

# There's certainly a lot of hurting out there: navigating the trolley of progress down the supermarket aisle

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**Abstract** For the past decade, supermarket chains have been positioned as the pre-eminent actor in global and national food systems. Some agri-food scholars argue that their ever-expanding transnational supply chains have established an era of stable production-consumption relations (or Food Regime), while others point to the conflicts they are encountering with governments, social movements and 'alternative' consumers. However, remarkably little attention has been paid to their relationship with communities and to community system sustainability. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Goulburn Valley, Australia, we argue that supermarket operations are contributing to community tensions through contestation over valued symbols and narratives about what desirable 'progress' looks like. We identified three interrelated points of tension being intensified by supermarket chains: whether progress is encapsulated by being an agricultural production or a modern consumption centre; whether progress should be based on a model of corporate capital or the local small business; and to what extent modern citizens can and should support community shopping instead of convenience shopping. For long-time residents, supermarkets are paradoxical actors appealing to, as well as, challenging the narrative of a community whose economic strength was based on the surrounding natural environment and local people's endeavours. The concepts of solastalgia and

structural nostalgia are relevant, with the former referring to the place-based distress experienced by residents whose local area is changing profoundly and the latter describing a process amplifying that distress. Through exploring the political paradoxes of community solastalgia, we raise new questions about supermarket authority within contemporary Food Regimes.

**Keywords** Australian supermarkets · Rural communities · Solastalgia · Structural nostalgia · Food Regimes

## Introduction

Within Food Regimes theorising, supermarkets have been described as pivotal actors in the last quarter century due to the capacity of their supply chain and cultural economy activities for engineering consensus between governments, producers and consumers (Burch and Lawrence 2005; Dixon 2003; McMichael and Friedmann 2007). However that consensus appears to be falling away in Australia and elsewhere, as the 'Watchdogs and Ombudsmen' paper in this issue demonstrates and as the numerous accounts of the rise in alternative food exchange possibilities illustrate (Allen et al. 2003; Kirwan 2004; Guthman 2008; Dowler et al. 2009; Dixon 2011). Producer alienation is understandable given the many studies which describe the 'asymmetrical power' of supermarket supply chain activities (Harvey 2007; and see papers by Hattersley et al.; Davey and Richards, this issue). It is less clear why consumers should be resistant to supermarkets when they are widely perceived to be delivering qualities that consumers appreciate: convenience, low prices and choice (Humphery 1998; Dixon 2008). While 'the supermarket' has attracted

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the scholarly attention of a range of disciplines, there have been remarkably few studies of supermarket impacts on the lives of food consumers, local citizens and community dynamics more generally. Limited insight into supermarket-community relations has been gained through examinations of supermarket contracts and audit operations with producer communities, often in developing countries. Few studies however feature the supermarket as a central actor lying at the heart of community life in OECD countries.

The aim of this study was to understand the contribution of the supermarket institution to the dynamics of a regional agricultural community that is undergoing profound structural change. This paper reports on the links between supermarket legitimacy and community well-being, and describes the implications for stable food systems. Based in a formerly important agricultural producer region in south-eastern Australia, the ethnographic research describes the political dynamics at work when community members are in conflict regarding the contribution of the supermarket model to their present and future well-being. We found that supermarket narratives of progress rely upon the same community ideal of identity to which their critics often appeal: the inherent strength of a community that has grown up around a proud agri-food history based on a productive natural environment. Yet consumers and small business owners were aware of the rapid change in that environment and hence in their diminished status as a viable food producing region. Long term residents recognised the corporate manipulation of valued narratives, and younger residents felt the strain of holding to a particular set of values which was antithetical to the supermarket model while supporting that same model in their daily practices. In short, the supermarkets in the area were resented by the very people who shopped in them.

In understanding these issues, a consideration of “solastalgia” proves useful. The term was first introduced by an Australian environmental philosopher to an Ecohealth Conference in Montreal in 2003. It was coined to capture the emotional health of an Australian mining region. Albrecht defined the term as the physical and psychological “distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment” (Albrecht et al. 2007, p. 96). Elsewhere he has described it as an emplaced melancholia (Albrecht 2012). While the term has been applied usefully in discussions of public health, climate change policy, and psychological symptoms (Glackin 2012; Albrecht 2010; Pereira 2008), its discussion usually remains within the framework of emotional experience and does not explore the political dynamics emanating from community solastalgia.

In this article, we take an interest in the presence and responses to solastalgia, recognising that different actors attempt to wrest authority in defining the community’s past

to frame future possibilities. In doing so, we enhance our understanding of solastalgia with Herzfeld’s (2005) theory of “structural nostalgia”, which describes how oppositional actors appeal to a widely accepted idealised past in order to lend legitimacy to their pragmatic activity. Rather than establish new alternative icons or symbols of identity, actors may endeavour to manipulate the meaning or “permanence and thingness” of agreed upon, historical icons and narratives. In such a situation, the contradictions and paradoxes of everyday life can become even more apparent and painful, just as the ideal which is being referenced can mask the contradictions. In the region under study, the narrative which was being mobilised and re-defined concerned an idealised past as a community where social and economic strength was rooted in the rural environment and rural people. This symbolic attachment lies at the heart of the community’s identity, although citizens know that this aspect to the area’s strength is under enormous strain.

### Synthesising the literature on supermarkets, Food Regimes and communities

Food Regimes: supermarket efforts to underpin stable production-consumption relationships

As a preeminent anchor of food value chains and a modern social institution, the supermarket has attracted the attention of a wide range of disciplines and agri-food intellectual traditions, including Food Regime theorists (see Agriculture & Human Values Special Symposium on Food Regimes, 26 (4), 2009). At the heart of Food Regimes theorising is the notion of periods of political consensus about the governance of the food system, brought about by aligning the interests of governments, producers and consumers (Friedmann and McMichael 1989). Burch and Lawrence (2005, 2007; this issue) have been persistent in identifying the contours of a third period of food-based geo-political stability in the late twentieth century based on the activities of global corporations, including global supermarket chains. Alongside government endorsement of self-regulation processes, supermarkets have been afforded the status of de facto policymakers within the food system (Freidberg 2007). They have also been singularly successful in enculturating the modern shopper to appreciate the values of product choice and low cost, and in providing convenience practice attributes like free car parking, ready meals, and now ‘choice editing’ of product ranges. Through their cultural economy activities, they have been key exponents of re-embedding food economies and food cultures in local imaginations just as they dis-embed them through their global supply sourcing (Dixon 2008).

