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Reproducing Culture through Terroir: Following Raclette du Valais from the Alps to the Consumer

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Reproducing Culture through *Terroir*: Following *Raclette du Valais* from the Alps to the
Consumer

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Glossary

Affinage—a period of time for ripening or maturing different types of cheese and the act of facilitating ripening through the application of brine on the cheese's crust

Alpage—a term for the alpine fields where livestock graze during the summer months that is also used to refer to Alpine dairies

Appellation d'origine Protégée—Protected Designation of Origin

Consortages—organizations for the community-based management of labor and public goods, similar to a cooperative or consortium, that regulates the economic life of farmers, cheesemakers, and herdsman.

Cantons—Member states of the Swiss Confederation

Cave—cellars where cheeses are aged

Coagulation—the process induced by the addition of rennet (or in industrial case acid) by which curd forms as the milk is warmed

Coulée—casting or molding

Désalpe—when herds descend from the Alpine pastures

Homogenization—the process by which fat globules are made uniform in size and distribution

Inalpe—when herds ascend to Alpine pastures

Le prix—curd pressed together before it leaves the vat

Morges—liquid used to rub the cheese during a maturation period that consists of brine (salt and water) and bacterial cultures. Also used to refer to the communities of microorganisms that inhabit the cheese's crust.

Organisme Intercantonal de Certification (OIC)—intercantonal certification body

Pasteurization—the process of heating milk to a high temperature for a set length of time to kill potentially harmful bacteria or pathogens

Petz—the crust cut from around the edges of a premature wheel of cheese

Raclette du Valais—semi-hard scrapeable cow's cheese made from raw milk in the alpine environments of the canton of Valais

Rennet—an enzyme used to coagulate milk derived from the membrane lining the stomach of a calf

Savoir-faire—know-how

Starter—a bacterial culture that converts lactose into lactic acid, lowering the pH of the milk at the beginning of the cheesemaking process

Terroir—characteristics given to a food, in this case cheese, that are derived from the area it is produced (soil, climate, altitude, and biodiversity are all factors considered) and a traditional mode of production

Tomme—refers to a multitude of cheeses that are small rounds of semi-hard cheese produced from raw cow's milk in alpine environments

Tranche-caillé—an instrument used to cut curd

Transhumance—the seasonal guided migration of animals to higher alpine pastures

Whey—liquid portion of milk leftover after coagulation takes place

Introduction

I travelled to Florence, Italy in the fall of my junior year to learn about sustainable food systems and Italian food culture. Soon after I started the program at the International Studies Institute in Florence I met Etienne Gard who would become my “native” interlocutor, if you will, into a completely different food culture 350 miles north. My fieldwork took place in the Swiss canton of Valais, a region known for its cheeses made with raw Alpine milk. In the summer of 2018, from July 13th—August 10th, I commuted to and from Valais to spend time as a participant-observer with cheesemakers that craft *Raclette du Valais*, a raw cow’s milk cheese that is particularly lovely to eat melted. *Raclette du Valais* is a semi-hard, washed-rind cheese that is typically fashioned into 12 lb. wheels. Fabrication mostly takes place on the *alpage*, which simultaneously refers to the Alpine fields where livestock graze during the summer months and to the infrastructure (farm buildings/homestead) where the cheese is actually formed and aged. In January 2019, I returned to Valais to do a different form of fieldwork that was more interview-based. During a week, from January 14th—January 21st, I conducted interviews with local people in Valais that are involved with the AOP (Appellation d’origine Protégée) or OIC (Organisme Intercantonal de Certification) in some capacity.

Anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Clifford Geertz relied on what they called “native informants” as cultural insiders to receive “entré” into a complex world of cultural meanings, values, and symbols completely unbeknownst to them. Etienne was not only my “native” interlocutor in the canton of Valais but also my translator in the interactions that were crucial to this ethnography that took place in French. When I decided to be a participant-observer with cheesemakers that are known for their *Raclette*

du Valais I expected the people I came into contact with to speak English. Valais is one of 26 cantons in Switzerland, what might be thought of as states belonging to the Swiss Confederation. To do this ethnographic research, I was hosted in Etienne's childhood home in Geneva. Given that Geneva is a city known for its multiculturalism, and most everyone I came across spoke English, I naively assumed that, with the canton of Valais being a short commute, I would be exchanging with cheesemakers in English.

I quickly found out that was not the case. I ended up being able to engage with a grand total of two people in English in Valais, out of my twelve key interlocutors, some of which I spoke with in the context of a formal interview while others I could spend more time engaging in participant-observation or what Renato Rosaldo called 'deep hanging out.' Doing most of my interviews with Etienne translating created somewhat of a barrier in establishing a connection with some of my interlocutors and there was also some content that was "lost in translation." In the summer of 2018, Etienne and I made day trips to Valais in his family's Subaru (which was not as much of a mountain car as we had hoped) to meet with the cheesemakers I contacted in advance. Some contacts were provided by Etienne's friends and family, and others I found online in a convenient listing of *alpages* across the Valais.¹ I tried to do as much background research as possible before I visited each *alpage*.

On one occasion we stayed in the village of La Fouly for a few days with Etienne's family friend, and in the winter we were able to stay for a week in Etienne's family's mountain hut near Sion. Some of my interviews were scheduled in advance, and others were spontaneous, or resulted from the "snowball method." For example, in La

¹ "Lower Valais- Points of Sale - Authentic Valais - A Source of Pleasure," Authentic Valais, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.valais-terroir.ch/en/points-de-vente/types/valais/>.

Fouly, we met one cheesemaker in a local grocery store that our host immediately introduced to us and he invited us to visit him the next day in the morning. When we hiked up to *Alpage de la Peule* we were greeted with coffee and a pitcher of raw milk. Around nine in the morning, after we finished our coffee, he offered us an *aperétif*, a shot of Valaisan liquor, which I politely declined and would later find out was a customary offering at any hour of the day. One of my first lessons learned. Another day, when we were in Val de Bagnes to meet with Eddy Baillifard in his restaurant, “Raclette House,” we ended up staying overnight on *Alpage de Mille*, a dairy we had never heard of just up the mountain. Eddy, whose vocation is aptly described as “Raclette Ambassador,” told us how to get there and said we were in for a real treat: “Find Carmen with the small goat wonders,” he told us. Carmen’s aged goat cheeses were indeed wondrous.

In general, whether it was on an *alpage* or in a village dairy, the doors were most almost always open and people would come and go to say hello, buy cheese, yogurt, or butter, and interact with the animals that were around. We were not always the only ones peering into what was going on in the cheese room or the cheese aging caves. I would say it was generally a mix of tourists, often hiking through, and locals that we encountered. In some ways this arrangement was ideal because we could simply show up somewhere we found on the Internet and improvise. We would strike up a conversation with the residing cheesemaker about my project and the general response was incredibly welcoming.

