Civic Agriculture in Chicago

By GAVIN VAN HORN

What Is Civic Agriculture?

Throughout the United States, farmers’ markets are proliferating, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) businesses are gaining members, and vegetable gardens are being planted at schools, in neighborhoods, and even at the White House. Bestselling books such as The Omnivore’s Dilemma and Fast Food Nation, as well as film documentaries like Food, Inc., have brought food-related issues and concerns into popular consciousness, spawning a discussion that transcends-of-the-moment dietary fads, such as Atkins or South Beach. Descriptions like “organic,” “fair-trade,” “grass-fed,” and even “locavore” are becoming more prominent as grocery stores adjust the stock on their shelves to match a growing public demand. Ever aware of consumer trends (and market share), companies such as Wal-Mart have made a point of “going local,” creating a niche in their produce section touting the freshness of their close-to-home vegetables.

Amidst this sometimes dizzying array of food options, a more subtle grassroots movement exists—one in which food is not merely one more lifestyle choice harried shoppers must make, and one in which food is not reduced to “product” and individuals to “consumers.” This movement is in part a reaction to what is called commodity, industrial, or conventional agriculture, terms that describe the dominant forms of agriculture in the United States.

In the twentieth century, these became increasingly mechanized, dependent on chemical inputs and biotechnology, and subsidized by federal dollars in order to achieve maximum productivity (for a few commodity crops) and efficiency. This trend resulted in the “hollowing out” of small and mid-size family farms, which were unable to compete against the consolidation of land under agricultural corporations, and in attendant disruption of rural economies and communities.

Determining the origins of one’s food or even having access to healthy foods can be challenging in the present agricultural system. The sheer scale of conventional agriculture creates a system in which farms (and farmers) and their “products” become units of production—abstract entities that can be exchanged and traded with little attention to the relational and qualitative social impacts of such decisions.

There are many who recognize that the culture of agriculture is in jeopardy. The foment about locally based foods, increasing organic options, and the burgeoning of farmers’ markets is a partial response to the disconnection and loss of food cultures brought about by conventional agriculture. Each of these is important, but there are signs that a wider movement is taking root in which food is understood as a way to build community and care for place—a social exchange as much or more than it is a nutritional or economic exchange.
Various terms are used for capturing the ways in which people are building community by focusing on the social impacts of food production and distribution, but the one I have found most helpful is *civic agriculture*. Civic agriculture has been described as an “ideal type,” a term that it is a broad umbrella sheltering a number of concerns about regional food production, local economic security, and social development. According to anthropologist Laura DeLind, in contrast to conventional agriculture, civic agriculture “scans from the ground up, attending to less standardized, more direct and self-reliant approaches to food production, distribution, and consumption” that are “responsive to particular ecological and socioeconomic contexts.” Civic agriculture, however, is not merely a greener alternative to conventional agriculture. What is most distinctive about the term is that it places emphasis on the potential *civic* character of agriculture. That is, it links the cultivation of soil with the cultivation of citizenship. As DeLind asserts, civic agriculture is “a tool and a venue . . . for nurturing a sense of belonging to a place and an organic sense of citizenship.”

The pairing of *civic* with *agriculture* encourages us to consider citizenship in ways that are strikingly different from dominant conceptions of what it means to “be a citizen.” Specifically, it cuts against a view of citizenship that is founded upon the sanctity of radical individualism and the supposition that values are private and subjective. In his book *Community and the Politics of Place*, Daniel Kemmis explains that this view is rooted in the Madisonian idea that society consists of self-interested individuals whose desires must be balanced (and adjudicated, when necessary) against one another in a competitive marketplace. Civic agriculture, in contrast, encourages thinking in terms of collective need, mutual cooperation, and the responsibilities we have to our shared ecologies. Deeper connections to the sources of our sustenance (and the broader health of the soils and waters upon which these sources of sustenance depend) may indeed be one of the more direct ways to awaken a sense of being “a plain member and citizen” of the land-community, as Aldo Leopold put it.

I hope to provide a convincing case that this linkage is critical if a deeper commitment to and understanding of place and community are desirable goals. For examples, I draw from my interactions with three groups within the Chicagoland region that demonstrate different forms of civic agriculture—an engaged, community-based citizenship in which growing and eating good food is a means of affirming and developing civic, ethical, and ecological commitments.

**THE VALUE OF CIVIC AGRICULTURE (METHODS AND MOTIVES)**

Before I provide some of the details about the groups I researched and the people who were kind enough to share their insights and time with me, I would like to say a few words about what animates this project. I sometimes jokingly refer to the work I do as “story-foraging,” in that I seek to discover and understand the ways in which people order their experiences of place into meaningful and morally significant wholes. Writer N. Scott Momaday provided some valuable insights about the relationship between place and story when he wrote, “We know who we are (and where we are) only with reference to the things about us, the points of reference in both our immediate and infinite worlds, the places and points among which we are born, grow old, and die. There is in this simple cartology the idea of odyssey. And in odyssey there is story.”

I understand story to have particular relevance for conservation—to how people care for and relate to the more-than-human world. Stories provide us with the ability to reflect upon both what we are for and what we are against, how we understand our place within the cosmos and in our particular neighborhood, and they offer us a way to make sense of the larger systems of which we are a part. In considering how cities can become places of profound community engagement, Kemmis highlighted another function of story: “It is precisely the healing of places—the creation of new structures of wholeness—and the remembrance of the stories of what it took to do this that gives citizens a place to stand, a place to look back in memory and forward in anticipation.”

As I conducted interviews, I sought such “remembrances” about food—why it matters, what it means to people, how it connects people to their places. When I spoke with people, I hoped to identify common elements of *why* participants feel the need for agricultural alternatives and how their participation has shaped their understanding of community and citizenship. I selected the sites I chose on the basis of whether the group in question focused on agriculture as an opportunity to engage in a broader public understanding of community. That is, did the growing and distribution of food include a clear social...
component, in which food was the medium for building community bonds and ecological understanding? I also looked for different kinds of civic agriculture—based on geographic location, organizational type, and demographic diversity. My hope is that highlighting these themes and groups will bring attention to how unconventional agricultures are emerging in the Chicagoland region, and how these alternative agricultures may be critical to building stronger communities, binding people to their places, and creating reasons to hope for a sustainable urban food culture.

