat (OECD, 2021) and cheap food (Carolan, 2018). A study of producer perceptions of ethical meat producers in Canada documents a range of perspectives on moving towards sustainability (Johnston et al., 2021). While some producers accepted the status quo, most advocated for a transition towards a system of 'less meat, better meat', with a small group taking a more radical perspective by arguing that meat production and consumption should be deliberately minimised. We know from prior research that farmers care about animals' wellbeing, but scholars also document how these concerns exist alongside worry that consumers are not willing to pay for meat that is raised in higher-cost, higher-welfare systems (Miele et al., 2013, pp. 31–32). This leads us to the topic of meat consumers – how do they fit in the ethical meatscape and within producers' cultural imagination? And what conceptual tools can be used to capture their presence?

Tools from cultural sociology: Cultural repertoires and consumer sovereignty

Here, we want to briefly situate consumers in the broader ethical meatscape. Studies have documented consumers' discomfort with industrial meat production (e.g., Holm & Mohl, 2000; McKendree et al., 2014; Ngapo et al., 2004) and have examined how consumers make sense of continued meat-eating despite their reservations (Oleschuk et al., 2019) and negative associations with meat-eaters (Johnston et al., 2021). Interview research reveals that consumers draw on common 'cultural repertoires' that connect meat-eating to cultural preservation, gender identity and consumer sovereignty—the idea that it is one's individual right to decide whether or not to eat meat (Oleschuk et al., 2019).

What is the meaning of the term 'cultural repertoire', and how can it be usefully applied to the realm of meat producers? The concept of a cultural repertoire emerges from cultural sociology, especially the work of Lamont (1992) and Swidler (1986, 2001). Instead of seeing culture as a static set of values that operates as a monolithic force, cultural repertoire theorists consider culture as a set of ideas, practices, and routines that enable certain ways of thinking and acting in the world. Actors have multiple cultural repertoires to draw from to make sense of their actions, and they employ these reflexively but also habitually. The concept of a cultural repertoire allows analysts to appreciate how people selectively draw from different pieces of culture to make sense of their behaviours and manage contradictions. While cultural repertoires are understood as broad cultural tools, access to cultural repertoires is shaped by social location. For example, the cultural repertoire of ethical eating is more accessible to privileged eaters, even though low-income consumers may selectively engage with this repertoire to make moral sense of their food practices (e.g., emphasising their lack of food waste; Johnston et al., 2011).

Consumer sovereignty can be understood as a kind of cultural repertoire that allows people to make sense of a certain way of thinking, feeling and behaving in the foodscape. For example, in the study of meat-eating mentioned above (Oleschuk et al., 2019), consumers drew on a repertoire of consumer sovereignty to emphasise their own right—and the rights of others—to make independent food choices unencumbered by social dictates. In the words of one meat-eating respondent,

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when asked how he would explain his food choices to a vegetarian: 'it's their [a vegetarian's] choice if they're eating vegetables, but it's my choice, I'm eating meat, and it's up to me' (18). As this quote signals, the repertoire of consumer sovereignty is centred on the commonplace economic idea that a consumer has the right to pursue their own self-interest (their identity, pleasure and freedom) through autonomous choices in the marketplace (Middlemiss, 2018, p. 77). This idea is not confined to the pages of economics textbooks but is a powerful cultural story of consumer behaviour and normative aspiration (Middlemiss, 2018, p. 78; Slater, 1997). Consumer sovereignty is based on the assumption that multiple individuals freely accessing information and pursuing their self-interest in the marketplace will generate optimal collective outcomes (Baumann, 1988; Korthals, 2001, p. 203). Within consumerist frameworks, individual choices satisfy consumers' desires but also drive production decisions, and with it, industry changes. For example, an individual's desire for pesticide-free apples is assumed to create markets geared towards lessening pesticide usage in apple production.

The idea behind consumer sovereignty has been roundly critiqued by scholars, including food scholars who note its connection to neoliberal ideology (e.g., Allen & Guthman, 2006; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Korthals, 2001; Middlemiss, 2018, p. 80). Schor notes that at a historical moment when corporate capitalism has gained tremendous power, we see the 'dominance of an ideology that posits the reverse—that the consumer is king and the corporation is at his or her mercy' (2007, p. 28). This assumption obscures the reality that consumers' freedom to choose and their ability to engage with greener forms of consumption are not equally distributed and are shaped symbolically and materially by the social context and privilege they occupy (Middlemiss, 2018, pp. 40, 81). As Allen (2010, p. 300) writes, 'those with the greatest need often have the least ability to exercise individual choice'. Other scholars, like Middlemiss (2018, p. 61) and Guthman (2008) also note that the assumption of free information leading to responsible consumer decision-making in the market (the 'information-deficit model') is deeply problematic. In Guthman's words: '"knowing where your food comes from" has become one of the most prevalent idioms of the current agro-food movement in the US, as if awareness of the intimacy of food will automatically propel one to make reflexive, ethical food decisions' (2008, p. 1175).