However, the downside to this approach had to do with the fact that cheesemakers and other laborers on the *alpage* are usually working around the clock, and it was sometimes difficult for them to simultaneously answer my sometimes excruciatingly detailed questions. In fact, a basic limitation of my analysis is inherent in the nature of

work that takes place on the *alpage*, which is so physically demanding and constant that it does not afford much down-time, which would have been ideal in order to get to know my interlocutors more intimately. That being said, many of the cheesemakers I met during my time in Valais were eager to show me around for a few minutes and some of them let me shadow them throughout their workday--asking them questions as they worked. I didn't get to make any cheese, but I lent a hand with smaller (less skill-based) tasks. Others were more comfortable sitting down and taking the time to talk with me for an hour or two, often intermittently going back to the cheese room where they had a batch of cheese *en route* to the cave.

When I returned in January I was not able to meet with cheesemakers that work on the *alpage* because they are strictly summering dairies. The climatic conditions are too severe in the winter for dairies in the Alps to operate and the summering of livestock is part of a long tradition of transhumance agriculture that is still highly valued. Due to this seasonal constraint, I decided to expand the scope of my project to the valleys where I met with certification and marketing professionals that are involved in different capacities with managing and marketing *Raclette du Valais*. I primarily met with the representatives in the interprofession of the AOP, a cooperative association that monitors the production of the cheese and provides the appellation of origin, which is a quality label designating its origin in Valais and a "traditional" form of production. I also met with the former director of the OIC, a state-accredited body that certifies AOP products in French and Italian-speaking Switzerland. The OIC is an umbrella organization above the AOP tasked with assuring compliance with "tradition" through controls. The

appellation of origin distinguishes *Raclette du Valais* from other types of Raclette.² As a quality label, it promises the consumer that the cheese is made in the region following certain practices. Ultimately though, it stands in for the promised and consumable qualities of naturalness, origin, and authenticity. To understand the *Raclette du Valais* certification-and-control process and a consumer perspective on the cheese more deeply I also collected AOP promotional materials, local magazines, and took photos of advertisements to provide more ethnographic data for my analysis.

I've always known a little about cheese because I like to eat it. I have certainly been thinking about the meaning of food in my personal life and outside contexts since my adolescence. Growing up in a farm-to-table restaurant my mother and grandmother started was extremely formative in my worldview, or perhaps I should say my foodview. They taught me everything I know about what good food is and informed my tastes from an early age. To some extent, I could identify with a Swiss notion of taste because they are heavily influenced by origins, or what I find more evocative in French, *racines*: our roots. Taste is a complex idea that is highly situated due to practical physiology, and importantly, how it can shape-shift throughout history. It is vital to our survival, intensely cultural, and in my opinion, quite elusive. When I was a kid growing up in a rural part of West Virginia, we used to go foraging for ramps in the spring and we would always make a fire outside to roast them in cast iron skillet in the evening. The simple combination of sautéed ramps, olive oil, and salt will always taste like home to me, and it is somehow not replicable. One cannot eat them on a pizza in Brooklyn and experience what I experienced. Why do those moments in my childhood seem more authentic? Did the

² Reviron, Sophie, "Switzerland: Raclette Du Valais--Cheese--Claiming PDO," September 23, 2002. *Raclette du Valais* has around 15% of the relevant Swiss market. Industrial firms in Switzerland are producing around ten times more Raclette.

ramps actually taste different in the past? At the heart of this project is an exploration of why place matters in the production and consumption of food.

When I learned that the prevailing notion of taste in Switzerland was heavily *located* my interest was piqued. The pressing questions that this project attempts to answer are as follows: What does the taste of *Raclette du Valais* tell us about a place and a history of dairying on the Alp? What kinds of work, existing in the material and in the symbolic realms, are required to sustain an idea of *terroir* as reflective of reality? The notion of *terroir* is difficult to translate but in English it is glossed as “taste of place.” *Terroir* is much more than a category for the culinary-savvy French-speaker. The idea reaches beyond the potential linkages between qualities of flavor, smell, and texture to certain origins. *Terroir* enables some people in Switzerland to believe that what is produced through cheesemaking is a preservation of their cultural heritage. What allows *terroir* to communicate this has to do with its erasure of human labor. By buying *Raclette du Valais* people can participate in what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai refers to as “production of locality”³ in conditions of anxiety in the contemporary urban life of the conscientious eater.

Cheesemakers, perhaps unwittingly, are also engaged in a kind of locality production through the artisan practice. I found that a wide array of locals in Valais were not only context-driven but context-generative, albeit with different motivations and techniques. Yet, in any case, different actor’s commitments to reproducing culture were strongly informed by their understanding of *terroir*. Commitments to activities of

³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Public Worlds, v. 1 (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178–99.

reproduction (that of culture)⁴ were varying and contentious. I attempt to problematize these through an analysis from cheesemaker, AOP, and consumer perspectives. Most importantly, I argue that the belief in *Raclette du Valais* as tangible heritage preserved through reproduction is not only false, but also impossible and mythic. From my multi-sited investigations I have come to understand *Raclette du Valais* as a mythic idea-in-form that speaks to a national public through *terroir*. Roland Barthes (1957) defines myth as a mode of speech.⁵ *Terroir* then is a mode of signification to the public constituted by concepts like “goodness,” “diversity,” and “traditional,” that can sometimes uphold one another but can also be contradictory. *Raclette du Valais* is a key signifier of *terroir* I explore, but I suspect there are many more. The way in which *terroir* is appropriated and attributed meaning by different kinds of believers, with situated ideas of “good” or “real” cheese, “traditional” production, and “diverse” taste sustains the myth but also reveals its fundamental instability.

The idea that taste is produced by a locality is not new. *Terroir* comes from worlds of French winemakers and more general wine aficionados and cultural figures in France.⁶ However, it has become a prominent theme in food cultures and surfaced as a hot topic as of late. While I previously knew about the French notion of *terroir*, I certainly did not expect to glean as much as I have from it. I was also not familiar with the world of *Raclette*, which is considered a nationally important and provincial food speciality in Switzerland, the best of which hails directly from the canton of Valais. I

⁴ The cultural reproduction I refer to is twofold: that of cheese’s cultures and that of a cultural tradition.

⁵ Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies*, 47. [print.] (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2006).

⁶ Thomas Parker, *Tasting French Terroir: The History of an Idea*, California Studies in Food and Culture 54 (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

should mention that the Swiss take cheese very, very seriously. They consider regionally based food traditions part of a general Swiss cultural heritage. There are not only dishes that revolve entirely around local cheeses, but conditions for Swiss citizenship that are contingent on cheese (local) knowledge. Recently, a British man that has lived in Zurich since shortly after his birth was denied Swiss citizenship because he missed the “Raclette question.”⁷ He did not know in which canton the cheese was made. On a global scale, Raclette is the lesser-known national food specialty compared to fondue, a mix of different Alpine cheeses that has been popularized and highly commercialized.