In an earlier AHVs symposium devoted to the Food Regimes approach (Campbell and Dixon 2009), contributors examined other actors and processes responsible for food system stasis and change. They acknowledged the presence of actor networks beyond the supply chain—environmental, nutrition, social justice—which contribute to the dynamism of, and turbulence within, the global food system by articulating food system visions which can be antagonistic to corporate power. What was missing from that symposium was the role of emplaced communities in consolidating and contesting a corporatized food system. In particular, there have been remarkably few studies of supermarket impacts on the dynamics of rural community life in OECD countries. Here we take up this challenge and note the re-embedding processes being used by Australian supermarkets in attempts to keep rural Australia on-side, not an easy task as global terms of trade deteriorate for Australian producers and as the supermarkets use their global supply chains to import more food. According to a Food Regimes perspective systemic conflict is typically managed through government regulatory action and a range of ideological cooption strategies often invoking discourses about progress (McMichael 2009). In this case study, the former is missing but the second is in evidence through the supermarkets' application of structural nostalgia. We also describe the re-embedding work emanating from community groups in their attempts to keep local food relations at the heart of rural Australia. We show how actors with different interests may mobilise the same nostalgic symbols and narratives, but try to achieve very different things by them; sometimes successfully shifting the ground of meaning on which a seemingly permanent symbol rests.

#### Supermarkets and community impacts: what little we know

Despite the (re-)ascendance of alternative food networks in recent years, supermarkets remain the pre-eminent food retailing format in post-industrial countries, and continue to make rapid inroads into regional and rural towns as well as cities. Supermarkets have myriad impacts on the communities from whence they source products, even if their stores are not physically present. There are numerous case studies of producer communities in Africa which supply UK supermarkets and of producer communities which participate in supermarket auspiced GlobalGap value chains (Hughes 2005; Mather and Kenny 2005; Smith and Lyons 2012). Those studies typically report that livelihoods and working conditions improve after signing supply contracts, but that supermarket decisions to demand new product lines and commodity varieties or to move to lower

cost production locales makes these communities economically vulnerable.

In terms of First World producers, Harvey (2007) notes that UK producers who dedicate themselves to supplying supermarket own-label goods can be under pressure to provide up to 1,000 new products a year. He describes how some products take only 3 weeks from conception to retailer shelf, requiring flexible and rapid co-innovation processes benefitting bigger producers and by extension their workforces who can adapt rapidly (Harvey 2007, pp. 64–66). However as with Third World supply chain participants, supermarket decisions to shift suppliers leaves even highly capitalised ventures, and the communities which host them, in a precarious situation (see Burch and Lawrence, this issue). In considering supermarket consumer well-being, there are a handful of the effects of supermarkets on local food environments and neighbourhoods, especially concerning the concept of 'food deserts' (Guy et al. 2004; Cummins and Macintyre 2006). Changes to an area's shopping outlet mix, and subsequent access to affordable and nutritious foods, has been related to population rates of obesity (White 2007).

However, studies of whole-of-community impacts are relatively unusual. In terms of recent explorations of the effects of supermarkets on communities located in OECD countries, two have reported on their economic and social impacts. Tescopoly (Simms 2007) provides an in-depth account of how Tesco in the UK repeatedly transforms opportunities for small food retailers and local enterprises in every locale it moves to. Their land acquisition and holding-for-development purposes ('land-banking') erect barriers to entry by competitor firms; and their open-all-hours business model undercuts consumer patronage of shorter-hours outlets. The character and amenity of entire suburbs and neighbourhoods can transform rapidly when shops move to within the confines of the supermarket building or precinct, altering the vitality of a shopping street or area which loses an independent food retailer, newsagent or bank outlet as their viability diminishes with a lack of passing customers. Social interaction possibilities consequently fall away.

Based on the experience of US communities which host stores belonging to the largest global retailer Wal-Mart, Fishman (2006) focuses on what has been identified as the 'Wal-Mart effect': namely the repercussions on local economies when a dominant player enters with a simple "always low prices" philosophy. Fishman referred to one economic analysis of local area impacts, which concluded that US counties have higher poverty rates if Wal-Mart is present (Fishman 2006, p. 164). He surmised that this outcome follows from the closure of small businesses which cannot compete with Wal-Mart stores and the low

operating margins endured by suppliers. Interviews with former suppliers also revealed how financially impoverished they became when they lost their supply contracts with Wal-Mart, having typically foregone other contracts in order to be able to meet the highly demanding and changing specifications of the giant retailer. In addition to Fishman's study, others have examined Wal-Mart's influence on changes to social capital in towns with the chain's stores. Their conclusions are either inconclusive (Carden et al. 2009) or indicate that they depress levels of social capital (Goetz and Rupasingha 2006). In an overview of sociological examinations of Wal-Mart, Gereffi and Christian (2009) refer to a number of descriptions of community mobilization against the corporation.

### The study design

The study was conducted in 2009 in Shepparton and surrounding district, the Australian setting for Hattersley and colleagues' stone fruit global value chain analysis (this issue). In this setting, supermarkets, and before them old general stores, have played important roles for more than a century: providing a major source of retail employment, a valued retail and social destination for consumers, and a source of food for small cafes, hotels and restaurants.

Given the community's long and economically important links to food through being a major food producing and food processing area, it could be classified as a 'food-engaged' community. One unique aspect was that many of the consumers who were interviewed had been small producers or had had family members employed in food processing or in food retail. This food engagement created a strong sense of local identity, one that was linked to the narrative of an environment made prosperous and productive through the activity of local people for close to 150 years. Their proud history of food production meant that this was a reflexive population (Johnston et al. 2009). There was a keen awareness of supermarket trade practices, including what people considered to be the unfair market monopoly and unprofitable terms of trade for farmers and processors. However such understandings did not necessarily translate into consumer practices which favoured community food outlets stocking more local produce, a paradox upon which local supermarkets were able to thrive.