While these critiques of consumer sovereignty provide vital context for our case study, they are not our focus here. Instead, our aim is to capture and understand the relative presence of a consumer sovereignty cultural repertoire in our data on ethical meat producers. Especially, given that this repertoire has been documented in studies of consumers (including meat consumers), our intent is to better understand how these ideas manifest amongst meat producers. What is significant for us is that these critiques reveal a noteworthy tension between the consumer sovereignty repertoire, with its reliance on an atomised individual making independent market choices, and the ethical meatscape, which is founded on a *shared* set of values that inform producers' and consumers' decisions. Here, an individually orientated repertoire is situated within a broader collectivist discourse,[3] helping to produce some of the complex relationships that producers articulate with consumers in this article.

Just as was the case for the concept of the ethical meatscape, we employ the concept of cultural repertoire to ethical meat producers, but we do not seek to extend or complicate the concept in this article (but see Oleschuk et al., 2019). Nor do we seek to further theorise the ideal of consumer sovereignty (see Korthals, 2001), but instead we use this concept to capture and make sense of the powerful presence of consumers in our producer interviews. As we show below, the cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty was widely embraced by ethical meat producers, typically in a positive and affirming way that suggested consumers' central role in making positive changes in the food system.

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METHODS

The data we analysed for this article come from interviews we held with people who work on the 'production' end of small-scale and ethical meat. These interviews are part of a larger data collection effort for a project on meat consumption and production, focusing on issues of risk, taste, ethics and politics. Interviews with producers include people who work as farmers (who might raise multiple animal species and crops), cattle ranchers, butchers (focussed on whole-animal butchery and developing relationships with ethical farmers), small-scale abattoir operators who service these communities and restaurateurs (focussed on nose-to-tail eating). Initially, targeted recruitment was conducted among industry 'leaders' in small-scale and ethical meat and continued through snowball sampling, as producers told us of others taking similar approaches to their work. We conducted 44 in-person interviews among producers working in 44 businesses from 2016 to 2018. Many interviews included multiple interviewees (e.g., husband and wife), so in total, we spoke with 74 producers (see Table A1). Interviews were semi-structured meaning that they were informed by a pre-designed interview guide (see the Appendix) but were conducted in a conversational and flexible manner. The interviews lasted between 30 min and 4 h, with an average of approximately 90 min. Although we conducted two interviews by phone, the vast majority of interviews took place in producers' places of work, mostly their farms, shops or restaurants, which had the benefit of providing additional information gathered through observations about the production processes and their work lives. The extent of these site observations ranged from complete tours of farm sites, slaughterhouses and butcher shops to brief forays into barns beyond our interview site; all provided many opportunities to raise additional questions during the interviews. Interviews were conducted across four Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario) to gain perspectives from producers working under a range of geographic and economic circumstances and policy jurisdictions.

Following each interview, we wrote memos that summarised details about the interviewees and observation sites and that began identifying salient themes in the data. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and interviews were transcribed and entered into the Dedoose qualitative software program for coding. We developed our initial codes together by relying on prior literature and our early memoing. Then, during the open coding process, further codes and code refinements were produced inductively as transcripts were reviewed (see Table A2 for an overview of the coding system). During the initial coding period, all three authors coded a portion of the data to ensure congruency across coders and form a consensus on code development and refinement. Then, one author coded the remainder of the data while meeting regularly with the two co-authors to debrief the coding process and discuss early findings. For this article, we focused particularly on questions about how producers saw change happening in the meat industry, and their assessment of how states, markets and consumers all figured into that change. Producers were not asked outright to locate where that change should occur; instead, these conversations emerged organically through conversations about state support for alternative agriculture, the role of market forces, the value (or lack thereof) of labels and certification standards and the characteristics of conscientious consumers. The article's focus on consumer sovereignty is a finding that emerged inductively through our review of code excerpts related to producers' perceptions of food system change. Methodologically, identifying a cultural repertoire is interpretive insofar as repertoires are latent and therefore are observed indirectly, visible through patterns of categorisation and meaning-making across interviewees (Lamont, 1992).

Finally, we want to emphasise that our goal was not to interview producers to capture their understanding of the term ethical meatscape; instead, we saw them as actors working within the

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ethical meatscape. To be sure, 'meatscape' or 'foodscape' are not concepts that actors within AFNs would normally use. As noted above, we borrow the 'scape' concept from Appadurai (1996) and apply it to ethical meat to describe and understand the material and discursive environment in which ethical meat producers work and think about their work. In our interviews with producers, we used terms like ethical or sustainable meat; these were terms that all of our producers both understood and were interested in elaborating on.