**PRAIRIE CROSSING**

*Agriculture, I think, is important for sane living. I really mean that. Digging in the dirt, dealing with animals, is real, it’s hands on. And I want to lead a real life not a virtual life. ...Agriculture does keep us connected to the realities of life and death. —L. Weins*  

Superficially at least, Prairie Crossing is the clearest example among the three groups that were part of my research that might fit comfortably under the term “alternative agriculture.” Alternative agriculture, which sometimes goes by other names such as local, ecological, organic, or place-based, represents commercial food production and animal husbandry that is consciously swimming against the tide of conventional agriculture. In Illinois, the vast majority of agriculture is conventional, meaning that farmland is heavily mechanized and chemically dependent (for pest control and fertilization), and its crops are predominately raised for export to both national and international markets. Forage crops, corn, and soy beans dominate the rural landscape, so much so that there are those who question whether the state’s motto as the “Prairie State” is losing its meaning. Prairie Crossing, as the name implies, ascribes to a different paradigm.

Prairie Crossing is a 677-acre “farm-centered housing development” in Grayslake, Illinois, located about forty miles northwest of Chicago. Because of two separate Metra lines that intersect (hence, *Prairie Crossing*) on its southwestern edge, Prairie Crossing commuters who work in Chicago can travel to downtown by rail in about an hour. From early in its conception, Prairie Crossing was envisioned as a place that would defy typical suburban conventions, eschewing cookie-cutter houses and postage-stamp crabgrass lawns in favor of clustered development, open space preserves, and prairie grasses.

Central to the identity of Prairie Crossing is its farmland, an area of more than ninety acres that includes Sandhill Organics, which is one of the more successful Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) businesses in Illinois. Cognizant of the need for replicating the success of this model in adjacent areas, Prairie Crossing initiated the Farm Business Development Center (FBDC) in the early 2000s, as an experimental piece of farm operations. The purpose of the FBDC at Prairie Crossing is to assist “farmer-entrepreneurs” in all the skills necessary to run a successful farm business, from marketing to financial management, crop choice, and labor decision-making. Farmers can work up to five years in the program, with the ultimate goal of securing a long-term land lease that allows them to farm professionally.

The Sandhill Organics CSA and the farm incubator program are both attempts to reverse a trend in the United States that has been intensifying in the last century: the separation of people from the sources of their food. Linda Wiens, a senior associate for the Liberty Prairie Foundation noted that as agriculture has been pushed further and further away from where people actually live, food knowledge and farming impacts become obscured. Prairie Crossing was intended as a model that would show how farming, community, and land conservation are compatible while “retaining the key elements of the character of this region.”

Between its farms, its informal neighborly networks, its conservation volunteer programs, and its educational initiatives, a lot happens at Prairie Crossing. Rather than attempt a detailed account of these programs and their histories, I would like to focus on two of Prairie Crossing’s “guiding principles” (the full list of ten can be found at [http://www.prairiecrossing.com/pc/site/guiding-principles.html](http://www.prairiecrossing.com/pc/site/guiding-principles.html)) that are directly related to civic agriculture: a sense of place and a sense of community, and how these are mutually reinforced through the various forms of agriculture that occur at Prairie Crossing.
As one might expect, people are attracted to Prairie Crossing for different reasons: its natural aesthetics, its architectural appeal, its open spaces and amenities, and so forth. The people with whom I spoke, however, oftentimes described a journey of growing ethical and ecological awareness as they became more invested in the activities at Prairie Crossing.

Erin Cummisford is an example of a concerned parent who moved to Prairie Crossing seven years ago because it seemed like a healthy community in which to raise her children.\textsuperscript{24} Since that time, she has seen a shift in her perspectives that was not expected. While it remains important to her that her kids can come home and run “straight out the backdoor” to play with trusted neighbors, she noted that her views about farming and food have been profoundly altered by living in the community. Erin had experience with gardening before coming to Prairie Crossing, but she “always thought organic was a little silly,” a kind of overreaction, and the ethics of food was something she “never thought about before, really, at all.”

Erin’s experiences with Sandhill Organics and with the other farmers at Prairie Crossing during field tours, harvest festivals, and her personal interactions with them have brought these connections to light. “As you start to get older, you begin to think, ‘I don’t think everybody in charge knows what they’re doing.’ . . . You start to learn more, and think, ‘Is it really okay to eat all these chemicals?’” These might have remained speculative questions were it not for the conversations that are part of the daily life at Prairie Crossing. “Is my money going toward things I believe in? If you’re buying something at the grocery store, you have no idea. . . . The importance of a community like PC is that you bounce those ideas off each other.” The conversation does not end at the boundaries of Prairie Crossing. Erin, for example, said she has become a “bridge” between her church community and Prairie Crossing by organizing “ethics of eating” discussions for her home congregation and sharing her experiences at other regional meetings.

The sharing of ideas at Prairie Crossing, of course, is not limited to food. From rain barrels to bioswales to prairie restoration, there is a kind of “think tank” (as Erin put it) energy in the community that allows for the exchange of information as well as skills. Bill Pogson is another person with whom I spoke who recognized a shift in his perspectives based on his experiences at Prairie Crossing.\textsuperscript{25} Bill moved to Prairie Crossing in 2001 from New Jersey, knowing nothing about the area. He and his wife bought a house because “the place looked different.” This “happy accident” has since led him to appreciate the value of a community with a conservation focus. “The people here infected me with their interests,” Bill said. “Personally, I’m a very strong skeptic in a positive way of wanting to find out the truth. So I question things, I look to the technical side of things, try to stay away from the emotional things in trying to make my decisions.” His inquiries have helped him gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between farming and land health and defined a role for him in relation to others. He now does part-time work as a mechanical jack-of-all-trades in the community. His involvement with the farming operations (e.g., fixing irrigation systems, keeping the tractors operational, building greenhouses) has furthered his education about sustainable agriculture and helped him understand how farming is connected to public policy. “I’d like to see people more involved in farms, so if they do have an inquiring mind I can get them from the cynical side of skepticism to the positive side of what’s going on, and learning that organic is not just a politically left-wing marker but is something that is biologically desirable.” One of the things that has impressed Bill most is the way in which “Here conservation is not just an annual check to the conservation fund, but it’s something you do or are aware of on a daily basis.”