What we report on here is the outcome of a short ethnographic study, based on participant observation conducted over 8 weeks. The data are the outputs from: key informant interviews with: half a dozen 'community leaders' including an ethnic council member, peak horticulture bodies, a Member of Parliament, two small business people and a fruit packing house manager; five former or present farmer/growers; organisers of three community produce

markets; managers of three of the major supermarket chains, plus two locally owned supermarket stores and a café proprietor; five consumer focus groups; interviews with five lots of young parents; and document analysis. Analysis of the 120 pages of transcripts revealed some variation within each subject position depending mainly on age, life stage (parents, retirees) and the nature of experience with supermarkets. Other data are drawn from living and shopping in the area over this time.

The research was designed to canvas the broadest range of perspectives in the time available. For background on the socio-economic well-being of the Shepparton region, we obtained government data for socio-economic indicators (Department of Primary Industries 2006; Department of Planning and Community Development 2008). We considered a study of social inclusion and social capital (Carrington and Marshall 2008), and obtained what environmental change data that we could, given repeated references to the 10 year drought (CSIRO 2008; BTRS 2003; Walker et al. 2009).

As Lobao and Stofferahn (2008) point out in their approach to examining the community impacts of industrialized farming, a case study design cannot control for specific developments in communities. For example, we could not 'control' for the enormous changes the area has experienced over 30 years as supermarkets have become more pervasive like the capital intensive nature of farming and the internationalisation of food processing. Nor could we isolate the contribution of more incremental social changes, including migration resettlement policies and the demographic trends of an aging population alongside an influx of young families who find Melbourne, the capital city, too expensive. We do not attempt a cause-and effect analysis, but an exploration of how a range of people within the food system perceive the influence of supermarket operations to the past, present and future social and economic development of their community.

### The context for a sense of solastalgia

The participant observation for this study took place in and around Shepparton, some 120 kilometres away from Melbourne, with a population of around 29,000 residents. 'Shepp', as it is known by the locals, is the 'capital' of the Goulburn Valley district, being the largest town and having a robust influx of 6,000 people in the 16 years prior to 2006: many of whom came from smaller surrounding towns. It provides major government services to the district population of 134,000 who reside over an area of 14,000 square kilometres, extending to the banks of the Murray River to the north and containing peri-urban settlements to the west. It is irrigation country, with agriculture being the

top industry followed by retail and manufacturing. Dairy and beef are the biggest agricultural sectors followed by pears, apples and tomatoes. Numbers employed in agriculture have declined steadily through dairy restructure, loss of orchards and greater capital intensity in all sectors. Until recently, food processing was the second most important employment activity based around the two longstanding canneries, SPC and Ardmona. When the canneries went through difficult times, the locals were encouraged to play their part by filling their shopping trolleys with cans.

The Shepparton district is considered to have a diverse economy: in 2003 the proportions employed across a range of sectors were relatively even: agriculture and mining (23 %), retail trade (20 %), health/education/government (18 %), private sectors (15 %) and manufacturing (13 %) although agriculture underpinned these last two sectors (BTRS 2003, p. 111). Figures for Greater Shepparton Council reveal that in 2011 manufacturing (16 %) outstrips agriculture (15 %) for full-time equivalent positions (Greater Shepparton Council 2012). What is happening in the town and surrounding area reflects the development trajectory in many developed country rural landscapes worldwide, and that is the remaking of the very essence of rural life: away from agriculture towards service sectors. In this context, “What frequently results are cultural, economic and environmental struggles between “locals” and the bearers of extra-local capital” (Sayre 2011, p. 437).

The Greater Shepparton area has been involved with the Australian government's humanitarian resettlement program for about 15 years. An analysis of the program reveals that it has worked well in this particular area for two reasons: a long history of migrants coming to work in agriculture and food processing and the presence of strong reserves of social capital (Carrington and Marshall 2008). An indication of the migrant presence is revealed by almost one in six of the district's population being first, second and third generation Italians. More recent arrivals have included humanitarian migrants from Iraq and several war-torn African nations. A significant Indigenous population continues to call the Shepparton area their home.

While all of south-east Australia is at higher than average risk from climate change, hotter days, less rain and higher evaporation are predicted to be significant for Shepparton and district especially on fruit industries which require cold nights to set the fruit buds (Department of Primary Industries 2006). In Shepp, it is common when on the street or in the living room to overhear discussions about water rights and the bastardry of the Victorian government as it builds a pipeline to take water from the Murray River to urban Melbourne. This particular community debate reflects the several studies that have been undertaken of the growing fragility of the area's environment (CSIRO 2008; BTRS 2003). Among them, a regional

resilience assessment showed that the area was subject to ten known or possible bio-physical, economic and social thresholds with the major thresholds in the bio-physical realm at tipping point or already exceeded (Walker et al. 2009). The study revealed that the area had declined markedly in biophysical terms since colonization, particularly in terms of losses to biodiversity and connectivity between natural systems and the riverine systems had been degraded. Since the 1960s, and in the living memory of our older participants, the environmental constraints on milk, vegetable and fruit production have been increasing markedly mainly because of the rising water table and associated salinity and water logging. These natural changes have been compounded by the steeply increased cost of buying water following the droughts of the 1990s and late 2000s. The authors found that farm income to debt ratios were closely linked to salinisation thresholds, and that the salinity threshold was at catastrophe fold state, making necessary the agricultural diversification strategies underway and for which they praised decision-makers.

### Exploring tensions regarding the supermarket's role in rural community well-being

Our data deal with conflicting values within the community and reveal the presence of solastalgia among longer term residents, and for this particular form of melancholia to be heightened by tensions about what the future for the area should be built upon. At the heart of alternative scenarios lie supermarket chains which exacerbate community tensions by invoking narratives that remain precious to many residents, and yet appear to be under threat due to supermarket operations.

Here we report on three interrelated tensions, and how different actors are invoking a narrative that builds on and plays with Shepparton people's views of its former glory.

Find a new job: the transition in identity from rural production to modern consumption

For some of our participants, the drought alongside the actions of international food processing companies (see paper by Hattersley et al. This issue) have fuelled the urgency to secure a future for the Shepparton area that is not solely rooted in primary production. Even so, this future was not necessarily based on large supermarket chains because supermarkets are frequently distinguished as flag-bearers for all that is wrong in the world.