FINDINGS

Producers in the ethical meatscape: Commonalities and differences

The producers we spoke to possessed similarities in their shared commitment to the promotion and growth of the ethical meatscape. They were unified in their disillusionment with conventional meat and their belief in the power of progressive, sustainable animal husbandry. Producers nonetheless occupied vastly different positions in the ethical meatscape, which placed them in varied relationships with consumers. They also held diverse perspectives about how to avoid the downfalls of conventional meat and how to promote the growth of the ethical meatscape. This was especially true of producers' perspectives about the costs and benefits of market mechanisms for change within contemporary capitalism. Alongside this diversity was nonetheless a remarkable interest among producers in consumers, a unified commitment to the cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty or belief in the power of consumers to drive food system change.

Producers in this dataset were located in a myriad of positions in the ethical meatscape. They varied widely in terms of their size and specialty and the amount and type of contact they had with consumers. For example, Jane Osgoode was a relatively small-scale farmer raising small numbers of chickens, pigs and sheep on about 75 acres of land. Jane sold meat from her farm to restaurants as well directly to consumers through farmers' markets and direct wholesaling. Kerri Sharp meanwhile ran a large, holistically managed ranching operation involving several thousand heads of cattle in Alberta; she held back a few cattle for friends and family but sold virtually all of her cattle at the conventional cattle auction, not having the opportunities or time to develop direct sale with consumers. Jim and Elaine Pinto raised turkeys and chickens along with organic fruits and vegetables on their 21-acre farm in British Columbia. Jeremy Stewart operated a small-scale abattoir in Alberta and worked with small farmers and hunters to process their meat. Paul Simpson was a high-end big-city butcher in Ontario who operated as a 'middleman' in the supply chain, meeting both ranchers and consumers regularly and translating meat products and information between them. Casey McFarland and Bryce Rollins were both restaurateurs who focused on sourcing the most ethical meat possible for their customers, but Bryce owned a high-end farm-to-table restaurant in Alberta, while Casey ran a British Columbia-based ethical burger chain. Many of our farm-based participants worked off-farm to supplement their farm incomes, while others' operations brought in profits earning them a comfortable living. A few also held bureaucratic positions within government agricultural offices, and others held leadership positions in sustainability-focussed farm organisations.

Producers' varying social locations naturally produced a wide variety of perspectives related to the factors that drive food system change, and the roles various actors played in that change (even though they had remarkably consistent views on the power of consumers to drive food system change as we explore below). This is especially true in relation to the topic of markets, where we

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saw a wide divergence of perspectives regarding what a capitalist orientation can do for the ethical meatscape. We did not observe any systematic correspondence between a producer's position in the ethical meatscape and whether they had critical or positive perspectives on markets (although this is certainly a topic that could be explored in future research).

Faith in markets is a dominant contemporary ideology in Western countries (Harvey, 2005). We would expect many of our interviewees to reflect this larger cultural current, especially given that our producers are rural ranchers and farmers and small (or mid-sized) business owners. Dan Marshall, a butcher who also owned his shop, said, for example, that his practice of procuring and butchering only 'ethical' meat followed his philosophy 'to buy and sell food the way nature intended'—a position that reflected the melding of his beliefs in 'naturally' raised meat and free markets. When talking about his decision to quit his accounting job and start raising animals and run a small abattoir, Jeremy Stewart similarly revealed a conviction that he could marry capitalist markets with doing good in the world: 'I was happy to leave my job and then do something that was meaningful to me....I wanted to be an entrepreneur now'. Another farmer we spoke to, Joe Reid, had expanded his family-owned ethical meat business into a small retail chain. He discussed his partnership with an ecologically minded investor group as an effective way to scale up sustainable livestock: 'These guys seemed to be people that I liked. There were principles behind it'. Participants like Dan, Jeremy and Joe embraced the tools embedded in markets for their potential to make positive change and believed it was possible to marry strong values with profit-making.

At the same time, many other interviewees were unequivocal about the negative impact markets have had on animal welfare and critiqued how capitalist pressures perpetuated injustices and inequities to maximise profits. Despite the overall dominance of pro-market sentiments, there were also several vocal critics of free market ideology in our sample. Because our interviewees were working within an alternative food system that is typically viewed as progressive, it was also not surprising to see some of them turn a critical eye to capitalist practices, even while they too existed within larger capitalist structures—a finding in keeping with other studies of small-scale agriculture (e.g., Strube, 2019). Producers identified numerous practices in livestock production where cutting costs to boost profits might not be in the best interests of people, the environment or animals. When discussing the use of urea licks for cattle to add protein and save money on higher-quality feed, Jared Bellows said, 'they're not really ethical...they're cheaper, but if you buy higher quality hay, then, you know, that's probably better'. In site visits, the topic of contained animal feeding operations (CAFOs) was perhaps the most frequently raised example where profiteering conflicted with ideas of ethical meat. Producers understood the widespread use of CAFOs and growth-promoting hormones as an outcome of the free market, allowing for maximum production at minimum cost. As Jeremy Stewart noted about industrial chicken operations, 'Modern industrial birds are actually pretty sick. But they are a scientific experiment that's gone right for profit, and wrong for the birds'. Corporate concentration was a commonly identified negative capitalist dynamic that contributed to a sense of small players being victimised by big corporations. As rancher Barry Griffith asserted when talking about his decision to direct market his beef to consumers 'I didn't want to be victimised by an international corporation'. Corporate capitalists were seen as hurting farmers and driving unhealthy practices of meat production and processing—what Brandon Hunter described as a 'corporate con...the takeover of the meat supply in this country'. He continued by saying, '90% of the beef bought and sold in Canada is controlled by a couple multinational corporations. And it's these packers that drive the whole production cycle. They want bigger animals, fattened a certain way, and that drives feedlot production, and that ultimately drives the cow-calf production'.