This relational dailyness is facilitated by the many ways in which people at Prairie Crossing come together around food. The community was designed to help foster such interaction. Linda Weins described this as a “New Urbanism” that is actually quite old: “Keep[ing] the houses close together so everyone can enjoy the spaces, and keep[ing] people living close to where they are working makes sense, and keeping people where they can interact.”\textsuperscript{26} These intentional arrangements of housing and space, with access to walking paths, porches that back up to gardening areas, and the on-site farms means “there is a lot of getting together over food,” ranging from a weekly farmers’ market, to potluck dinners, to the annual tomato harvest at Sandhill Organics.\textsuperscript{27}
Like the other groups in my research, farms (and gardens) are central but growing healthy food is far from the only, or possibly the most important, aspect of civic agricultural practice. Rather, it is the social engagement facilitated by growing, buying, preparing, and eating food that fosters a sense of community identity. One example of such get-togethers that I attended was the monthly farm-community lunch. Teachers from the charter school, farm workers, Liberty Prairie Conservancy staff, and interested community members shared a homemade, seasonal meal while discussing the food-related question of the month (in this case, “Why do some people not want to have a share in a CSA, and what do you think would convince them otherwise?”). The enjoyment of the meal was enhanced by the diverse perspectives and insights of those present around the table.

One Prairie Crossing homeowner, Maryanne Natarajan, observed that the diverse skill sets and professions represented in the community have helped her understand how she can do more than “just complaining to the neighbors” and instead “make a difference.” In particular, she noted how neighbors recently banded together and became versed in county ordinances and governance in order to address concerns about a nearby landfill. This kind of landscape-wide perspective is also reflected in her own family’s practice of contributing their composted food scraps to the farms at Prairie Crossing. Once a week, similar to how recycling bins are visible in city neighborhoods, there are weekly compost pick-ups and deliveries to a community compost pile. For Maryanne, whose family now has in-house worm bins to facilitate the decomposition process, being a part of this community composting “brought the whole [food] cycle into perspective,” endowing it with a certain everydayness that no longer seems novel.

Not all people who live at Prairie Crossing are deeply involved in the life and cycles of the community, but generally there is a deep spirit of volunteerism that seems fueled by the “belief that community and conservation can go hand in hand.” From a civic agriculture perspective, it might not be that community and conservation can go together; for enduring community health, it may be necessary that they do. I asked Vicky Ranney, who was one of the primary developers of Prairie Crossing and continues to actively guide its programs, how agriculture is linked to conservation. She responded, “It’s all part of the same thing. It’s totally a seamless web if it’s done organically, or at least sustainably . . . If it’s good for the land, then it’s good for rare natural areas nearby, it’s good for bringing in money for forest preserve districts or other municipal bodies that need some return on their land.”

The Liberty Prairie Conservancy (LPC), a non-profit conservation group whose offices are located at Prairie Crossing, has focused on making the connections between sustainable farming and private and public land conservation. One of the goals of the LPC is to begin to place farmers from Prairie Crossing’s incubator program onto lands that were once farmed conventionally. Nathan Aaberg, the director of development and community relations for the LPC and a Prairie Crossing resident, summarized well the “seamless web” to which Vicky referred. “A land ethic has to permeate everything that we do in terms of how we relate to nature. The most fundamental way we relate to the earth is through agriculture . . . and the dominant modes of producing are really deleterious.”

Nathan did not come to these views overnight. Like others, he described the process of discovery that was part of his experience of being at Prairie Crossing, which eventually informed his beliefs about why agriculture was so fundamental:

One of the things that has been revealed to me over time, is that it’s not just a natural world phenomena, it’s not just an environmental issue. It’s also a community issue. How you produce things, especially in the case of food, shapes the economy we live in; the economy shapes the families we have, the lives we live—it’s all wrapped together. How we farm, how we distribute the food, what kind of food we
have, affects our health care, our health care budget . . . Everything’s woven together.32

A community like Prairie Crossing reveals the synergies that can occur when a space is created to honor agriculture as a network of relationships rather than just a process of growing some foodstuff in a soil-like medium. “I think that we are coming back to the idea of the farmer as the real founding citizen for this country,” Vicky told me. “That hasn’t been around for years and years. But Matt and Peg [the farmers who run Sandhill Organics], for example, are people like that . . . What we have to work for is setting the seeds so that in terms of regulations and facilities that these new farmers really can live a good life . . . It’s our job here to try to set up the whole system right, so that farmers can not only provide something good for us but so that they can have good lives for themselves.”33

Whether a farm can operate sustainably while farmers make a good living depends on a broader cultural awareness and value for farming. Civic agriculture calls attention to setting “the whole system right” by underscoring that agriculture needs to be set within a broader engagement with place. Food is an entry point to understand and value these connections. Although it is certainly possible to reach this understanding as an adult (which is evident from Erin’s, Bill’s, and Nathan’s comments), creating a culture that collectively values, supports, and respects farming as critical to its survival is an intergenerational process. There are a number of ways in which Prairie Crossing has sought to encourage such learning, and many people with whom I spoke noted the success of exposing young people to farming through various educational partnerships.

One example is The Learning Farm, which includes extensive on-site collaboration with students from the Prairie Crossing Charter School as well as Montessori 7th-9th graders. The Montessori middle-schoolers run, according to Learning Farm manager Eric Carlberg, “every aspect” of a farmers’ market business dedicated to growing and selling microgreens. Eric Carlberg, who manages The Learning Farm program, described how he has witnessed initial reluctance on the part of many young people transform into deep involvement over the course of the program.34 The business aspect is one side of the Learning Farm, an educational experience in how to manage and adapt to customer demand, but more important to Eric were the possibilities for the cultivation of character. A bit of the latter was revealed, Eric pointed out, by the “mantra” the middle school students chose for their group: “when you cultivate the soil, you cultivate your soul.” By paying close attention to the weather, the soil, and the plants, students become invested in the process of farming and what it means in relation to themselves and the landscape.

Another notable way that young people from outside the Prairie Crossing community are mentored in farming is through the Prairie Farm Corps program. The PFC recruits kids who are interested in learning how to manage their own CSA business from the county’s public high schools. Eric told me that this program has engaged a diverse bunch of students, some with behavioral issues at their respective schools and many from low-income families. Young people who have been through the program are now returning as leaders and mentors in their own right, teaching their peers the techniques and lessons that they have learned. Eric now relies on these repeat PFC students to manage a great deal of the program on their own.