When older producers considered the role of supermarkets in their communities, they invariably moved onto a discussion about forces over which supermarkets have no sway, like the drought. In their eyes, supermarkets are but

one in a long list of hardships they have to endure. Mario, who had been an orchard manager for 29 years, repeatedly intertwined deteriorating environmental conditions, commodity terms of trade and supermarket behaviour:

Now it is very hard to sell fruit for export, the boss has shut down the orchard after 55 years and 4 generations. .... The orchards are struggling for water, and water is scarce. I understand. But then they go and take the water to Melbourne. Yes, Melbourne needs water but they don't have it hard like it is here.... There are not many chances to sell fruit. At Melbourne [wholesale market] you will sell the fruit for a dollar a kilo and then IGA (a nationwide franchise chain of supermarkets) will sell it for \$5.99 a kilo; the supermarkets are the ones who are making money....

While Mario understood all too well the changed nature of environmental conditions and global markets, he encapsulated solastalgia for a particular idealised past of economic prosperity for both consumers and producers:

Now you pay—even for the water lying on your own property. Bread used to be 70c and now a loaf is \$3.50 or \$4.... There are lots of orchards breaking down and it breaks my heart, it's a loss of jobs and a loss of money for the people here.

Other farmers reiterated the pain they felt at the inability of local orchardists to meet the demands of supermarket supply lines. For example, Boris, a practicing orchardist explained that supermarkets:

want a regular, guaranteed supply line: but it's not possible because of the nature of growing fruit and vegetables. You can't guarantee the same amount every week. They put all the costs on the farmer, for example if they want to put their product on special they will pay the farmer less.

Small cheesemakers Tom and Betty viewed the government as culpable in allowing the major supermarkets to have so much power:

...[And] Coles and Safeway are appalling! First in their market monopoly, which is not their fault, it's our government allowing it to happen. Then they have these draconian laws that if you're not in the top 3 brands they won't stock your products. Then you have to pay for shelf space.

Rather than supermarkets creating jobs, these small business people viewed corporate retailers as job destroyers.

For community market organisers, governments are also at fault for not curbing the power of the supermarkets. Their complaints make sense given a history of successive

Australian governments establishing inquiries into the market power of supermarkets yet refusing to act to curb their supply chain power (Burch et al. This issue). At Girgarre we heard:

[Supermarkets have] screwed everybody and well and truly they have.

For older residents, it was not simply the loss of employment opportunities for small food producers and processors, but for retailers as well. At another community market, Ted told us:

In Shepp, 30-40 years ago when I first arrived, there were about 40 butchers in town. .... Now there is only a couple-.... It used to be that the supermarkets were able to sell meat until 5.30 pm- they couldn't sell the meat after then. When that changed it was a big destroyer for butchers ...It'll be 24 hours a day soon, it's all going that way ...Grocers too- the same thing: they all lost out.

In contrast, for the local town planners the future of Sheppaton's economic prosperity rested in its development as a commercial district and in diversifying the job market and the supermarkets were pivotal to their vision. Edward and Josie are two young professional urban planners working for the local government. Their jobs require them to consider planning applications from new businesses. Of all the people we interviewed they were the most enthusiastic about supermarkets, because they 'provide any number of jobs in the community'. Their positive views on the presence of supermarkets and food franchise outlets were linked to their views about the need for change and diversification in the industry sectors represented in the area:

The whole area is changing. There used to be a lot of smaller orchards and now they are getting larger ... I guess they are having to export their product because there isn't that same demand here from SPC. ... the food bowl is one third of our economic base and it is very important and we do see it continuing but its changing in the way it operates.

The words 'opportunity', 'innovation', 'development', 'change' were repeated often and went together. Josie explained where she thought the future for agri-food lies:

It's all about innovation ... I know a lot of the bigger players are looking at what the demand actually is and planning accordingly. They're talking about pomegranates, talking about a whole change in the way things are operating.

Not surprisingly, the major chain managers agree about their significance in creating business opportunities for others: the job multiplier effect. When asked to comment

that some people criticise supermarkets for destroying independent grocers and local butchers, the response from the chain managers supported the logic of the planners:

... [well] this isn't a ghost town.... We've all got a part to play and if stores close they were probably going bad anyway. There is a coffee shop here in Shepparton that sells our mudcake, they come in, buy a cake and then sell it in the shop by the slice.

In invoking the phrase "we've all got a part to play", the manager reinstates the area's view of itself as being built on community cooperation. The supermarket is assuming a moral legitimacy by taking on the important and iconic role of providing the food materials upon which local businesses and social life can thrive.

The presence of four large supermarket chains—some located across multiple town sites—along with major hospital, schools and government administrative offices were seen by the local government council to have consolidated Shepp's place as the regional capital and premier service centre for the Goulburn Valley region. Along with an influx of fast food, fashion and other franchise stores, Shepp is now a shopping destination for the district with the employment figures testifying to the growth in retail employment. Throughout this transition from agri-food producing region to consumption mecca, the state has been relatively absent. The local government council is present to facilitate supermarket entry and expansion but successive national governments have not acted to regulate inequitable supply chains (see Burch et al., this issue). This hands-off approach accords with the structural ideal of rural progress being synonymous with economic prosperity unfettered by governments, as reflected in Australia having long had one of the lowest farmer subsidy and assistance regimes in the OECD.

Attract new capital: the transition from small owner operators to corporate capital

Supermarkets were welcome not only for their finance capital injections but also because of their cultural capital. A supermarket chain's decision to enter an area was seen as a coup by the urban planners and as offering modern shopping options for consumers, signalling a bright future. According to planner Josie:

Mooroopna [5 kilometres away] is an interesting example ... we've got two supermarkets going in, so that really helps to grow confidence.

In contrast to this emphasis on 'bigger players', the three small business people we interviewed blamed supermarkets for killing off the small owner-operator business, 'the little

man'. This amounted to more than eliminating jobs. These, who had been in small business for over 30 years, provided a description shared by others of a former social era built on small business:

I know when I was younger there were green grocer shops and butcher shops up Wyndham St. and with the more supermarkets that have come, what we used to call the "little man" – they're no longer around because of price pressure ... and I think that's sad. She reasoned that People went to supermarkets because of the price rather than the small man, naturally they had to pay higher prices. .... The supermarket buys for hundreds of stores while the small man buys for only one. They lose their livelihoods...