The power and importance of consumers

While producers occupied different positions in the ethical meatscape, interacted with consumers in varied ways and held diverse views about the role of the market, writ large, in promoting or inhibiting transformation in meat production, there was one component of the market around which there was an extremely high degree of consensus: the significance of consumer sovereignty. We asked producers about a variety of factors encompassed in food system change, such as how states could support alternative meat products more effectively, or whether they felt labels or certification systems were useful. But it was consumers who came up most regularly—even in response to questions about these other factors. Among all the explanations provided by producers about how to effect change, or why change is so hard to achieve, by far the most frequent factor invoked in these explanations was consumer sovereignty. According to our producers, to best understand the current state of the meat industry and the successes and failures of the ethical meatscape, we need to focus our attention on consumers as the most consequential actors in the food system. Their consumption choices were described as a key mechanism through which change can be facilitated or inhibited. The evidence we provide below is representative of the routine, automatic nature of this cultural repertoire; producers expressed an understanding that consumers had a natural power to control and direct the meat industry. Although no single utterance can constitute a cultural repertoire, it is the patterned, habitual emergence of this way of thinking across many producers that should be taken as an instantiation of the cultural repertoire.

When asked about how best to think about moving away from the dominance of the conventional meat industry, we heard many interviewees, like Russell Hill in the Introduction section, who immediately identified consumer sovereignty as the key. For example, farmer Colin Baker, said:

> I think if people are concerned, they just need to support alternatives and put their money where their—like vote with their dollar, all those mottos we have. It'll change. It comes down to the consumer. The consumer is driving this. The consumer drives everything. If you don't like what's going on, then you just don't buy it. If you don't buy it, they won't produce it. It will stop immediately. It will stop overnight.

Carol Barton had a similar perspective. She said, 'I just know that there's a tremendous opportunity to get consumers to connect with their food, and that if we are committed as an industry, for change, that is where change is going to come. It doesn't matter how much policy you implement. At the end of the day, it's the consumer that's gonna make change'. When asked how the conventional meat industry will change, Brandon Hunter said, 'The consumer, for sure. They're driving this whole thing. Like, statistically, the farmer doesn't matter anymore. We're less than 2% of the population. But the consumer, they're the ones educating themselves about food, and they're demanding it, you know'? Rancher Luke Mitchell was likewise emphatic. He said, 'I think what's really important is just to learn more about consumer perception trends, beef wants and demands. Where is it going? Where is the industry changing and going to? Ultimately, that will be driven … 100% from consumers'.

Many producers elaborated on their perceptions of the power of consumer sovereignty. In doing so, they explained that they saw consumer choices as a reflection of consumer values. As farm coordinator Karen Miller said, 'I think it all comes down to your personal food values; what's important to you? And then, go from there. Search out those things'. When consumers choose to act on their values for health, sustainability, animal ethics, local economies or direct relationships,

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they could be a catalyst for market change, as retailers and producers take notice. For example, some consumers' concern for animal welfare has been piqued through social movement actors like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) as noted by farmer Elaine Pinto: 'Every time a PETA video comes out, it outrages. And people start looking'. In Elaine's view, consumers start to ask for change and look for alternatives (and not necessarily plant-based alternatives) when they have more access to information about conventional meat. The issue of increased information flow promoting consumer demand was also noted by farmer Jennifer Shaw. Jennifer saw consumers' concern for minimising environmental harm as an important motivator for growing her business:

> We didn't plan to be doing this, but it was very much driven by market demand. We didn't sit down and write a business plan originally. We just were raising a couple of pigs for ourselves and a few chickens. It got out of control pretty quickly. So how do I account for the increase in market demand? Well, I think it probably has a lot to do with easy access to information, with the rise of the Internet and social media and everything… And then we've got climate change, so that's something most people can't ignore, and it isn't too far of a walk to get from looking at climate change to looking at our food supply and the miles and the methods and everything.