These programs highlight the way in which agriculture at Prairie Crossing is understood as a process of cultivating and nurturing people as well as soil. From a regional perspective, this may mean that Prairie Crossing becomes a metaphorical beehive, pollinating the landscape by “repopulating” (Linda’s term) the surrounding area with farmers trained in the incubator program and young people who have hands-on experience with local forms of farming. Vicky also saw an opportunity for Prairie Crossing to be a “food hub” amidst other emerging hubs, so “that the whole system could be built back up.”35

A sense of place and a sense of community—featured in Prairie Crossing’s guiding principles—will be critical if this agriculturally inspired vision is to be realized on the landscape. Sonny Sonnenschein, one of the first people to purchase a home at Prairie Crossing...
when “it was still a cornfield” in the early 1990s, told me that it was these principles that convinced her and her husband to move: “It was the idea that you get people out together working as caretakers—it’s the stewardship model—and it’s through their interaction with the land that they get to know each other.” In this respect, PC might not only “incubate” farms, it could provide a viable template as an incubator for similar farm-based communities, reminding “us that others have lived on this land before, and that others, to whom we have responsibility, will live here after us.”

ACADEMY FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

We don’t have the luxury of starting a new community, starting fresh, starting new. We have the luxury of starting a school new. . . . If we look at the infrastructure that’s already built in those cities and community there’s a lot of efficiencies there, and there’s a lot of sustainability there. It’s how do we implement these values, if you want to call them that, or systems, or way of life in a system that already exists. . . . How do we share that information, how do we implement what we are doing city-wide with something’s that’s already placed? And it starts with our school and our families, it goes out to the Chicago Public School system, and beyond, and beyond, and beyond. —Dan Schnitzer

The Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC) is a charter school in southwest Chicago that is set apart by its sustainability-based education philosophy. My initial interest in AGC sprang from what I had heard about their on-site gardens and their all-organic meal program for students. Once I began to speak with teachers, parents, and administrators I found out that—as impressive and forward-thinking as the focus on food is at AGC—its educational objectives and influence are much more comprehensive, impacting the students’ parents and the larger community.

Fronting a street with a steady stream of traffic, AGC is presently located in a former barrel factory in southwest Chicago, and it would be easy to zip by the school’s half-acre property if one was not watching for it. Take a few steps beyond the sliding chain-link fence that encloses the school’s small parking lot, however, and it becomes apparent that something unique is happening on this site. As one walks toward the school entrance, the din of familiar car noises gives way to the laughter and shouts of children. Beyond the modestly sized greenhouse, an outdoor play area, and a long row of raised-bed gardens, one might hear a more unexpected sound: the clucking of chickens.

The 61st Street Community Garden*

The loss of the 61st Street Community Garden was the loss of “a living thing on a lot of different levels,” long-time Experimental Station social activist Jamie Kalven informed me. The “living thing” to which Jamie was referring was a thriving constellation of human relationships enmeshed with a piece of land just to the north of the Experimental Station building, on the southeastern edge of the University of Chicago’s campus. When I first saw it, no trace of the community garden was left. Piles of dirt and construction equipment filled the space, lying dormant under a March sun.

Gardening in various forms has long been a part of the culture of Experimental Station. In the late 1990s, the 61st Street Community Garden was established on a vacant parcel of university property through a special agreement that allowed the gardeners temporary use of the site. Over a decade later, the garden had developed into a 130-household enterprise that was an “extraordinary, unique, precious community institution” with a “collective elegance.”

When the university informed the community garden’s plot-holders about its plans to use the space as a temporary staging area for construction of a new campus building, many people found it difficult to comprehend the loss. In talks with administrative and facilities officials, Jamie struggled to find a language that would communicate the importance of the garden to those who did not see why the garden could not be relocated. “That site was so cultivated from square inch to square inch in terms of the quality of attention, care, sustained engagement of these little plots,” Jamie observed, “and I
Tucked in a nook next to the building, the chicken coop is a student favorite, and like the rest of the environment at AGC, the students are encouraged to interact, care for, and learn from those things that constitute their larger “classroom.” The chickens, like the gardens and greenhouse, are educational opportunities set within the larger sustainability-based curriculum.

One of AGC’s goals is to use the garden to help students “become better stewards of the earth.” When I asked Dan Schnitzer, the AGC’s Director of Sustainability and Operations, what this meant, he told me three things stand out to him about how students learn to be earth stewards. First, he said, stewardship is simply developing appreciation, and even awe, for one’s surroundings. “It can’t be fear that motivates. That’s what we teach our kids. ...You have to teach them to love and respect first.” Dan believes that working with the natural curiosity of the students inspires much of the learning that takes place at AGC; as he put it, “Don’t do less bad; do good!” In the garden, for example, students take an active role, learning how to plant, what to plant, when to plant it, and how to divide up tasks. Gardening thus becomes a teaching tool for science lessons, for understanding cultural connections to specific foods, and for discussing health issues, but there are also the simple joys that derive from watching things grow that students themselves have planted. One parent laughed when she told me that she and her son “have to leave through the back door every day because he has to see the garden” so he can check on the plants.

The second stewardship principle reinforces the “citizenship” portion of the Academy’s name. Dan emphasized that the students are encouraged to take ownership of their actions and environment. This often is phrased as “being principled,” meaning that students are encouraged to be conscious and respectful of others, ideally without having to be reminded by parents or teachers. The garden is a hands-on medium to begin to learn such lessons. As sustainability and wellness teacher Joe Phillips noted, the AGC resists “feeding [the students] information in a passive way”; gardening has been a way that they “take ownership of the physical surroundings.” This is particularly valuable in an urban context, where nature may be perceived as something distant and unrelated to everyday life. One student’s mother was impressed by how “the school uses every last inch,” which affirmed to her “that no matter how small your space, you can grow something.”

In a “racialized setting” like Chicago, Jamie told me, in which public space may be viewed with suspicion or associated with criminal activity, “A really important part of the farming, market, gardening initiatives, and energy has to do with the regeneration of public space where neighbors find each other, are visible to each other, share news, engage in conversation, [and] hang out.” As I have highlighted, the 61st Street Farmers’ Market offers such a civic context. The community garden offered similar opportunities for public engagement. Unlike a farmers’ market, however, the garden was a continuously visible part of the neighborhood’s geography, and perhaps the sweat-dependent cultivation of food and beauty created a more intimate form of embedded relationality, impossible to duplicate.