Replace the reference to Wyndham Street with Lincoln street, USA, and you have a quote that could have been lifted directly out of the Wal-Mart Effect. It reflects a particular logic where there is no room for progress built on small entities.

It was not simply economic progress that people were concerned about, it was the refashioning of a culture of caring. Like Mario above, we regularly heard that supermarkets did not care. Terry, a café proprietor who had been in business for 11 years, forcefully encapsulated the sense that supermarket corporate economic culture was an unfeeling culture:

Supermarket shopping is supporting a corporate giant that doesn't give a rat's arse about the local. ...Life was simpler 20 years ago. Now we are bombarded with magazines, adds, junk mail, radio, TV. There is a huge information overload and so the corporations win because they make things simple and easy.

The managers we spoke to from the major chains would have been genuinely upset by the casting of supermarkets as not caring about the community. They all stressed the importance of providing financial support to community services in a way that idealised the rural community:

At the local schools we support a land care scholarship, we give both money and time for the kids, so we are actually doing something. You wouldn't get that in a metropolitan environment – in urban areas the donations are more about spin, you don't get real interaction and engagement.

Nevertheless for the bigger chains, community engagement also involved winning over future customers. Programs that included the local schools were understood to be:

priceless from a marketing point of view... you are in contact with [young] families who haven't yet chosen where they will be regular shoppers.

The managers were also emphatic about their role in strengthening the community through providing quality food for the family. They invoked a common refrain that Shepp has always been, and continues to be, a place to source healthy and quality Australian food for the family. Even consumers critical of supermarkets recognize this attribute. However, this trope does not engage with the more subtle nuances of how Australians cling to a notion that Australian food is food produced by proud Australian companies, rather than food produced and sold by firms that market themselves as Australian. Although possibly this popular sentiment is becoming more acceptable to the supermarkets because we were told about the inclusion of 'local food' procurement in the business plans of the major chains. At the entrance to one store there were a couple of bins of fruit prominently advertised as 'local', and in another store the manager described how the:

business is entwined with the customers through getting local product in the store. For example, kiwi fruit and salad from Echuca. He saw this goal as important symbolically and economically. We've had articles published in the local paper for our concern for local farmers. And we get a positive feeling from the growers. It makes a difference to a guy if we can go to the guy and they can miss the middleman.

However, he was concerned about consistency of supply and suggested that local food had a place only if it could be provided by large firms:

customers want local produce but everything local is supported by agribusiness. If you're not in agribusiness, you're just not there.

While this manager was incorporating locally sourced food into his store he was also revealing his preference for local food from large corporate suppliers, even though the main local firms had now been taken over by transnational corporations. As supermarkets see themselves as underpinning a particular approach to economic progress, part local and part global, community firms and social networks are not necessarily flourishing. This perception fosters a cynicism among some citizens regarding the efforts of supermarkets to represent community ideals and it also contributes to community conflict regarding the area's future. The scenario favoured by the Council planners and supermarket managers is one of 'big P. Progress' underpinned by highly recognised firms, including supermarkets, with small firms finding their niche by supplying what the corporations do not. For others—especially small shopkeepers and orchardists—this scenario is unlikely to address the 'hurt' in the area brought about by the drought or the demise of the 'little man' due to corporate takeovers

and corporate supply chains. The Big P progress scenario fails because it is not diverse enough or caring enough.

#### Support community shopping or convenience shopping

Although Shepparton households rely on the supermarket retail format, many are highly critical of what the large chains have to offer in terms of food product quality, service and a positive shopping experience. Criticism was more muted from those who access supermarket stores with a long local history, like Fairley's described below, and more pronounced among those who were the most food-engaged (either operating out of community markets or having been employed in food production and processing).

Despite their reservations towards supermarkets for their economic and social impacts, many residents—young and old—agreed that they shop at large supermarkets because it's quick and easy. One older resident explained that:

a lot of my friends will shop only where they can put the car right outside the door of the building.

Two young parents summarised the importance of outlet access to all of the parents we interviewed:

The big supermarkets are the best place to shop, because the car-parking is the key thing. If all the smaller shops were together then we could shop there.

Having made this point, a host of downsides emerged regarding supermarket shopping although they were varied by life stage. A lack of trust was palpable among the older residents, as were their descriptions of the supermarkets' contribution to the erosion of social interaction and hence community bonds. When asked about the shopper docket scheme for discount petrol and discount grocery bills, older shoppers believed it works to attract customers. However, they were also suspicious as to whether the supermarkets were passing on real discounts, and whether they were confusing and misleading shoppers by regularly changing and raising prices on groceries. One put it this way:

Can you trust supermarkets?— They are frustrating. The things that you buy on a regular basis —every week - you go in and the prices have changed.... And the plastic bag thing - they are going to charge us and I reckon they are doing it anyway - they are just putting it into the price of the products and they've been doing it for years.

In response to a question regarding whether big shops alter community lifestyle, Paolo and Eddie, an Italian and Anglo-Australian member of a service club, invoked a time

when social interaction was flourishing in comparison to the current time. Frank said: ...

there is no more friendship between the people. Nobody knows each other. You become isolated.

Eddie continued:

I've noticed that that's the most obvious thing. Being semi retired, I can stop pretty much whenever I like, but others have no real rest time.

When we explored the feeling and atmosphere at the supermarket, the following conversation continued a theme of being lost in a society, which does not care about attention to detail or people and their problems. Paolo said:

The feeling inside the supermarket, you feel cold. If you have something wrong or have a problem.

Mary, Paolo's wife, went on:

You can't find anybody.

Then Paolo lamented:

To who will you complain? The supermarket doesn't care if it loses one customer. He thinks, I have 100 customers and someone from another supermarket will come here because he had the same problem at another supermarket. You understand? Nothing. ... You don't know who is the owner, who is responsible, who cares about the customers. The supermarket doesn't care one cent about it.