Perceptions of how consumers could or should be informed about meat production varied, but many producers believed that their role as sources of information was critical. Producers felt that part of their responsibility was to educate consumers about the pitfalls of conventional meat and showcase the possibilities of sustainable alternatives. For example, rancher Barry Griffith emphasised that, '[w]hat you're really doing is you're delivering messaging all the time. You're reinforcing the messaging. You're delivering education, always, always, always. You're reinforcing why you're dealing with me, why you're making the change [from conventional to ethical meat]. Why is this better for you'? Similarly, rancher Isaac Gibson gives regular farm tours and public lectures and engages regularly on social media 'to try to educate people'. According to Isaac, 'Education is always our stumping block. You know, how do we get people educated? And as soon as people become educated, they actually become quite empowered in what they want to do in their purchasing power'.

But even in this perspective, the power to create change rests with consumers who choose to act on information about how conventional food—and meat—are produced. Isaac Gibson further explained:

> Half the problem is a lot of people aren't even educated or understand the whole food process. … maybe they don't want to, because it's easy to disconnect yourself if you don't know. Once you start actually understanding and realising right now where most of your food—how it is produced and the way it is produced, it's so scary … But if we're gonna have any change … hopefully start putting this planet into a better place, people really have to take that power back and become responsible for their buying power and what they're purchasing.

Interestingly, in this view of consumer sovereignty, ethical meat consumers are not necessarily motivated by counter-cultural values but can be driven by individual motivations like fear, health and taste. Some producers, like farmer Trent Harvey, felt that the ethical meatscape will grow in part from consumer demand for better-tasting meat. Others, like farmer Kim Morith noted

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that consumer demand for ethical meat can come from people who want to protect their health and the health of their families: 'I think it really does come back down to the consumer having their time, energy, resource, interests whatever, you know, to care enough about their food, which from what I see is a lot of the time happens when people have kids'. Children are often seen as especially vulnerable to chemicals or impurities perceived to be present in conventional meat. The consumers' desire to protect themselves, and especially their children, is considered an important factor in the growth of the ethical meatscape (see Cairns & Johnston, 2018).

Alternatively, consumer choice was also recognised by many producers as a major stumbling block preventing faster or more far-reaching change in the meat industry. Interviewees understood that the vast majority of meat consumers buy is produced through conventional means. Although in part, they attributed this choice to a lack of knowledge on the part of some consumers, producers also perceived this choice as driven by consumers' focus on price, convenience or other priorities. Consumers' de-prioritisation of ethical meat can cause resentment and frustration, when they are seen as prioritising frivolous consumer pleasures, like cars and vacations. Rancher Pete Foster complained that 'an $80,000 speedboat is a must-have', and his friend, Dean Carol, agreed: 'today's consumer … they go to the store and they pay for the chips. They go home in their two-car garage and on and on and on. Then, they don't have any money left, and they say food is too expensive'. Similarly, food entrepreneur Kyle Klassen said there are 'two objections people always come up with: I don't have the money and it's just for elitist pricks and I don't have the time because I'm not lucky like you or wealthy like you and have this free time. It's completely false'. In this view, consumer sovereignty is again where all the power for change is located, but it is simply not being employed in ways that promote ethical meat. Other producers are more sympathetic to the inability of some consumers to pay for ethical meat. However, even if they understood that many consumers have limited choices when it comes to affording ethical meat, some producers felt that consumers could still make it work if they changed their priorities and turned away from consumer indulgences. Others believed that mechanisms need to be in place, such as state subsidies, to allow consumers to afford to purchase ethical meat. While this last view clearly attributes some power for change to governmental policy, it still rests on faith in consumer sovereignty as a key mechanism for the meat industry transformation.

Consumers as a source of meaning in everyday life

While producers' focus on consumer agency is partly a result of the entrenched nature of the consumer sovereignty repertoire, this is not the end of the story. The presence of consumers in our interviews is also rooted in the importance this sector places on direct relationships with consumers. In part, producers believed in the power of consumers because they engaged with consumers regularly and developed longstanding relationships. These relationships served as a foundation for the meaning and pride producers derived from their work.

Overall, producers emphasised the personal nature of their relationships with consumers. While the extent of these relationships varied, almost all participants had some direct consumer engagement at some point in their careers. Most producers had an element of direct marketing in their business and had regular opportunities to engage with their consumers, whether that be through direct farm sales, at farmers' markets or online through social media. Over time, these engagements often fostered longstanding, meaningful relationships. As farmer Bobby Harper stated, 'I think a lot of people go by the adage of know your farmer. At [the local farmer's] market, we're on a first-name basis with 100, 200 people every week. It's quite a gratifying thing'.

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Similarly, farmer Jared Bellows talked about the value of, 'customers who know you as a human being rather than a business'. He argued that when producers have 'deep seeds in the community' consumers come to 'know you as a person. They know, like, this is me, this is my family, and that's who [they're] supporting.'