Jamie shared the following reflections with me about what made the garden unique: “The garden was in a somewhat marginal location, you could be very alone there. It was a big space, not a lot of traffic. And a number of women told me . . . that they just felt safe in the garden, they felt deeply safe in the garden when they were alone, as the sun was going down, at odd times. The way that I interpreted that was the level and degree of cultivation, the quality of attention that had been given to the immediate environment around you felt like presence. It was a kind of presence. Even when people weren’t there, there was this protective presence of care and attention. I still don’t know what to make of it, but it strikes me as very suggestive of what contributes to our well-being and at-homeness in the world.”

Some of the gardeners have been able to find other community gardens nearby (though none, of course, so close to Experimental Station). Abandoned lots in the area have also been recently reclaimed for gardening. Still, it is clear that something special was lost when the 61st Street Community Garden was bulldozed. “I think it’s fair to say that many of those relationships have atrophied in the absence of the garden,” Jamie said. “We simply aren’t mindful of the value of relationships that inhere in particular places. It’s a sense of community,
Lastly, Dan told me that stewardship includes learning about the symbiotic relationships between people and the earth. For example, classroom worm bins (a student favorite) give teachers the opportunity to talk about decomposition, the food web, and ecological cycles. Leftovers from the cafeteria go into these bins, eventually becoming compost that provides nutrified soil for the garden. This activity is not confined to the school; I spoke with two students who now have their own vermiculture projects at home, and Dan told me about a first-grader who asked for a worm composting bin for her birthday. Teachers take advantage of the school’s gardening programs to encourage critical thinking in other lessons, as well. Second-grade teacher Mayra Jiminez mentioned one unit she just completed with her students entitled “Creature Features.” Though the unit was primarily about animal classification, Mayra was pleasantly surprised to find that student knowledge about food issues resonated in their questions about animals (e.g., Why are some animals carnivores? Why do we keep pets when they should be living naturally in their own environment?). For Mayra, thinking critically about food is “the anchor for our school, but it trickles into everything.”

One reason for this is that careful planning and attention goes into the meals at AGC. Unlike standard cafeteria fare, the breakfasts and lunches at AGC are all organic and, when possible, locally sourced. Students are encouraged to be “risk-takers” in trying unfamiliar foods, and also abide by a “zero-plate” policy in which everything that is not eaten is composted. Another anomaly of AGC’s cafeteria in comparison to other Chicago public schools is that glassware and tableware are used instead of throwaway packaging and plastic forks and spoons. These efforts fit within the overall educational philosophy at AGC that affirms a respect for materials and their connection to larger materials cycles.

The parents with whom I spoke returned enthusiastically to the topic of school meals on several occasions, noting that it makes avoiding “junk food” at home much easier. According to one mother, even when her children were presented with several choices, they often opted for the healthier snack because of their experiences at school. Other parents mentioned the physiological and behavioral differences they noticed, which have encouraged them to try new recipes and to change their own eating habits. One parent, for example, referred to her second-grade son as a “food ambassador” to their family, noting that her husband has been able to lower his cholesterol from the 300s to 180 in a three-month period. Other parents mentioned how their cooking repertoires have expanded dramatically as their children have been introduced to new vegetables and meal possibilities.

Beyond healthy eating and educational opportunities to think about food, there are tangible ways in which AGC’s food policies are impacting the larger community and possibly even providing further opportunities for some farmers in Illinois to consider alternative practices. In terms of the school’s families, well-attended organic cooking classes are held during the week, with recipe selections that are often drawn from the school’s weekly menu. In addition, through a relationship with a local food distributor (Goodness Greenness), at least 25 of the school’s 170 families now also pick up organic produce boxes at the school. A few of the parents with whom I spoke noted how this has led to more socializing around food both within their families and without. In terms of the larger community, Chartwell’s—the food service provider for Chicago Public Schools—has responded to AGC by increasing its local food purchases ($1.8 to $2.3 million in the past year) and issuing a request to its contracted farmers to eliminate organo-phosphates in their food production, promising preference to those farmers who do so. AGC is currently working on a food policy manual with Chartwell’s through which AGC could become its own food vendor.
Reflecting on AGC’s food initiatives, one teacher noted that she has watched parents “mobilizing” around food issues. This comment provides a key insight about civic agriculture. Food may provide one of the most useful entry points into both personal and public relationships to the larger ecology of which one is a part. Awareness of where food comes from is one collateral impact of determining how to eat well, but cooking, recycling, composting, giving food away to neighbors, learning how to build home gardens, gathering for school “tastings,” and so on build bonds between students and parents that also radiate outward into the community. As Dan put it, though the school families are its “first community,” AGC’s goal is to work “from the center out” so that it becomes a vibrant hub for change in the larger community. So while AGC teachers try to instruct students through the world at hand, there is also a reciprocity with the world at large. Joe summarized this: “I think the name of the school helps myself and our students identify the mission, that they are citizens of a global society and their actions have a chain reaction in the rest of the world . . . [AGC] is not just a name, we really try to embody it.”

With plans to expand one grade per year until it educates through the eighth grade (currently, the oldest class level is fourth grade), AGC is in its infancy. There is much promise, however. Students are already providing input for the school’s menu. One second-grader, responding to requests following a school project, began teaching parents how to make recycled paper. Another started her own conservation group for endangered species. Compared to other schools, AGC is providing a different baseline of normality. As one teacher told me, environmental issues “will eventually become in-your-face issues that we’ll have to deal with,” and “these kids will already be thinking in those terms.”

Thinking through the question What does it mean to be a citizen? in terms of how we produce, eat, and distribute food means thinking about the health of our own immediate communities in relation to the larger landscape. The students at AGC are offered a rare space to consider these issues at a young age. The hope is that the critical thinking skills they are now learning will be reflected in the ways they shape their future communities. “I’ve never really been politically active, but I think this is a way to be politically active,” Joe told me,

To condition—in the best sense of the word—that this is a normal way to live. You can eat healthy food and lead a healthy life. It shouldn’t be that radical. In some ways it’s kind of weird that we’ve gotten to this point where AGC is farming has come a long way recently but for a while it was a real uphill battle. . . . We’re really just trying to get back in history to something that was sustainable.