For many older residents of the area, supermarkets represented not only a loss of valued businesses but social relationships and civility. Thus it is not surprising that older residents appear to be the main organisers of the community produce markets.

Such concerns were not however present among younger consumers, although they felt that supermarket shopping amounted to turning their backs on the community. In this way and in other respects, supermarkets were a moral economy hazard. The five young parent groups we interviewed shared a set of conflicted feelings about a lack of coherence between their food provisioning practices and their more general aspirations. For them, life without supermarket shopping would be unworkable even though a common refrain was that in an ideal world supermarket shopping would not be necessary. A visit to the supermarket represented a weekly battle to balance paying bills and finding time with ideals of a healthy, comfortable family life. Supermarkets made their lives easier but the parents viewed them as being socially irresponsible.

Rosemary and Trevor are parents of a four and half year old son (at day care) and a 9 year old daughter. They were both born and raised in the area, and Trevor grew up on a

dairy farm. They moved away and then got married, returning 14 years ago. Like so many we spoke to, both did fruit picking as young adults, and as a teenager Rosemary worked as a 'check out chick' at a Safeway supermarket. Trevor also worked for a season at the cannery, again a common job for young adults in the area. When reflecting on food quality, Rosemary and Trevor were clear that they prefer the speciality shops over supermarkets:

the butcher and certainly the fruit is better at the smaller shops.

All of the parents agreed that they would prefer to go to the green grocer and independent butcher over the supermarket. In part this decision was about the fresh quality of the produce, but in part it was about supporting local businesses where they knew the owners. However this mark of distinction did not translate into particular shopping habits. There was a conflict over how to orient one's moral activity: towards the family through saving time and money, or towards the community through frequenting locally owned shops:

But we shop for convenience, we are always pressed for time.

The other matter on which there was considerable consensus among parents concerned the way supermarket shopping compromised family health through their store formats and product placement. Trevor explained:

when you're at the supermarket [our son] looks around and asks you to buy things. You need to try to avoid certain aisles. But at the checkout you can't avoid the sweets.

Another mother explained the supermarket's advertising of unhealthy food in terms of showing a lack of social responsibility:

I understand that, yes it's a business and they have got to make profit margins, but a social conscience, I still think is necessary.

Even so, this mother took her son to a shopping mall which housed one of the major supermarket chains because she could give him a social outing as well as getting the shopping done.

Shoppers who were keen to support 'the little man' and the local business experienced a sense of ethical malpractice by patronising or relying on the major supermarkets for their shopping needs. As others have pointed out, the concept of the individual as the locus of ethical consideration and conduct not only works against a collective notion of responsibility (Popke 2006) but is itself undermined by the nature of today's global food system, which supermarkets have played a significant role in constructing. Long-time Shepp residents recognised supermarket

shopping to be accepting a giant shopping, and community, compromise. Even for younger residents, the frustrations with the supermarket unsettle their personal moral identity and undermine the solastalgic ideal about a flourishing, rural community based on supporting the 'little man'. These long-time rural consumers appear to recognise supermarket attempts to present themselves in line with nostalgic narratives, but as people suffering solastalgia they can be acutely aware of the lack of substance to this corporate positioning.

There was however one group for whom solastalgia was absent and for whom structural nostalgia was neither apparent nor disturbing. In contrast to a sense of loss related to the displacement of small and familiar shops by large anonymous supermarkets among the older and long term Shepp residents, four of the 'New Australian' migrants who met as part of an Ethnic Council focus group were grateful for supermarkets. The retail outlet type was not a big issue except for meat, which for the Arabic people had to be halal; and for this reason they were pleased by the opening of two halal butchers in the town. When discussing food provisioning, a couple mentioned the enjoyment of their home grown produce or produce gifted by the community. Generally they agreed that they could get what they wanted from any of the major supermarket chains augmented by fruit and vegetable shops and the specialist Lebanese shop. Ishtar from Syria said:

all the families go to the supermarket every day, all the families have to use the supermarkets, we have to get many products from the supermarkets, the grocery shops are not enough.

Their issues were not lack of time for food provisioning, but being able to afford to have enough home-cooked food each day in case visitors dropped by. Their sources of sadness were related to not being able to find their ethnic foods at all; or when they could, that they tasted different from back at home. Their sense of nostalgia took the more conventional longing for a distant homeland and went thus:

when I go to Iraq I feel and taste like the taste is different. The meat is different, the fish and the chicken is different. The food here does not taste the same.

Christian born in the Democratic Republic of Congo said:

for us it is bananas! When we eat the bananas here it is not the same, sometimes I find a good bananas here but it is not every day.

For Sabeen from Syria:

Taste is more important in my family than price or convenience. Taste should be first because if it doesn't taste good, we would never eat it.

Further unlike the retirees, they did not depend on social contact taking place around shopping trips, because this centred on shared meals in their homes. In this way, supermarkets aided and abetted ethnic community building and whether supermarkets invoked Australian rural community nostalgic reference points was irrelevant.

### **Negotiating community identity through responding to solastalgia**

Not only did Albrecht and colleagues describe the emotional distress that can be caused through local environmental change, he also noted that solastalgia can catalyse practices to remedy the distress. Here we report on community member efforts to respond to their sense of moral hazard: in part a nostalgic return to supporting the family-owned retailer and in part by creating new food exchange alternatives where community bonds can be consolidated and extended.

#### **Supporting the family-owned retailer**

In Australia, academic and popular discussion regarding supermarkets is dominated by the supermarket duopoly of Woolworths and Coles. Shoppers will contrast these chains with the IGA chain (Independent Grocers Australia), the latter being considered small, local and family run by comparison. Rarely do people acknowledge that Australia's 1,000 IGA outlets are part of a global consortium of 4,000 stores all of which are supplied by the giant South African wholesaler Metcash. What is different about IGA is that it is a chain of 'voluntary' firms, and indeed is the world's largest such network generating sales of more than 20 billion in Euro dollars.

Shepp's most popular supermarket in terms of on-the-street sentiment is a part of the IGA network, but because Fairley's has been in existence for around 100 years the networked and global nature of its operation is often overlooked. Vince, the manager and a top IGA manager award winner for Victoria, described with great pride Fairley's origins, business strategies to stay abreast of the times and the store's evolving relationship with the community.