Raclette is traditionally eaten in the summer, and most often prepared using an electric roasting oven, which is outfitted to position half a wheel over the heat evenly to achieve an evenly distributed melt. The act of preparing the cheese is its own know-how reserved for well-seasoned *Raclers*, which roughly translates to “those who scrape.” The cheese is consumed especially during festive gatherings and parties since it is custom to buy a half a wheel or a whole wheel at a time. Typically, guests receive a glorious and generous pool of Raclette on their plate that is scraped by the *Racler* with a knife in a particular fashion just after it has achieved the correct melt on its open surface. The *Racler* orbits around the table from plate to plate until it gets down to the “heel.” Nothing is wasted. When I first started eating Raclette I would get terrible stomach pains because my body was not accustomed to digesting 8-10 servings of cheese at a time and I would also be very thirsty, so naturally, I would drink water. I later learned that this was the worst possible thing I could do. For those that are not “used to it,” it is best to drink tea or

⁷ “Brit Denied Swiss Citizenship after ‘Failing Raclette Question,’” June 4, 2018, <https://www.thelocal.ch/20180604/brit-denied-swiss-citizenship-after-failing-raclette-question>.

white wine, never cold water, which is known to make the cheese congeal in one's stomach and make it even more difficult to assimilate.

Etienne taught me how to prepare, scrape, and taste *Raclette du Valais*: the type of Raclette that is the focus of this project and considered the most authentic because it is produced according to an AOP-regulated set of specifications in the geographically bounded region of the canton. The ritualized preparation of *Raclette du Valais* over a fire and the sensorially complex experience of tasting the cheese inspired me to “meet the makers.” My initial reaction to the cheese was admittedly that of considerable hesitation and disgust. I grew up drinking raw cow's milk but I have never been a huge proponent of stinky cheeses. The aroma of melted *Raclette du Valais* is reminiscent of body odors I will not mention. However, tasting the cheese is a different matter. I tasted different wheels of both industrially produced Raclette and *Raclette du Valais* over the last year, which has been a far more complex and informative experience than I expected. The first time I cut into the gooey and golden mass and wrapped it around a potato I was pleasantly surprised to enjoy the outcome. Later, I was instructed to skip the traditional accompaniments (potatoes, dried meat, and gherkin pickles, and cocktail onions) and taste the cheese in its unadulterated state, which allowed for a much more complex sensorial experience. I was immediately able to note the complexity of the thing I tasted but the fact that I did not know how to talk about it made me extremely curious. I wanted to know how the cheese was made, and in a more pressing way, I felt the desire to pursue the senses analytically.

Raclette du Valais is known for its “*terroir* taste.” The modern idea of *terroir* draws attention to a region's distinctive cultural and ecological landscape. In other words,

terroir denotes a typicity of place, namely the material conditions of the region (soil, microclimate, altitude, biodiversity) and in some cases its continuity with the past through traditions.⁸ Oftentimes, the physical conditions of production, not the social, are emphasized in definitions. The fabrication method and rhythm that originate in the canton of Valais are famed to produce the *terroir* of certain cheeses fabricated there. While the concept of *terroir* risks being essentialist in rendering a historically complex relation between people and the land isomorphic it is cause for further analysis as a socially agreed upon fact that is widely considered objectively tastable. The corollary idea of “traditional know-how” is *terroir*’s accomplice and rooted in a strong idea of belonging in Switzerland. Specific cheese fabrication practices, collective cultural traditions surrounding cows and cheese, and a specific ecology are associated with the region of Valais and understood as the intertwining forces that constitute place.

I found that in the social circle I was a part of in Geneva (consisting of Etienne’s friends and family), it was something of a rite of passage to pledge allegiance to a particular dairy where you will buy your *Raclette du Valais*. This loyalty can be based on a commune where family comes from somewhere down the line or simply where one went on ski trips growing up. In any case, some people feel a sense of obligation to swear by the Raclette that their parents eat (and what they ate growing up), similarly to the way in which loyalties to a religion or political party might be passed down. Cheese rivalries boil down to prideful allegiances to places, and are a source of playful banter at dinner parties. All of this is to say that place deeply *matters* in this context.

⁸ Amy B. Trubek., *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*, First paperback printing, California Studies in Food and Culture 20 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009).

The taste of *Raclette du Valais* is what sets it apart from the more generic, industrially produced Raclette that I heard characterized as “flat” and “boring” across multiple producer and consumer registers. *Raclette du Valais* occupies a growing niche in Switzerland, but industrial Raclette still dominates the market by a huge margin. There are significant gaps in knowledge between generations that are apparent in a loss of appreciation for “real” Raclette and the know-how of how to properly prepare and consume the cheese. I focus on the taste of *Raclette du Valais* in a local context where it is produced and highly valued (and also most consumed).⁹ I then broaden the scope to the cheese’s national consumer public. Within the canton of Valais, the way in which the cheese can be considered *good* has everything to do with whether it is produced *well*. Goodness is mostly assessed on the sensorial basis of tasting pleasure but also, more fundamentally, on the AOP label’s promise of origin and authenticity.

A fabrication method and rhythm that originate in the canton of Valais are famed to produce the *terroir* of the cheeses produced there. The modern concept of *terroir* is frequently used to attribute the material conditions (soil, weather, topography) of a locale to the taste of foods and wines.¹⁰ Winemaking regions in the ancient world recognized that different regions had the potential to produce distinct wines.¹¹ French winemakers developed and popularized the concept, but it has only become a buzzword in part of an

⁹ In 2006, 10,871 metric tons of Raclette cheese was produced in Switzerland, excluding Valais, in the same year the canton produced 2,058 metric tons of *Raclette du Valais*. Of this total, only 819 tonnes were exported. Unlike some cheeses, like *Tête de Moine* for instance, *Raclette du Valais* is intended for national consumption and is mostly direct-sale.

¹⁰ Parker, *Tasting French Terroir*, 2.

¹¹ Parker, 2–3. Historically, the French took it even further than that and considered *terroir* to affect the cheesemakers and farmers as well. Parker posits that the evolution of *terroir* in France reveals wider essentialist perspectives about people and the earth.

international food vocabulary in the 21st Century. In the absence of historical framing the term has become extremely flexible in its meanings. For example, in a Chilean case study, Yveline Poncet describes the way Chilean companies enlist *terroir* for its “snob value” to gain visibility on a global stage.¹² In my fieldsite, *terroir* implies collective, locally produced skills. The “typicity” of regional food products in Switzerland relies on ideas of locally shared histories and cultural identity. Interloper cheesemakers working in Valais possess cheesemaking skill on par with what the AOP expects and might even identify with a nearby Alpine dairying tradition, but their proficiency only goes so far in terms of their cultural integration and belongingness. At the same time, the specific method of production they reproduce is perceived as heritage and used as a development tool. While the trendiness and marketing leverage of “eating local” and “talking *terroir*” is amusing to many cheesemakers in Valais, there is also a dark underbelly to this story that was not explicitly mentioned.