The Academy for Global Citizenship is a promising educational model for civic agriculture, showing how the activities at a school can be integrated into an overarching vision of sustainability that radiates into the community as a whole. Although AGC only opened its doors in 2008, Dan’s assertion that “we’re creating agents of change in the community” is already apparent. In a school that, at present, is so small that it can be easily overlooked from the street, big ideas are finding a foothold.

**EXPERIMENTAL STATION**

Food is such a focal point of any culture and determines how that culture survives or doesn’t or sustains itself. If you have access to food, you’re going to be around. If there is no food, that community is gone, one way or the other. —D. Ryan

Thus far we have seen examples of civic agricultural practice from a farm-based suburban community and a charter school with a sustainability mission. The final group that I visited was Experimental Station, a community-based non-profit organization on the south side of Chicago. Like the other groups with which I interacted, the community building efforts of Experimental Station do not focus solely on food. For example, Experimental Station’s building is the home of a thriving bicycle repair shop, where neighborhood kids learn how to repair and maintain bicycles in exchange for credit-hours that can be applied toward purchasing their own bike parts and bikes. Experimental Station also serves as a unique community space for independent journalism, cooking
events, dramatic performances, topical forums, and musical artists.

This fertile mix of people and activities is not confined to the building. For many years, staff and those heavily involved in Experimental Station projects recognized that their neighborhood had a food problem. Experimental Station is located on the border that divides Hyde Park (an affluent neighborhood that is also home to the University of Chicago) and Woodlawn, a neighborhood in which fast-food restaurants far outnumber grocery stores. Indeed, Woodlawn ranks seventy-first out of seventy-seven Chicago community areas in distance residents must travel, on average, to the nearest supermarket. Corey Chatman, a staff member at Experimental Station, compared his experiences of trying to find fresh food in Woodlawn to searching for the Loch Ness monster. Further elaborating on the problems that residents face in terms of food access, Corey said, “Just to the north of us we have one of the top twenty schools in the nation. . . . Just to the south of us we have a major food desert in Woodlawn. We have vacant lots. If there’s any store there’s a liquor store on one corner, then there’s a currency exchange, and then there’s another liquor store.”

Experimental Station—in various incarnations—was a place recognized and valued by many in the community for decades. The director at the Station, Connie Spreen, observed that one of the things that makes the Station special is that people with various social and environmental interests “creates this pool of resources. Just like in nature, it becomes a little ecology that deepens and matures over time, where things interact, they support one another.” How could this “little ecology” respond to food quality and access problems in the neighborhood? Experimental Station did not have to start from scratch: in addition to the Woodlawn Buying Club for staple and bulk foods (started in 1998 and still operating), the Station had a strong group of community gardeners associated with it (the 61st Street Community Garden), and popular community events like the wood-fired oven bread baking fed into the early energy and planning behind the farmers’ market.

Connie was especially interested in Experimental Station’s potential role in starting a farmers’ market. As a child, she grew up on her family’s farms in Wisconsin. When she moved to Minneapolis and later Chicago, she discovered that gardening offered a context for weaving together her past and present, becoming a source of meaningful continuity in relation to landscape cycles and seasons. By providing a space where people could more directly connect to their food and those who grew it, perhaps a farmers’ market would serve a similar integrating function. As she told me, the social potential of a farmers’ market, particularly the idea of overcoming anonymity between residents of Hyde Park and Woodlawn, was critical in the planning process.

Dennis Ryan, who was hired as the market manager, stated what his own experiences have led him to believe, “I don’t think you can have a culture without food. One determines the other.” Dennis grew up in an Italian neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. He recalled memories from his childhood of local food peddlers, yelling in Italian, and how in his own extended family “not everybody got along but food brought us together.” He also witnessed his childhood neighborhood transition from “artisan” foods into a “food desert” as community-based vendors succumbed to the competition of large grocery stores. When later in life he became interested in the relationship between sustainability, cooking, and farming, he realized “something wasn’t being addressed in the foodie world,” which focused on high-end specialty foods and failed to focus on how food could be critical to a community’s health and identity.

The 61st Street Farmers’ Market, which opened in 2008, was meant to address those concerns. Nevertheless, Dennis noted, a farmers’ market is “not just like popping up a tent.” Each community has different needs that must be balanced properly if a market is to succeed. Experimental Station’s commitment to the Woodlawn community meant that they were also committed to making food affordable and increasing knowledge about the origins, benefits, and preparation of the foods sold at the Market.

To address the affordability challenge, from its opening day the 61st Street Farmers’ Market has accepted Link money (Illinois Link is a state-subsidized food assistance program), providing low-income patrons with access to the Market’s food. From 2008–2010,
the Market had a 1000 percent increase in Link-related purchases. In 2010, this translated to $10,000 worth of sales (not including an additional $7,000 through a value-matching program). “Food should not be a class thing but unfortunately because everything is so tied to the dollar it’s hard not to be,” Ryan observed. From his perspective, Link “levels the playing field,” which is reflected in the numbers of shoppers themselves, with patrons of the Market now evenly divided between Hyde Park and Woodlawn residents.

Because of the success with the Link program, Experimental Station has also been at the forefront of helping other farmers’ markets in Chicago and across Illinois effectively manage Link sales. Beginning with a pilot program that included five city-based farmers’ markets (the first time Chicago city markets ever accepted Link), staff from the Experimental Station facilitated the use of wireless EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) machines, simplifying the process for using Link benefits. During this trial period, Dennis said, these markets “broke every record in Illinois ever set for Link sales.” Experimental Station staff also played a large role in collaborating on the passage of the Farmers’ Market Technology Improvement Act, a piece of state legislation that set aside funds to pay for wireless EBT machines. Because of the program’s success, in 2011, the ability to use Link benefits expanded further to twenty farmers’ markets, including sites outside of Chicago. Dennis is hopeful that these efforts will make the 61st Street Farmers’ Market “less of an anomaly and more of the norm” because “it’s a large-impact, low-overhead solution that any politician can understand.”