In the early stages the store originated in the centre of the CBD and was a variety store: a lot of furniture, clothing, crockery, that sort of thing...it had a small section for groceries ... going back some 35-40 years ago ... and it has grown dramatically since. ...it's well known within the community, from its humble beginnings in the variety store, it catered to a lot of local farmers, offering accounts, credit, which a lot of

stores didn't offer back then and because of that it was able to get a following ...

Today the supermarket employs about 250 people across shifts seven days a week, 7.30–10 pm at night. Vince estimated that 60 % are full and part time with the remainder being casual.

Vince had an acute sense of the turning point for the town, which he attributed in large part to government retail policy. For example, he described the negative impact on small business of deregulated trading hours urged on by the Victorian government in the 1980s:

A lot of milkbars have had to close, and the ones that are still open aren't as profitable as they used to be and are run by families and are working long hours, seven days a week for little return. The smaller supermarkets - a lot of them closed and the ones that are still in operation have had to sharpen their pencils and minimise their profit margins to stay in business. And we, like them, have had to diversify a lot.

One point of diversification has been to open a café in the supermarket, indicating the continuation of the social significance of shopping. It was not a mere economic 'add-on' but a place where older women were known to bring their own tea-bags and ask for a free cup of hot water.

While Vince expressed stoicism and even some satisfaction at the "continuous need to review our business structure", he was mindful that the same forces were exacting a high penalty in other parts of the community:

There's certainly a lot of hurting out there, especially in the farming community. We've been in drought now for 12 years and most of them have had to endure that length of time without a really good crop or sell the livestock to bring the income they were used to having so they've had to change their ways of doing things. We've actually got a couple of the farmers employed here who can't sustain their livelihood on the farms, so they're working their farms and they're also working here in some capacity to earn some extra money. Yes, it's certainly tough times out there and I think the economic pressures have created a lot of problems, not only for farmers but for the general community. ...

Despite its national and global agri-food links, Fairley's was widely popular in large part because it embodied at least two important aspects of the local narrative: economic prosperity through local endeavour and a place to renew old-style community bonds. The very honesty of its owners and the manager about the hurt in the community because of environmental and economic changes would also have been appreciated. The owner-operators were mindful of the

presence of solastalgia while playing their own part in a wider process of structural nostalgia to provide their business and the community with vitality and hope for better times ahead.

#### Establishing community food markets

People who were involved in food markets generally shared the sense of loss of the 'good old days' expressed by the senior citizen focus groups, perhaps in part because they too were older. Some were acutely aware that supermarkets gradually displaced small shopkeepers when the latter could not compete with their wages bills as shopping hours were extended. Because the retirees had more time for shopping and community engagement than the young parents, they often supported farmer market formation and shopped there regularly.

Solace-seeking behaviour, as well as attempts to negotiate a local nostalgic but forward-looking identity, was readily apparent at the region's community markets; and here we provide stories from one that operated in a small town, Gargarre, 90 min drive from Shepp and one only 15 min away. While their origins were different, their focus on community building through selling food from far and wide was shared. As one horticultural industry representative noted, these are not real farmers markets because the grower/producers do not have to be present to sell the produce and as we see below even supermarket-purchased produce has a place. All the organisers and shoppers we spoke to were 50 years plus.

Home to the now closed Heinz tomato factory, Gargarre, with a population of 187, established its community produce market 4 years ago. Solastalgia was clearly the springboard:

This community had gone through six or seven years of terrible drought. A lot of people had been taken out. Ten years before that this community was the most affluent little place that you could imagine. This farm here milked 600 cows. We've retired now but back then ... three milk trucks used to go up and down this road. Now only one truck, if you're lucky. It has been devastating...

They stressed that if they sold only 'local' produce there would not be enough variety to attract return attendances, so:

we lifted our ban that to sell at the market you had to be from Victoria. You can bring in regional produce; and as far as I'm concerned regional produce starts at Hobart and ends at Cooktown. We promote Australian made produce...about 90 percent of it is Goulburn Valley.

They were not perpetrators of local fetishisation, but of small town communitarianism (Dixon 2011). The organisers were extremely proud of the fact that:

Our market is different to a farmers market, ours is a community event... When we started, five people said they'd help. ... [Now] we have three to four thousand people through. We have 50 people helping us.

Instead of farmers getting any profit:

we make a profit but it comes back to the community.... There's money going towards netball courts. ... About \$200 000 has gone into [the old council hall] renovation. All these things happened because the community was united.

Here there are threads of rural self-sufficiency, independence and freedom in a context of absent government: there are few rural assistance schemes except to farmers in times of drought, markets like the two above benefit from lack of regulations regarding what markets can promote in terms of 'local' food, and local people are acutely aware of inadequately supported public facilities.

Meanwhile at a small Sunday market close to Shepparton, the sentiments about the role of markets in community life were similarly positive, especially when the participants were reflecting on the many negative social changes they perceive perpetrated by supermarkets. Sounding like a public relations exercise they began the discussion by saying:

There's a lot wrong in the world except at the Sunday morning community market!... The market is like a church but not religious. It's where people come on a Sunday to meet their friends and neighbours...

This celebration of life as experienced at the market was effortlessly counter posed to the changes in food provisioning that they had observed over their lifetimes. While one person lamented:

The supermarkets are open till midnight now, aren't they?

Another complained:

Now they've deleted all the Aussie brands in the supermarket.

A third said:

Think about porridge: you just can't get the good creamy porridge, they just have those quick oats. Oats in little sachets!

Conversation then moved away from unwelcome, novel and modern foods to the simultaneous loss of certain expressions of domestic and community relationships:

People also don't eat together any more: that's another tradition that's gone; then another chimed in with, it used to be that everyone worked 8-5 and once weekends were free and all the shops were closed. No one had to work.

It would be a mistake however, to think of the Sunday Market as a site of resistance somehow separate to supermarket consumption. Having spent a lot of time criticising the supermarkets and extolling small shop keepers, one stall which sells sausage sandwiches admitted that they buy their sausages from the supermarket:

because they stay big and fat- they don't shrivel up: people want a big sausage in their bread. Not one like the butchers where they cook to a smaller size.