In general, the marketing surrounding *terroir* products in Switzerland are not very representative of different populations. AOP advertisements tend to freeze an image of the Swiss male cheesemaker as part of “traditional knowledge.” Frequently using the words “roots” and “savoir-faire” to highlight that the land was inhabited by their ancestors. Historically speaking, women were always present on the *alpage* and essential to the division of labor. They often occupied both domestic and agricultural roles and were key reproducers, both in regenerating working landscapes and in literally reproducing the workforce. According to data on an Alpine pasture in Valais from the end of the 19th Century, two herders and their assistants supervised the grazing of about

¹² Yveline Poncet, Tchansia Koné, and Héctor Fabián Reyes, “La diversité locale des produits de terroir en pays émergent : un chemin malaisé,” *Autrepart* 50, no. 2 (2009): 17, <https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.050.0017>.

210 cows and some 60 heifers and calves. There were three dairies on the pasture that handled some 70 cows and each was staffed with a cheesemaker, a *female* milker, and a weigher.¹³ The absence of women on the Alp is not accurate from a historical or empirical point of view, but they were discredited as knowledgeable subjects in the lifestyle and activities of the *alpage* in some of my conversations with male cheesemaker interlocutors.¹⁴ In a similar way, migrant seasonal laborers that were present on most of the *alpages* I visited have been key economic actors in Valais since sometime after the Second World War, but their labor is erased from the *alpage vis-a-vis terroir* discourse. Part of this project is dedicated to detecting their absence and legitimizing their skilled labor.

In Chapter 1, I provide an analysis of changes and continuities in the Alpine dairying tradition in Valais, shifting back and forth from the premodern era to the present. I also defend the agentic capacities of people to implement CPR (common pool resource) use strategies, and extricate themselves from the “tragedy of the commons,”¹⁵ using the case study of Törbel, a village and Swiss heritage site in the western, German-speaking part of the canton. In Chapter 2, I delve into the particularities and meanings of the cheesemaking practice in Valais. I primarily focus on Christophe’s practice in relation to Doris’ practice with reference to some of my other cheesemaker interlocutors to explore what making *good* cheese *well* means in a way that is contextualized,

¹³ Barbara Orland, “Alpine Milk: Dairy Farming as a Pre-Modern Strategy of Land Use,” *Environment and History* 10, no. 3 (August 1, 2004): 341, <https://doi.org/10.3197/0967340041794286>.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, I did not have enough ethnographic data to pursue inquiries into the way cheesemaking was extremely gendered in this context, but their invisibility is still worth mentioning.

¹⁵ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons” 162 (1968): 7.

comparative, and draws attention to “situated knowledges.”¹⁶ I also ask why the artisan practice matters at this current moment in Switzerland and elsewhere. Chapter 3 looks closely at the AOP’s certification, control, and marketing activities and problematizes *Raclette du Valais*’ AOP status, primarily asking how the product can be reproduced as a form of edible Swiss heritage through the notion of *terroir* and recast as part of “traditional knowledge.” I then consider how *Raclette du Valais* is consumed and the way in which publics might appropriate and sustain a version of *terroir* that vacates the labor process. In each chapter, I identify a common thread of *terroir*, which has a mythic quality and can unlock the various understandings and commitments of different actors across multiple scales. In the conclusion, I address some of the possibilities and constraints in an Alpine cheese revival.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>. Haraway’s situated knowledge’s hinges on the contingency of the knowledge-maker’s position in the world, and requires that their object of knowledge is conceived of as having an agentive force.

Changes and Continuities in an Alpine Dairying Tradition

Alpine milk production, and mountain farming in general, now seems inefficient from an agronomic point of view. In particular, the summer farms at higher altitudes in the canton of Valais receiving their cattle from the low-lying areas in the canton struggle to be economically profitable. There are ever-increasing difficulties in propping up the Alpine economy in the face of competition from low-lying areas and the European market. The massive input of labor required, the use of handheld mechanical implements, and livestock summering would seem to put Alpine farmers at a severe disadvantage in a national food system dominated by agribusiness--a system of agriculture focusing on the narrow goal of productivity that uses industrialized or "factory" production systems. In *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry (1977) talks about the industrialization of the American farm as part of a larger industrialization process that penetrates the social and is destructive of human value.¹⁷ Taking a cue from Berry's cautionary tale, I see the survival of Alpine dairying in the canton of Valais in Switzerland as an example of the way in which values, emotion, and tradition *can* be taken into account by the bureaucracies of agriculture and the institutions that are set up to manage commonly shared resources.

The story of Alpine milk in premodern times in Switzerland demonstrates how cheese (and other dairy) production in the Alps facilitated long-lasting relationships between local land resources and laborer's skills, tools, and practices. It is within a percolating climate of anxiety over cultural loss or a loss of connection to the past, both of which are symptomatic of living in our globalized, technified society, that Alpine

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*, Rev. reprint (San Francisco [Great Britain]: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

dairying has gained more direct support through agricultural reform in recent years. In addition, there are values (Old World) surrounding dairy cows and dairy products in Valais that must be historicized to understand their present importance. Swiss social scientist, Paul Messerli, defines the Alpine landscape as, “a measure of what is possible,”¹⁸ that early generations worked with in order to survive. In the age of agribusiness, the connections between the artisan practice and the environment that were once essential to survival are being robbed of their significance and coming under threat. According to standard economic thinking, in terms of viability, Alpine dairying is rendered unsustainable. Yet, the Alpine farming community in Switzerland is testament to a history of developing mutualistic relationships that evolve through unique institutional structures that were relatively sustainable, in the sense of economic survival, the care for and maintenance of a healthy environment, and fostering social cohesion over hundreds of years.

Agriculture today is driven by demand much more than it is oriented around a particular landscape and soil quality. Geographical origin products that are tied to specific regions of production occupy a tiny niche within a context of a European *over*production of food that is made possible by investing huge amounts of fossil fuel energy into our global food system. The reliance on nonrenewable, hydrocarbon-based inputs to support agriculture is fundamentally unsustainable. As we begin to reach the inherent limits of growth, and global demand for food gradually outstrips supply,¹⁹ broad processes of localization have been set in motion all around the world. Relocalized

¹⁸ Orland, “Alpine Milk,” 329.

¹⁹ Richard Heinberg, *The End of Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality* (Gabriola Island, B.C: New Society Publ, 2011), 230–33.

agricultural systems are not mainstream, but it is gradually becoming imperative for states to look back to the non-fossil fuels ways of living of premodern peoples.

Switzerland is one of the leading countries in Europe in food self-sufficiency, already producing around half of the food it needs. The Swiss also spend the most per head on Fair Trade certified and organic products.²⁰ In Switzerland the small-scale Alpine dairy, with its production scaled to a local demand, a specific environment, and soil quality, is more of the exception than the rule. However, its survival is uncertain with current trends towards more and more cheese “factories” with big herds that automated milking machines can take care of and cheese that is made by robots.²¹

Agribusiness is characterized by *over-use*: applications of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, concentrated animal feeding operations, monoculture, and many of the technologies in industrial farming over-exploit the environment at the same time as they are highly dependent on the availability of cheap fossil fuels that are running out. This is quite the zero-sum game. Interestingly, in the Swiss Alps, cheesemakers in premodern times were frequently referred to as “producers of environment,”²² and identified early on as connected to the specific work of environmental stewardship in the Alps. Their production was twofold: that of a working landscape and dairy products. In the early days these productions were co-constituents of the dairy enterprise.