Certainly economic statistics indicate the impact this program has already had. What these statistics do less well in quantifying is the effects this program has on food cultures and the ways in which people build relationships that otherwise would not have been built. According to Spreen, providing Link card users with access to farmers’ markets is a way of “trying to rebuild all of that. How do you make food something central to your life that is a source of pleasure, and a source of community, and a source of connectivity? . . . It’s not just about nutrition. There’s a danger there [in framing it only in those terms]. It’s how you connect on all those different levels with food as a central element.” One would be hard-pressed to come up with a better definition of civic agriculture than this.

The motto of the Market is “connect with your food,” and two things stand out about this in relation to civic agriculture. The first, a sense of seasonality, and the connection to larger biotic cycles of the region, is the most visible, for it involves the food products themselves. Like many farmers’ markets, the 61st Street Farmers’ Market places a priority on locally sourced food, attracting farmers who are from within the region and focus on sustainably grown food and its environmental impacts. The second is the way in which the Market facilitates a multi-generational knowledge of food, creating shared cultural connections based on food knowledge.

Such food knowledge is promoted at the Market, but it is also nurtured and reinforced through the various programs at Experimental Station. Cooking classes have long been a part of Experimental Station’s programs, and there are now weekly, seasonally themed classes for adults and youth (many of whom work in the bike shop), in which participants learn how to prepare healthy, sustainably grown food (like the produce that can be purchased in the farmers’ market that Experimental Station hosts during the year).

These cooking classes have been particularly meaningful for several of the young people who frequent Experimental Station. Many kids who are associated with the bike shop have also gravitated toward these classes. The classes also appeal to those who “don’t want to have their hands covered in bike grease” but for whom “olive oil is all right,” as bike shop manager Aaron Swanton put it. Between these classes and the farmers’ market, Swanton noted he could see how the kids were picking up ideas about conscientious eating. Connie affirmed this, stating that there are about twenty or so kids who are part of the “kitchen scene” and have “developed a group mentality around kale.” Kevin Applewhite,
who grew up working in the bike shop and now manages the bike share program at the University of Chicago, said that the Market, the small garden on the side of the bike shop, and the cooking classes have helped many kids understand that nature “is not just about how big the forest is, it can be inside your neighborhood.”

Food-based education is a big component of the regular Saturday farmers’ markets, too, with the “Market School” featuring people from the community who share their knowledge with others, from dietary considerations to how to use vermiculture to enhance a garden. Dennis pointed out that this has been a great way for neighbors to share with neighbors. One example is Phyllis, who suggested the idea of using samples of farmers’ products to show how to cook specific dishes, increasing both patrons’ knowledge of and interest in sometimes unfamiliar products. Much to the delight of the farmers, Phyllis now regularly conducts these demonstrations. The market also provides a space for exchanging information and resources that show how pursuing a career in sustainable agriculture or the culinary arts is possible. Finally, Dennis noted a woman who shops for her family of four on a budget of $10, showing how careful planning can stretch dollars that are used for some of the highest quality food available.

One can appreciate through these examples how the web of relationships at Experimental Station grows, weaving new patterns as lines of interest intersect with one another. People I spoke with often referred to the larger “ecology” of the Market, Blackstone Bicycle Works, and the many other Station projects. These relationships and the way in which they are strengthened, Connie observed, “leads to a rich civic life” connecting people to place and one another. As Dennis put it, “there’s no culture in a drive-thru” but “soil is a living thing. How you treat your soil is going to determine how your society grows or sustains itself. . . . Obviously from growing food, but also to how you use the land, how you use it to bring community together instead of pulling it apart.” Experimental Station owns no acreages, no vast swaths of land; nonetheless, it highlights that the practice of civic agriculture is as important in the city as it is in rural areas. Indeed, agriculture may be one of the most robust forms of sociality and collaboration between these landscapes. Stitching these geographies together through the 61st Street Farmers’ Market shows how soil can be valued even when it is not one’s own.

Drinking a cup of apple cider or coffee while browsing the organic greens, the bottles of locally made hot sauce and salsas, the vegan soul food, the Michigan cranberries, or the organic and pasture-raised beef, pork, and lamb roasts, a first-time shopper might be forgiven for just seeing a vibrant, attractive farmers’ market. But if one were to return to the market with regularity, if one were to spend some time around the coffee pot discussing vegetables, or sit with others at the chef demonstrations, or participate in the workshops, one would likely understand what the market planners intended from the beginning: a new public space has been created where food has become the medium for social interaction and, therefore, the space has become a place of memory and meaning. Experimental Station has thus become a catalyst for knitting together people with their local neighborhoods, people with the agricultural community, and people with one another. Like “good poetry” that “shakes you awake, makes you see the world differently, opens up vistas of perception that you hadn’t previously experienced, and provides pleasure,” the 61st Street Farmers’ Market, as Connie put it, aims “to help awaken you to the rhythms of nature of which we are part, to help you experience your connectedness to the health of the land, the local economy, and your neighbors, and to help you see that the most everyday experience—eating—can be the source of immense pleasure and beauty.”

CONSIDERING THE SPIRIT OF AGRICULTURE

Between the three groups that I have highlighted, the demographic differences (e.g., race, income, location, mobility) are significant. Prairie Crossing is an upper-middle-class suburban community; a majority of the students at the Academy for Global Citizenship are from Spanish-speaking families, and the neighborhood is likewise comprised primarily of working-class Mexican families; Experimental Station is located on the border between an affluent, predominantly white neighborhood (Hyde Park) and a predominantly low-income, African American neighborhood (Woodlawn). The needs and desires of these different communities are wide ranging; the problems they face are particular to their neighborhoods. And yet, in their own ways each of these groups recognizes the critical importance of food as a form of public engagement and discourse, a way to build stronger communities, both in terms of immediate and local provisioning and in relation to the regional agricultural systems that are necessarily connected to Chicago’s food needs.
These groups are also responding locally to what has been a nationwide phenomenon, the marginalization of agriculture—or perhaps the obfuscation is more accurate—in terms of our everyday interactions and knowledge of our food sources. The promise of civic agriculture—which is embodied in the network of relationships at Prairie Crossing, the Academy for Global Citizenship, and Experimental Station—is that it brings these systemic problems of disconnection within the realm of first-hand experience, providing a way to more directly perceive and engage in the well-being of one’s community. Stated differently, engaging in the collective work and pleasure of growing, distributing, and eating food can lead to the rediscovery of place and to becoming more deeply committed to that place.