At the Gargarre market, they described the benefits to producers who first showcased their products at the market and subsequently became contracted by the supermarket chains, like the apple juice seller and the cheese producers who ventured into ice-cream. However despite being aware of the benefits of supermarkets for some niche producers, market organisers were loath to see anything positive about the former.

In her study of the painful adjustments being made by the tobacco growers of Kentucky, Wright (2005) observed that rural communities should turn to their long experience of cooperative organising in the face of the numerous transitions they have experienced over the twentieth century. She also noted that they need to listen to the contradictions pervading their narratives about what is possible. The Shepp and district market organisers are acting on the first piece of advice but not the second. Setting up community markets appears in this context to be a small but defiant gesture, protesting the social destruction that is being perpetrated by supermarkets. It is not a gesture that indicates a desire to get rid of supermarkets, nor to prevent people from shopping there. Their energies reflect an outcry against the social changes supermarkets represent, a community balm for the pain of an environment and society severely damaged. Almost daily this damage is manifest in conversations as people conflate their unhappy shopping experience with the latest news and gossip about terminated grower contracts, the closure of food processing plants, the weather forecast and government water buy-back proposals favouring urban centres.

## Discussion

In Shepparton—a highly food engaged community given that so many people have had long associations with orchards, dairies and the canneries—a social conversation

was underway regarding the community's changing relationship with the environment, national and international food systems and corporate capital. Despite the fact that this was not an area in decline—quite the reverse, it had a growing population and diversifying economy—community members readily talked about the 'hurt' present in the community. This hurt took the form of solastalgia, emanating from uncertainty as to whether the area's agri-food environment could continue to act as the foundation for the community's economic and social flourishing. Their desire for continuity appears constrained from a systems science perspective given deteriorating environmental conditions.

As residents drive past abandoned farms, it is unsurprising then that supermarkets provide a beacon of hope for sustained social and economic development in the area. However, for long-time residents (young and old), supermarkets are paradoxical actors both appealing to, as well as challenging, local symbols of economic prosperity based in the surrounding environment and strong community bonds. Within a process of structural nostalgia, supermarket managers and town planners are bolstering the earlier agri-food community identity through references to its proud food producing past as well as modernising it by inserting new consumption possibilities. In their assessment, supermarkets herald a modern era of service-based prosperity and a future based on a diverse social and economic base attractive to newcomers. And for newcomers, supermarkets are welcome purveyors of an extensive range of high food quality foods.

However, supermarkets have not altogether succeeded in selling the new rural consumption-oriented experience. People living in Australian producer-communities can be quick to blame supermarkets for the closure of local food processing plants and the loss of local fruit and vegetable farms due to the poor terms of trade offered to growers. They are inclined to ignore contributing factors for which the supermarkets are not responsible: hot and dry weather events, and the asset stripping of Australian owned processors by TNC food giants like Coca Cola and Heinz-Wattie.

The process of structural nostalgia was being used by a range of actors including supermarkets who were also attempting to present themselves as legitimate bearers of the community's relationship to the local environment, using historical symbols of social bonds, flourishing economic prosperity, and a food-based, if not producing, identity. For older residents and small business people who viewed supermarkets as facilitators of social distance, economic poverty and dislocation from farming life there is a nostalgia for food provisioning based on small owner-operators—both farmers and retailers—and familiar social interactions. While community members maybe powerless in terms of harsh weather conditions and erosion of water rights, the flight of food processing capital and the 'cold feeling' of supermarkets, they can set up community

markets whose role in food exchange is secondary to their community-building aspect. Community markets resonate with an earlier time when people went shopping for food, companionship and solidarity in the face of tough natural conditions.

## Conclusion

This study provides an unusual multi-actor analysis of the role of major supermarket chains in rural community well-being. While there have been numerous examinations of 'the alternative consumer' the focus here is on the supermarket shopper, although we find that supermarket shopping co-exists with support for alternative food outlets. Indeed a major finding relates to the paradoxical nature of supermarkets, which can be summarised thus. Supermarkets lubricate daily life through easy shopping for many, but they deny opportunities for incidental and valued social interaction. They make busy lives tolerable through providing a convenient retail format for parents who want to safeguard family health and well-being, but they provide other moral economy hazards in the form of unhealthy food and a food economy that does not benefit the community. Supermarkets provide opportunities for casual and part time work, but displace alternative retail outlets with attendant job losses. Lastly, they provide an area with a symbol of strength and open for business ethos, but old-time residents are aware that this symbol of corporate strength is also a symbol of exploitation because they see home brands which they know are sourced overseas compete with local brands.

That supermarkets adopt local icons and narratives of identity as their own is a use of structural nostalgia: for some, authenticating their local prominence, while for others, magnifying the solastalgic experience, or homesickness for previous environmental conditions. While supermarkets assert themselves as legitimate community actors by calling upon a local discourse of a socially and economically flourishing community based on a food economy, some people are able to see this as a rhetorical move and consequently experience the contradictions that are embedded within it. Perhaps for these reasons, some local people's experiences of supermarket supply chain dynamics are combining with other sources of hardship to act as a lightning rod of generalised discontent towards corporate models of social and economic development. In addition, the simultaneous enactment of structural nostalgia by actors who stand in opposition to the supermarkets has ramifications for community cohesion and conflict.

While supermarket community relations strategies appear insufficient in food producing communities to counteract the perception that they are eroding community

well-being by undermining the prospects for ‘the little man’, a role for government appears ambiguous. Typically structural nostalgia points to a utopian past, always just out of reach, and in this rural community the state was never really necessary as local people were strong moral characters, had powerful community bonds and were economically successful often through cooperative firms. Today in Shepparton, the supermarket’s dominance in economic, social and domestic lives continues the suggestion that the state is not necessary. Equally Shepparton people are characterised by a sharp political consciousness regarding a faltering national and local food economy linked to inadequate government regulation of unfair supply chains. In this Australian rural community at least, a struggle is underway about what future progress looks like with all protagonists keen to build on links to an agri-food past; but people are not necessarily persuaded by the benefits of supermarket dominance in the current Food Regime. As all manner of ills are being navigated up and down supermarket aisles, it is just possible that government regulatory oversight of supermarkets might soon acquire a modicum of virtue in this and other food producing communities around Australia.

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