²⁰ Sibilla Bondolfi swissinfo.ch with input from Geraldine Wong Sak Hoi, “Does Switzerland Produce Half of All the Food It Needs?” SWI swissinfo.ch, accessed April 28, 2019, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/fact-check_does-switzerland-produce-half-of-all-the-food-it-needs-/44380058.

²¹ Schweizer Revue (<https://www.revue.ch>), “The Last Dairy Farmer in the Village,” accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.revue.ch/en/editions/2016/06/detail/news/detail/News/the-last-dairy-farmer-in-the-village/>.

²² Franz Greif, ed., *Grünland in Österreich: Bewirtschaftung, Bewahrung, Förderung ; Schlußbericht zum Forschungsprojekt AW/130/97 “Alpines Grünland” der Bundesanstalt für Agrarwirtschaft ; zugleich Teilbericht zum Man-and-Biosphere Projekt “Grünland im Berggebiet” der Akademie der Wissenschaften, Schriftenreihe / Bundesanstalt für Agrarwirtschaft 97* (Wien: AWI, 2005), 153–59.

Herding cows and making cheese in a way that was sustainable for whole communes to survive in Valais required knowledge of the physical structure and limits of the environment they worked with. This intimate knowledge of the environment that was cultivated through dairying likely resulted through trial and error, and with cheesemaking, through the practice. The goal of sustainability related to farming is obviously an ideal that is rarely accomplished without breach. However, in this chapter I argue that the continuity of Alpine dairying in Switzerland is related to success in CPR (common pool resource) management, in particular in their cooperative strategies of grazing that use a rich mixture of “private-like” and “public-like” institutions. First, I offer a more general history of premodern Alpine land use and a historical perspective on the material and symbolic force of raw milk in Valais.

Premodern Land Use in Valais

Counterintuitively, by the 1980s, when serious ecological issues began surfacing in the Alps, geographers linked an *under*-use of nature to the decline of mountain farming to explain certain issues.²³ Cultural landscapes in the Alps, which include flora/fauna and the built environments that were oriented around agrarian lifestyles, began disappearing with the farmers, as dairying on the Alp was rendered less viable. Several Swiss reports put together for a UNESCO program, *Men and Biosphere*,²⁴ drew attention to harmful non-native plant infestations, abandoned roads, crumbling buildings, and the decline of certain species linked with the places they would have liked to live. In the 1980s, when

²³ Orland, “Alpine Milk,” 328–29.

²⁴ Paul Messerli, *Mensch Und Natur Im Alpen Lebensraum: Risiken, Chancen, Perspektiven ; Zentrale Erkenntnisse Aus Dem Schweizerischen MAB-Programm* (Bern: Haupt, 1989). Messerli summarizes UNESCO’s 1971 program and how it attempted to develop and test forms of land use, involving hundreds of Alpine countries in Europe. He also maps the later iterations of mountain projects in the 80s in Switzerland, France, Austria, and Germany.

public concern was being raised surrounding the technologies of industrial farming and environmental issues, Paul Messerli suggested that the solution for protecting the biodiversity of the Alps would be the continuous, site-specific agricultural land-use that existed in the past.²⁵ Obviously, the patterns of land use that once existed in premodern Valais have changed or even disappeared in some cases, but forms of collective action and communal land ownership do persist through the *consortages*. The meaning of milk in the region still has to do with an important understanding of food production and the production of an environment as necessarily intertwined. As such, cheesemaking in the Alps continues to be a highly situated knowledge and activity.

The unique geography of Valais is that of an inclined peninsula with a wide range of climates--from Mediterranean to Alpine. The climatic range in addition to the variegated nature of environmental zones suited to different uses (hay meadows, gardens, orchards, forests, and summer pastures) prompted settlers in Valais to span all of them using an elaborate patchwork system of shared work and ownership.²⁶ By cutting across the environmental grain, so to speak, they moved away from specialization and exchange. The communes in Valais were much like independent organisms increasing their self-sufficiency and hedging one another against unexpected failures by sharing the burden of farming in severe and widely ranging conditions. The *alpage* milker and cheesemaker in the Swiss Alps cultivated an understanding of the virtuousness of the fact of variety--an appreciation borne out of struggle for survival.²⁷ Difficulties of terrain, varying climatic

²⁵ Messerli.

²⁶ Robert McC Netting, *Balancing on an Alp: Ecological Change and Continuity in a Swiss Mountain Community* (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 14–15.

²⁷ Netting, 20–21.

conditions, and varying levels of biodiversity informed early strategies of land use and the nomadic, self-sufficient lifestyles that were powered through the strongholds of nuclear families. Their tactics of land use and resource management coordinated lowland farmer families with highland farmer families and afforded the region's economic survival and relative continuity throughout centuries.²⁸ While the industrialization process began in the 1870s in most Alpine regions of Switzerland, it was not until the aftermath of World War II that agricultural practices were decisively altered in Valais through the introduction of heavy machinery such as automatic milking machines.²⁹ In addition, the 1930s brought the first trucks and buses to the region with the construction of roads.³⁰

Today, milk can be produced on a year-round basis through a feeding system of silage, hay, and grain. However, in earlier times, available fodder was directly related to the way the land was being used, as there was no market for animal feed. In Switzerland, all mountainous areas were reserved for dairying due to their steep cliffs, rocky terrain, and difficult climatic conditions that could not be made arable for crop production.³¹ Up until the 19th Century it was common belief that specific habitats in the mountains existed for specific plants and animals. An agrarian reformer in 1853 advised breeding goats in deciduous forests rather than cattle or sheep, pigs in oak or beech forests, dry and spacious areas were encouraged to be reserved for sheep, gardens and orchards for bees,

²⁸ Netting, *Balancing on an Alp*.

²⁹ Orland, "Alpine Milk," 331.

³⁰ Netting, *Balancing on an Alp*, 22.

³¹ Orland, "Alpine Milk," 332.

and meadows for cows.³² Over time, the established dairy zones evolved to become synonymous with Alpine pastureland, which, due to high humidity and cold weather, included a short vegetation period that was beneficial for animal husbandry. Estimates from around 1900 established available pasture resources at 35% of all productive soil in the canton of Valais. Mountain pastures, in fact, gave the mountain range its name--the Alps, which predates the Roman era, and denotes cultivated areas in the mountain range.³³

Common pool resource use strategies were essential in sustaining the dairy sector in Valais and instituted through the organization of the *consortages*: consortia of collective work and ownership run by farmers, cheesemakers, and other laborers. These cooperative associations of owners still exist and members hold rights and duties that are inscribed into the state's statutes and regulations. Among duties is the participation in common work, and among rights, access to common goods and equipment. The cooperative organizational structure of the *consortage* serves many economic, ecological, and social functions. It was originally designed to foster mutuality and implicated cheesemakers as citizens in a community of resource owners who shared certain goods, and as such, was a system that regulated and enforced membership through holding actions accountable. In becoming a responsible contributor to a community, typically through the inheritance of land, cheesemakers became key members of local systems that aimed at social cohesion at the level of the commune.