Jared's differentiation between personal and market-based relationships was common among producers, who regularly emphasised the personal connections and meaningful interactions they had with their consumers over the years of running their businesses. These interactions served as the basis of longstanding, loyal relationships, which can work to reinforce the idea of consumers possessing a high degree of agency in the marketplace. Farmer Darren Riley emphasised the significance of consumer agency and loyalty when he commented, 'we've had people say, "As long as you or your kids farm that land, we will always support you". And that's pretty powerful'. Elaine Pinto went so far as to refer to her customers as family when discussing their response to her back surgery: 'I had gifts and cards. We've created a relationship. Because we're small, we only have 1000 customers. I know them all by name, I know when they have birthdays, I know when they have kids. We've become a family'.

These personal connections and interactions are easier for small-scale farmers like Elaine and Bobby to manage; however, even larger-scale farmers, like Russell Hill, who had 'talked to people and developed relationships [with] tens of thousands of customers over the years', derived immense meaning from their direct relationships with consumers. When asked about the most rewarding parts of his job, Russell spoke explicitly of the interactions ('feedback') that inform their work while also providing a tremendous sense of personal satisfaction:

> Oh, it's the consumer... They make it great for us, because their feedback is constant. It never ends. The congratulations, the wellbeings, the whatever else is always, is constant... I mean, when people say, 'We only eat your meat', or 'Thank you for what you're doing', or I mean, 'My husband is, since we started eating, he's lost 40 pounds', or 'Since we started eating your meat, my cancer's went into remission', ... All of these – and they're ongoing. I mean, it's just not one a day. There's multiple times a day the consumer thanks us for what we're doing. And it's the thanks that we get from the consumer that's absolutely the best part of the job.

The powerful presence of consumer interactions was observed among producers in various locations in the supply chain. Brie Falkes, a restaurant owner, described a similar sense of gratification from the direct relationships she had both with both her customers and the producers she worked with. Of consumers, Brie says, 'We have this relationship with our guests. Because it all comes back to relationships, where the guest has learned to trust us. We're only going to give you food that is really delicious. It's delicious because it's well-sourced. It's delicious because it's been prepared properly'. Due to her intermediary position in the supply chain, Brie was privy to multiple forms of direct relationships cultivated in the ethical meatscape, allowing her to eloquently communicate their value:

> For the farmer to be able to talk to the chef, and for them to look them in their eyes and be like, 'Wow, that was really amazing'. All your extra effort you went through, how much money it cost to even create the infrastructure to raise these animals, to feed them right, it's worthwhile. Thank you. You know? And that human connection is what is often the value added in their product. And that gets lost, of course, in an industrialised food system, or a globalised food system.

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Brie's valuing of 'human connection' was a common sentiment in our sample. When discussing the importance of direct relationships, producers regularly emphasised the value in their relationships with other actors in the supply chain. Personal, trusted connections between supply chain members were considered crucial to the harmonious operation of alternative supply chains so that those directly interacting with consumers could be knowledgeable and confident in their products. Importantly, these connections rely on shared understandings among producers and consumers about the value of raising and selling meat outside the conventional system.

Brie also alludes to the labour and investment demanded by this industry. The meat industry, whether it be farming, ranching, butchering or restaurant work, is laborious, physical work, often requiring long, unpredictable and non-standard hours. Alternative agriculture also involves added investments on the part of producers to ensure the wellbeing of humans and animals in its systems. For many producers, it was their direct relationships with consumers that motivated and justified that labour and investment. As rancher Carol Barton described:

> To me, it's very gratifying to be able to actually talk to consumers, find out what their concerns are, and address them, which is novel in agriculture… Dealing with consumers [is] really gratifying. That's actually what gets me up in the morning, because we have very long days. My husband and I never get a day off. We work nonstop.

Carol's statement also signals one final aspect of the meaning producers attributed to direct relationships: the impact they were able to see their meat make on consumers. Farmer Kristine Brown described this well when she said, 'I also love seeing the difference that I make in my customers' lives. They really feel good about what they're buying and confident in how it's raised'. Similarly, when asked what he enjoys most about his work, farmer Colin Baker responded, 'I enjoy being able to supply people with protein that, you know, they're proud to have'. Colin elaborated by describing an occasion where a customer told him that one of his chickens was the centrepiece of a dinner she attended for a dying friend, saying, 'to supply something that would be the centrepiece of that was really, really rewarding'.