This understanding of community provides an example of what sustainability scholar Ben Minteer described as a “third-way tradition” of environmentalism. In The Landscape of Reform, Minteer argued that a civic and pragmatic orientation has long-animated conservation in America, though it “has been obscured by contemporary efforts in environmentalism to divorce environmental values from human goods; to argue for the ‘intrinsic value’ of nature and assert its independence from other moral and political ends.” Rather than set human interests against the well-being of nature, “this pragmatic strain in environmental thought views humans as thoroughly embedded in natural systems.”

Retracing the prominent historical strands of this movement, Minteer offered a number of examples of how this “third way” tradition seeks to reconcile social and environmental values by encouraging democratic engagement and civic regeneration.

That humans are “thoroughly embedded in natural systems” is not just a philosophical point of reference; it is a truth with physical and psychological implications. According to DeLind, human beings “find ourselves enmeshed in a collective on-going story or conversation that has a particular history and physical design. It is a conversation that defines us (wherever and whoever we are), that carries meaning for our cells and for our lives. Food, of course, is the interlocutor.” The principles of civic agriculture can be shared across regions, but their particular manifestations—a regional dialect—will be shaped by an ongoing conversation with real places.

As a conversation with place, civic agriculture points beyond lifestyle choices, to the public need for communities to invest in the quality of their food. Thus, civic agriculture is not simply about better methods of farming, nor is it about greener consumption patterns; it is about discovering and working toward what DeLind referred to as “a sense of belonging to a place and an organic sense of citizenship.” Unlike an anemic understanding of citizenship-as-voting (or not voting), the practice of civic agriculture provides a means to a more grounded sense of what it means to live (and live well) in place—a way to realize and internalize how our bodies are embedded within the larger ecological and social commons. In some ways, civic agriculture is the communal process of making visible our connection to and dependence on the land.

A recurring theme among those with whom I spoke was the importance of making food production and community engagement visible. Prairie Crossing resident Nathan Aarberg said, “I think it’s really important to see people farming. It’s not somewhere out in Iowa—there’s a value in having farming visible to the community and not somewhere far away.” His neighbor, Erin Cummisford, concurred, “When there’s a farmer’s face associated with your food, it’s way more meaningful. . . . If you pick up something and it’s in a little bag, you have no connection to it. If you grew it, or you know someone who grew it, it’s almost a spiritual type of experience.” As the middle-schoolers at the Learning Farm affirmed, “when you cultivate the soil, you cultivate your soul.”

Because of its location and its commitment to sustainable agriculture, the community at Prairie Crossing is privileged to have farms within walking distance. In an urban context, such direct experiences of agricultural lands are often limited. Yet, as I noted, the Academy for Global Citizenship—in addition to connecting students and parents to farmers through the food they serve—educates its community on the ways in which small-scale farming is possible in the city. Likewise, at the Experimental Station, the 61st Street Farmers’ Market creates a public space that involves more than just the exchange of produce between sustainable farmers and savvy patrons. As Jamie Kalven said, urban agriculture is a social act in that it has the potential to create “a sort of feedback loop between action and perception.” The 61st Street Farmers’ Market makes relationships between farmers, land care, food, and local communities more visible. “If you show people a way to act,” Jamie asserted,
“even if it’s small and seems nominal [like fixing up a vacant lot] I think of that as opening up a little more space for perception. . . . The more that you’re able to act, the more you’re able to see; the more you’re able to see, the more you’re compelled to act.”

Jamie’s comment speaks to another theme that emerged among my respondents. In addition to making a community visible to itself, civic agriculture creates a public space for envisioning a different relationship between people and land. Sometimes this vision involves growing levels of personal and communal determination in food access. But it also includes thinking about how to work toward changing the dysfunctional system of conventional agriculture, as it is currently constituted. In the end, engaging in civic agriculture is a physical manifestation and affirmation of belonging to a place, and a groping toward how we may belong in an enduring way. By attending to what constitutes an enduring agriculture, we are also engaging in a journey of collective discovery about what it means to mutually dwell in place.

A question to consider is how effective neighborhood-based groups like Prairie Crossing, the Academy for Global Citizenship, and Experimental Station can be in creating a regional identity (and demand) for sustainable food practices. Each of these groups was described as a “hub” for innovative ideas and practices. And, rightly, each has responded to the needs of the community it serves, while modeling practices that others may emulate. Is it possible, or desirable, to “connect the dots” between these civic agriculture hubs, creating a collective regional network out of which a shared language and activism can challenge and change the dominant food culture? My hope is that lines of connection between places, some now faint, will become more visible. There are stirrings in the Chicago area, as promising as fresh green shoots emerging from rich soil after a late spring rain.

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Special thanks and appreciation are due to Robert Wengronowitz, who was an intern for the Center for Humans and Nature during the first year of this project. Bobby gave much of his time, insight, home-made bread, and wit to our research.

NOTES
1. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/er
gurnam), “As of mid-2011, there were 7,175 farmers’ markets operating throughout the U.S. This is a 17 percent increase from 2010.” For a point of comparison, in 1994 there were 1,775 markets nationwide. With 305 markets, Illinois currently ranks fourth among other states. For information and statistics about CSAs, see K.L. Adair, “Community Supported Agriculture,” ATTRA, National Sustainable Agriculture Service (2006), at https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=265. On the White House garden, see M. Burros, “Obama to Plant Vegetable Garden at the White House” New York Times, March 19, 2009, at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/20/dining/20garden.html. The White House blog also publishes periodic updates on garden activities at http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/20/Spring-Gardening/. In addition to the White House garden, Michelle Obama has been an active advocate for healthy foods and community-based gardening. A forthcoming book promises to elaborate on these efforts; M. Obama, American Grown: How the White House Kitchen Garden Inspires Families, Schools, and Communities (Crown, 2012).
6. For some of the most evocative writing on this topic, see W. Berry, The Unsettling of America, and W. Jackson, Consulting the Genius of Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010).
9. Bruce Jennings has argued for a similar rethinking of the city as the moral context for a civic bioethics. B. Jennings, “From the Urban to the Civic: The Moral Possibilities of the City,” Journal of Urban Health 78, no. 1 (2001): 88–102. See in particular his helpful discussion about the political history of the terms urb (city as a physical marketplace based on instrumental social individualism) and civitas (city as a common moral space for pursuing common commitments of human flourishing).

Civic Agriculture in Chicago

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