³² Orland, 332.

³³ Orland, 333–35.

Grazing rights were passed down through inheritance, which was equally divided between male and female heirs, or in some cases could be purchased.³⁴ Since the higher elevations in the region were not suited to year-round settlement, the question of who owned and regulated access to Alpine pastures became an issue as early as the 16th C when the mountain meadows became important economically.³⁵ Nearly all of the statutes, at least up until the middle of the 19th C limited the circle of potential buyers to members of the association of users or residents of the valley.³⁶ Thus, the ownership of land was rather synonymous with village membership. The common goods, that were determined for use include: water, forest, and Alpine pastureland. The building and maintenance of installations such as the “bisses,”³⁷ paths, mountain pasture equipment and bread ovens was also accomplished through the collective.³⁸ Cooperatives emerged as a mode of effective and optimal resource management, but have evolved into important tools for social regulation, cultural heritage making, and land stewardship. Occupying a role in the cooperative used to implicate its members into reciprocal exchange relationships, but now the system is much more hierarchically organized. In spite of materially unequal power relations, ideas of mutuality persevere in the rhetoric of cheesemakers and villagers who view themselves as accountable to one another.

³⁴ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, The Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 62.

³⁵ Ostrom, 62.

³⁶ Ostrom, 62–63.

³⁷ Mountain irrigation systems that date back to the 11th C. Darren S. Crook and Anne M. Jones, “Design Principles from Traditional Mountain Irrigation Systems (Bisses) in the Valais, Switzerland,” *Mountain Research and Development* 19, no. 2 (May 1999): 79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3674250>.

³⁸ Orland, 137-38.

Ownership forms in the past stressed the importance of keeping ownership and rights of usage separate which required intensive cooperation.³⁹ Even on private Alpine pastures that were not collectively owned by a commune “foreign” cattle could be seen grazing.⁴⁰ Milk, however, was not always processed in a collective way. Production infrastructure and tools were often privately owned.⁴¹ Mixed forms oscillating between strict individual ownership and cooperatives are characteristic of the *consortages* in Valais. For example, owners of a pasture might herd their cattle jointly but sell their milk to a cheesemaker at a fixed price who processes it at their own risk. Or, the owners might exchange milk among themselves after the milk of the entire herd is harvested and, in turns, process the milk by every member of the cooperative. From my experience, the position of the cheesemaker within a hierarchy of power in the *consortage* was sometimes vague and difficult to pinpoint. The owners of the land and farm infrastructure (who are also known as “the farmers” working with hired herdsmen) typically double as the “bosses” that employ cheesemakers and other laborers and rent accommodations to them. The farmers are mostly local villagers from the commune that have inherited the land and rarely outsiders. Conversely, there are also cases when the cheesemaker buys the milk from the farmer and is more in charge of their product. Still, in other cases, the price is fixed by a more industrial group, which is more typical of the bigger dairies in the valley and certainly represents the lowest rung of the ladder occupied by cheesemakers in Valais. Importantly, all cheesemakers that are a part of a *consortage* have a vote in any

³⁹ Orland, 337–38.

⁴⁰ Orland, 337.

⁴¹ Orland, 338.

change that is made in the cooperative's actions. In other words, institutional change must come from the inside, often according to unanimous vote.⁴²

The 16th and 18th centuries constitute a span of time in which people began entering the more lucrative fatty cheese business in Valais after they could not subsist through farming.⁴³ Enskillment took place through apprenticeships organized by Alpine cooperatives. They were originally organized to more effectively meet the increasing demand for dairy products taking place, particularly from cities. In the canton of Bern, to the north of Valais, this group of workers was referred to as the *Kuhr*.⁴⁴ They developed a unique contract between farmers, herders, cheesemakers, and other laborers that gave birth to the structure of the dairy *consortage* that persists in Valais. A reciprocal relationship was developed between the *kuhers* and the farmers in the villages. The *kuhers* migrated to the valley in autumn and needing a home for their jointly leased cowherds, they were housed and fed, human and animals, by the farmers throughout the winter. Once provisions ran out, they would rotate through other farmer families in the contract. In return, the farmers received the dairy products and also the animal dung needed to fertilize their fields.⁴⁵ The profitability of Alpine farming was shared until the proto-industrial years (1770-1773) when a series of land reforms began taking place and eventually dairying itself was brought down to the valley, disrupting such reciprocal relationships, and leading to a slew of environmental issues in the Alp.⁴⁶

⁴² Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 64.

⁴³ Orland, "Alpine Milk," 342.

⁴⁴ Orland, 333–34.

⁴⁵ Orland, 333–34.

⁴⁶ Orland, 345.

In terms of Alpine grazing, there were very specific rules in place to prevent the threats of under-grazing and over-grazing set up through the *consortage*. Maximum limits on use, strict time periods, and the proper number of animals per time period were enforced directly through the rules decided upon collectively.⁴⁷ Joint herding was the key tactic in enforcing compliance. These methods are sometimes cast as a folklore event. Yet, they were able to ensure that no one was first to show up to a fresh pasture with cattle, and as an extremely coordinated self-organized governance system, the community members were held directly accountable to one other.⁴⁸ The only way this form of sustainable resource use was feasible was through internal trust, reciprocity, collective self-governance, and collective conflict resolution.⁴⁹

Today, there are traces of the premodern villager-cheesemaker relations that were crucial to survival on the Alp. Joint herding has decreased with the division of communal land, but communal ownership of pastures is still very much the norm. In addition, rituals and festivities exist that create a sense of conviviality surrounding collective work. For example, villagers from certain communes will go up to the *alpage* in droves towards the end of the summer to help the laborers on the *alpage* with the collecting of hay from the fields to store for the winter. Maintenance and repair work of farm infrastructure, paths, water resources, and the land in cases of rock removal and eroded areas can also be taken on and resolved as a collective task in the *consortages*. These arrangements require an understanding that different economic zones are equally important ecologically sensitive

⁴⁷ Orland, 338.

⁴⁸ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*.