The above meanings that producers garnered from their direct relationships with customers served as personal and emotional touchstones for their belief in the power of consumers in enacting change in the food system. At the same time, these meanings are not divorced from the repertoire of consumer sovereignty. The normative ideal of consumer sovereignty is embedded in producer–consumer interactions and relationships. Direct relationships are a key mechanism through which producers educate consumers to become responsible neoliberal consumers, even as these relationships provide emotional rewards and valuable feedback for producers. And it was through their role as consumer educators that producers saw themselves as change-makers within the food system.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The ethical meatscape makes big promises, offering small-scale, sustainable and humanely produced meat that is tastier and healthier to eat than industrial meat. But how can these promises be realised, according to producers? In this article, we address this question by drawing from interviews with ethical meat producers and employing the conceptual tool of cultural repertoires from cultural sociology. To summarise, our analysis points to widely disparate views among producers regarding the potential of capitalist markets but have consensus around the power of

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consumer choices driving change in the food system. Despite the diversity of views on capitalism, we observed a powerful and pervasive cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty resting on the assumption that individual consumption choices can generate structural food system reform. Many producers expressed scepticism of the capitalist drive to maximise profits, an impulse they thought was deleterious for human health, animals and the land; at the same time, they simultaneously put great faith in the idea of consumer power to make a change and sometimes castigated consumers who prioritised other consumer items.

The presence of contradictory ideas in our interviews is not altogether surprising, as other research in cultural sociology demonstrates that people rely on cultural repertoires to structure their thinking and choices without being fully aware that they are doing so, and so they do not necessarily recognise when they hold contradictory ideas (e.g., Swidler, 2001). However, we do consider it significant that the idea of consumer power was so ubiquitous in our interviews—especially among interviewees who define themselves in opposition to conventional industrial agriculture and capitalist processes. We might expect producers to minimise consumers' power, especially since a repertoire of consumer sovereignty shifts control of how change happens away from themselves and away from a rural setting. We argue that our findings reflect the pervasiveness of a cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty—a repertoire that is located amongst meat consumers (see Johnston et al., 2011; Oleschuk et al., 2019) as well as meat producers.

Consumer sovereignty is a foundational idea about market society—capitalism is good because it maximises consumer choice. At the same time, this foundational cultural repertoire also helps ethical meat producers to make sense of their work and the larger project of moving away from industrial meat. The producers see their responsibility as making ethical meat available in the market, and they see it as the responsibility of consumers to choose correctly. Despite the limited amount of systemic change in the meat industry, where industrial meat is still the norm, producers remain wedded to the consumer sovereignty repertoire. Future work could investigate how small-scale producers working in different food commodities and sectors outside food also employ a cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty—or what other cultural repertoires emerge. Scholars might also investigate how actors in the alternative foodscape employ varied cultural repertoires to manage contradictions that emerge as they participate in capitalist markets while attending to non-market, 'peasant' imperatives like self-sufficiency and eco-social responsibility (Strube, 2019; van der Ploeg, 2018).

The concept of cultural repertoires makes up the analytic side of our argument, but the other side is empirical, rooted in observations and conversations about the labour of raising animals and producing meat. We argue it is essential to situate producers' faith in consumers in the nature of their work itself, which relies regularly on direct relationships and regular interactions with consumers. These direct relationships are outgrowths of, or are made possible by, smaller-scale production, which shapes how the work is carried out and how producers feel about the work (see Bock et al., 2007). Put simply, relationships with consumers give producers' work a crucial sense of meaning and emotional rewards. These relationships also involve producers inserting themselves into a consumer-driven framework for change through education, a finding that bolsters the idea of seeing alternative food as a pedagogical project (Sarmiento, 2017) and adds nuance to critiques of the 'information-deficit' model of change (Guthman, 2008; Middlemiss, 2018). It was through their framing as educators that producers understood themselves as active agents in a consumer-driven approach to change, which in turn amplified the meaning of those relationships—and which may work at a broader level to reinforce a normative ideal of consumer sovereignty. Drawing inspiration from Carolan (2020) as well as our own conversations with producers, we suggest that future research could examine how rural producers find meaning in their work as educators,

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producing food for urban consumers and how the emotional dimension of that work (e.g., pride, frustration) relates to perceptions of a rural–urban divide.

How do we situate our findings and argument in the broader landscape of research on ethical foodscapes, ethical consumption and agro-food studies? As noted above, research on the relationship between alternative food production and consumer culture remains underdeveloped, both in regard to producer perspectives and the ethical meatscape (Bruckner et al., 2018; Carolan, 2020; Driessen, 2012). This article works to address this gap by analysing how ethical meat producers understand the possibility of making progressive food system change, identifying the important role consumers play in this vision. Beyond this contribution, we encourage scholars to continue working to plumb the connections between farm and fork. In that spirit, we suggest two focal points for future work elaborating on the place of consumers in ethical foodscapes: embedded markets and neoliberalism.

First, our research suggests that bridging the production/consumption divide requires further attention to the idea of embedded markets, which is of course not a new idea (Polanyi, 1957). Even so, we believe that to understand the omnipresence of consumers in producers' imaginations, we can usefully draw from the perspectives of political economists and economic sociologists, who emphasise that markets are always embedded in social relationships (Krippner & Alvarez, 2007; Polanyi, 1957). From this perspective, markets are not neutral mechanisms for rational exchange, but are 'explicitly moral projects, saturated with normativity' (Fourcade & Healy, 2007, pp. 299–300), and shot through with cultural values, beliefs and understandings about meanings and evaluations (Zelizer, 2011). In the case of the ethical meatscape, we can see how consumers are embedded in producers' cultural imaginaries, emotions, normative ideals, and their daily practices. They are embedded relationally as individuals that producers interact with and sell food to, and they are embedded symbolically as a powerful normative ideal about where power and agency lie in society. Individual consumers making autonomous personal decisions about consumption is a potent symbol for producers, representing perhaps the core activity within the ethical meatscape. Consumers are obviously essential as a source of income for producers, but their embeddedness is significant beyond the material dimension; there is a symbolic dimension of the consumer agency that holds tremendous emotional resonance, especially for small producers with powerful connections to the ideal of the autonomous individual (Van der Ploeg, 2018).

Second, our findings speak to the complexity of the neoliberal critique of consumer sovereignty, which is actually a pluralistic, multifaceted critique articulated by numerous scholars (e.g., Allen & Guthman, 2006; Guthman, 2009, 2011; Szasz, 2007). Generally, critics argue that it is ineffective to assign responsibility for solving collective problems to individual consumers and that this tendency perpetuates an economic ideology of neoliberalism that privileges free, unfettered markets as an optimal way to promote the ecological and social good. This model of social change not only lets governments off the hook for regulating markets and protecting the social good but becomes embedded and embodied in individual psyches that take on the burden of protecting the health and the environment (Allen & Guthman, 2006; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Guthman, 2009). Maniates was one of the first to articulate the neoliberal critique, or what he called the 'individualization of responsibility', which involves a powerful, popular belief, that 'knotty issues of consumption, consumerism, power and responsibility can be resolved neatly and cleanly through enlightened, uncoordinated consumer choice' (2001, p. 33).

How are we to make sense of the neoliberal critique, given the discourse of ethical meat producers and their reliance on a cultural repertoire of consumer sovereignty? Our conversations with meat producers suggest the importance of investigating the complexity of the ethical

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foodscape. There are two notable tensions that our findings reveal. First, our interviews with producers highlight a tension between the consumer sovereignty repertoire, its reliance on an atomised individual making independent choices in the market, and the ethical meatscape, which is founded on a *shared* set of values that inform producers' and consumers' decisions. Producers in our data *simultaneously* venerated the independent consumer at the same time that they emphasised their shared values and collective aims. Second, our findings show that the ethical meatscape is a space that may perpetuate neoliberal ideas venerating market dynamics and rational market actors on the one hand *and* offer meaning and a sense of moral purpose to actors on the other. In addition to being perceived as the core agents of food system change, consumers are also perceived as sources of meaning and emotional fulfillment. Consumer interactions give producers a sense that their hard work is worth it, and that their efforts are appreciated. These producers are not simply ideological dupes but are committed actors who seek to stay financially solvent while they work to provide more sustainable food. At the same time, these actors tend to fall back on relatively pat solutions for consumer-driven change—as many others also do. These findings replicate other work on food system activists, which identifies a key paradox: nuanced, complex critiques of the food system are frequently combined with relatively simplistic prescriptions for making change (Kennedy et al., 2016). The ethical meatscape exists not despite these tensions but rather through them.

Our findings challenge us as food scholars to recognise and understand the hard work of producing food, raising animals and seeking sustainability, while staying aware of how neoliberal ideas may also become part of the everyday bedrock of thinking about how the food system can change. Our data cannot support specific claims about the potential of ethical meatscape discourse to generate change in the food system. However, this is an important question that future research should explore, especially given the urgency and severity of the social and ecological problems stemming from the conventional meat industry.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to confidentiality requirements, the data that support the findings of this article cannot be shared.

ENDNOTES

[1] To avoid confusion with plant-based meat alternatives (e.g., Impossible Burger), we use the term ethical meat to refer primarily to the 'ethical' meat industry (e.g., grassfed, hormone-free, organic). We do not routinely use quotes around ethical for readability but emphasise that this term is not intended to convey an empirical, ontological judgment about the moral superiority of these products or the consumers who purchase them. Moreover, we employ ethical meat rather than alternative meat to avoid confusion with plant-based alternatives to meat.

[2] An admittedly nebulous term, Harvey provides a helpful, succinct definition (2005, p. 2): 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.

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[3] A parallel situation can be observed in academic scholarship on the discourse surrounding obesity; a *collective* discourse around obesity is commonly articulated in terms that emphasize *individual* responsibility for thin, healthy bodies (see e.g., Guthman 2009, 2011).

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