⁴⁹ Ostrom.

zones. These tactics were specific to the goals of long-term stability and self-sufficiency that are becoming more and more important today. Within flexible grazing and range management, which can change based on the collective decision-making of the *consortage*, the production of dairy products became a mode of strengthening land use in the region and had a logic in the way production was limited the physical conditions and carrying capacity of specific habitats.⁵⁰

Landscape is both cause and result of the kind of the agricultural work that exists in the Valais, and as such, it is important to understand that it was not only artisan practice molding land use or being a cause of environmental issues on the Alp that is worthy of mention, but also the way in which practice is an outcome of environmental conditions as well. The interdependence of a laboring people and a particular landscape made the modern artisan cheesemaking practice emerge as significant today. Tim Ingold's thinking in "The Temporality of the Landscape," offers a lens to view landscape that is helpful in thinking of this as co-constitution. He claims that landscape is always *with* us, and "through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it."⁵¹ As the dairy zones par excellence for centuries, we can understand the *alpage* and people who have worked *with* the land as giving form to a particular "taskscape."⁵² Certain values and practices are still of the Old World Valais. Unpacking the material and symbolic force of raw milk in the context of this taskscape and other cheese and cow centered practices in Valais will demonstrate this more clearly.

⁵⁰ Netting, *Balancing on an Alp*.

⁵¹ Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (October 1993): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1993.9980235>.

⁵² Ingold, 157–58.

The Symbolic and Material Force of Raw Milk

In Valais milk is exalted as a rich material in its physical properties and through symbolic representations that have been produced through social and historical forces. Good cheese must begin at the source: with *good*, raw milk. Milk is creamier at higher elevations in the Alps and it is scientifically proven that Alpine milk contains between 15 percent and 30 percent more fat than milk from cows in the valley.⁵³ Milk comes to the cheese rooms alive, malleable, and complex in flavor and structure. Working with raw milk, as all of my cheesemaker interlocutors do, involves a high-stakes vulnerability to pathogens and harmful bacteria that could punctuate someone's career. In the exceptional case that there are bacterial pathogens detected and there is a cheese recall in order, the financial burden falls back on the individual cheesemaker. The potential outbreak of food poisoning looms over cheesemakers in raw milk fabrication, and if a batch is recalled, not only will their pockets suffer, but they will also find their reputation and membership in the community at stake, which can result in the slow death of a whole operation. Conversely, managing good, raw milk is also central to making cheeses that have diverse, self-developing flavors. I will return to the material complexity of raw milk, but first let us begin with its symbolic charge.

The cheesemaking culture in Valais is highly cow-oriented, and Herén-focused. *Raclette du Valais* that does not have some proportion of Herén milk is uncommon, and said to taste “flat.” In the early 80s there were mostly Héren cows in the Valais, a tough mountain breed that has become a symbol of Valaisonnness or purity as they are

⁵³ Orland, “Alpine Milk,” 333.

threatened with extinction.⁵⁴ The existence of the “mixed” herd is a modern revelation that came about as a result of economic forces, and some locals feel discomfort about this mixing. Favoritism for the Héren breed is prevalent in all of the places I have visited. In restaurants there are often small Héren tchotchkes lining the windowsills and large Héren cow bells hang from wooden beams. The emphasis on Hérens was everywhere. People talked about their milk in *Raclette du Valais* production, the seasonal Héren cow fights that attract hordes of locals and tourists, and told me romantic stories about familial lines of breeders. The description of the Hérens and the cow fights are described well on the AOP/Wallis Promotion website, an organization I worked with in the second phase of my fieldwork:

The Hérens cows are an ancient, traditional Valais breed with a highly combative temperament. Every spring, on the journey up to the mountain pastures, they lock horns. The winning ‘queen’ becomes the leader of the herd for the summer. This led to the development of the tradition of cow fighting, drawing many breeders and a large audience.⁵⁵

The overwhelming references to Hérens I encountered struck me as quite an obsession, and I eventually found that they are symbolically enigmatic figures in the region that draw out important community-held values surrounding purity and tradition. I say enigmatic because many people will talk about the Hérens as if they are admitting to the peculiarity of their obsession, and even acknowledge that the milk does not objectively

⁵⁴ “Intangible Search: Traditional Cattle and Cow Fights in the Valais,” accessed April 28, 2019, http://www.intangiblesearch.it/search/show_ich_detail.php?db_name=intangible_search&lingua=inglese&idk=ICH-FABTR-0000000799.

⁵⁵ “Cow Fights | Valais Switzerland,” accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.valais.ch/en/activities/culture-customs/cow-fights>.

influence the flavors in cheese, but will nevertheless insist on the sense of “pride” they feel in seeing the cows, particularly during the cow fights.

Héren cows’ milk is a symbol of goodness or purity that has been mythized as an active agent affecting the quality of cheese. While the breed of cow does not objectively contribute to the quality of milk or affect taste, there are some cheesemakers and villagers that still swear by its importance. For many, *Raclette du Valais* is unthinkable without the addition of Héren milk. In a larger cultural context of cheese consumption in Switzerland this assumption might become problematic as herds become more diversified. Madeleine Savioz, a marketing professional working for Valais/Wallis Promotion said, “don’t tell the people there is less Héren milk in the cheese.” According to Madeleine, Hérens are the most expensive breed in the region due to their notoriety, but they produce around 20% of what a standard Holstein would. As a result, they are being quickly outnumbered by other breeds on the *alpage*. This development continues to be masked by Valais-Héren codependent imagery that agencies like Valais/Wallis Promotion peddle to the Valaisan public. Whether literally seeing the Héren cows grazing in a meadow, as one often does hiking through the Alps, or pictured on a wall or in an AOP advertisement, people are constantly assured of a “natural” connection between Héren, landscape, and product that is indispensable.

Some cheesemakers are negatively impacted by the symbolic force that Héren milk has in Valais. For example, Carmen, a goat cheesemaker at Alpage de Mille above Val de Bagnes, is directly affected by their symbolic superiority to other animals. Despite the fact that she has been working at Alpage de Mille for six summers, she still feels continually frustrated that there are villagers with a “distaste” for goats, not just with

goat's cheese, but also just physically seeing them. Carmen has dealt with accusations that her goat's milk she uses is not fresh, which she attributes to a class-driven phenomenon in Valais of lower classes having to drink goat's milk growing up. However, I suspect it is also related to the idea of Héren milk as superior in cheesemaking. Carmen and Christophe, her partner who is also a cheesemaker, have a neighbor who claimed that the sound of bells from their white cows in the mixed herd was "no good," pointing out that the Héren sound, on the other hand, was quite beautiful. Carmen said she was completely serious in this remark and seemed to be personally offended by the sight and sound produced by the white cows in the herd.

I am not sure I was able to fully grasp the deep fascination with the Héren cows in Valais. However I am fairly certain it has to do with the fact that they are viewed as practically "native" to the region. They were reportedly brought to the area a long time ago by the Romans.⁵⁶ Their silky black bodies are muscular, compact, and hang low to the ground. The common understanding seems to be that they have coevolved with the population of Valais to endure the harsh conditions in the mountains. The cows are viewed as instinctually superior to other breeds. They have a natural propensity to fight in order to develop a hierarchy among themselves. The fighting instinct in the cows has an emotional resonance with people from Valais who are nostalgic for an Old World sensibility or mentality of survival. I was informed that families that own Hérens treat



Figure 1 An emblem on the outside of Eddy Baillifard's restaurant in Val de Bagnes depicting two fighting Hérens and an old-fashioned cheese vat.

⁵⁶ "Warrior and Icon: The Herens Cow | Valais Switzerland," accessed April 28, 2019, <http://www.valais.ch/en/stories/warrior-and-icon-the-herens-cow>.

them like they're a part of the family. Since they are becoming few and far between, families that own Hérens typically only own two or three. I have heard stories of parents fawning over them like their own children when their kids leave to pursue other things outside of Valais. There are also several familial lines of breeders of Hérens in Valais that have continued this expensive passion of cow breeding throughout the generations in the name of carrying on family tradition.

The hundreds of varieties of herbs, wildflowers, and grasses for animals to select on each *alpage* in Valais are understood to translate into complex, diverse flavors in raw milk. As cows migrate to higher pastureland throughout the summer their greatly diversified diet changes and as a result nearly every batch of milk brought to the cheese room is qualitatively different. An old farmers' proverb goes "grass is always better the higher one goes up the mountain, and at the top it is good enough that the farmer's even like to eat it."⁵⁷ This sentiment is echoed by cheesemakers in the Alps today that talk about their milk improving over the season as the cows reach higher altitudes. The proverb has a scientific basis, as in fact, with increasing elevation in the Alps, the intensity of sunshine increases and their protein and fat contents are higher. Alpine products are historically considered tastier and healthier because of the herbs found only in mountainous pastureland. The way in which ethereal oils contribute to the process of rumination and digestion is understood as beneficial to milk production. It was also claimed that cattle living on the Alp were generally more healthy and resistant to disease.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Orland, "Alpine Milk," 333.

⁵⁸ Orland, 333.

Concurrently, the idea that Alpine pastures benefit from cultivation and animal grazing that we see resurfacing in the 80s was once common knowledge. In particular, grazing animals fertilizing the land with their dung improves soil quality and changes the plant cover in the region over time, favoring certain plants over others. The unique flavor of the high mountain pastures was acknowledged and “showed up” in the dairy products early on, which is why many botanical names reference dairy products and cheeses were named after the Alpine pastures in which they were produced.⁵⁹ These connections attest to the perceived indivisibility of landscape, animal, and product that has existed for centuries in Valais. The very notion of dairy farming was bound to complex perceptions of the environment--about relationships between terrain, plants, animals and their fruits of labor. Though not explicitly stated, naming dairy products after the land references their *terroir*: the idea that they can be traced back from one’s mouth to the plants, animals, and even the soil.

Much of the work that takes place in the cheese rooms in Valais is a concerted practice of maintaining good raw milk through an understanding of the material and the way in which good bacteria can do their work and triumph over the bad. Open air lactic fermentation most often takes place without the addition of industrial starter culture, and the milk is unpasteurized, which means that it is not heated to an extent that the aromatic compounds and enzymes in the raw milk are destroyed. Milk, being a fluid animal product, poses no barriers against the spread of microorganisms and many cheesemakers can attest that they are actively cleaning the cheese room nearly as much as they are engaged in fabrication steps. Striking the right balance between harnessing microbial variety and risking biohazard is not straightforward. Rather, it is a carefully orchestrated

⁵⁹ Orland, 333.

through years of practice. Striking this balance goes beyond artisan skill in the cheese room and requires cheesemakers to work with the natural and shifting variations that they contend with through the material at hand: such as overall herd health, how far along the cows are in the season, the ambient temperature and humidity, and so on. Despite the difficulties of predicting what may happen any given day in the cheese room, cheesemakers on the *alpage* will tell you that they find this aspect of variety in their work keeps things interesting and results in a more interesting product.

Often speaking in binary terms, cheesemakers describe pasteurized cheese as “flat” or “boring,” and their cheese as “complex,” “interesting,” or “diverse.” Carmen showed me an Instagram post of her friend’s farm in Australia when we sat down for tea in her kitchen. She plopped a bundle of wild, hand-collected herbs into a kettle and handed me her phone. The photo depicted several cows grazing in a meadow with tall grasses. She asked me what I could make of it and as I was trying to gauge what reaction she was looking for she burst out, “one grass is just not that interesting!” Over my stay, I began to realize that Carmen and Christophe held a deep appreciation for the ecological diversity of the *alpage*. They saw the biodiversity of the terrain as advantageous for them because the animals could “selectively graze,” and effectively decide what they eat. In cheesemaking, they viewed this diversity through a lens of limitless opportunity: the flavors of an irregular, heterogenous, and biodiverse terrain were in some sense theirs to harness.

René, a young cheesemaker and the manager of the Laiterie Nouvelle, a village dairy in Orsières, also mused about the material complexity of milk. Towards the end of our meeting he said, “the milk is alive so everyday is very different.” René is continually

developing an understanding of these differences in the milk in a way that engages his mind and body. At the *Alpage de la Peule*, above Val Ferret, Nicolas Coppey compared the land he works with to other *alpage* operations in the valley and noted that the wide variety of herbs and wildflowers there creates a “very interesting” flavor profile for his cheese. The appreciation for “variety” and “diversity,” words that were mentioned repeatedly during my time on the *alpage*, were not exclusively reserved to cheesemakers worldview. Indeed, using the language of heterogeneity to describe milk, cheese, and the Alpine landscape was a prominent theme in the rhetoric of Alpine cheesemakers and locals alike. There is a certain virtue of variety in this context.

The virtue of variety arises from a combination of historical and social forces I described previously that continue to resonate with cheesemakers in the region on multiple scales. On the largest scale, this virtue is implicated in the structure of the *consortage*. There is a web of shared ownership that is not based on linearity or singular specialization due to the sheer variety of environmental zones in the region that can be sustained well through a cooperative structure. The joint administration and ownership of common goods seeks to reinforce a sense of shared responsibility for variegated resources on the *alpage*, such as the forest, Alpine pastures, and bodies of water. On the scale of the *alpage*, there are a wide range of variables that relate to its physical situation in the Alps such as altitude, soil composition, and biodiversity that foster uniquely different microbial communities at each site. This fact of variety at multiple scales informs the way in which *terroir* is perceived. For instance, as a result of such variability, *Raclette du Valais* from above Val de Bagnes will always taste different from cheese made above Val Ferret. These differences apprehended through taste are attributed to the

cheese's *terroir*. On the scale of the cheese itself, the process of open-air lactic fermentation of raw milk transformed into curd at a low temperature allows the cheese to incorporate microbial variety. The guiding principle of using raw milk in fabrication is considered part of a "traditional" production and should not be underestimated in what it reveals about the sustained "social fact"⁶⁰ of *terroir*, (which I address in Chapters 2 & 3_.

Raclette du Valais is traditionally a seasonal cheese only produced on the *alpage* where cows subsist on a variety of grasses, herbs, and wildflowers throughout the summer months. Nowadays, the cheese is produced in smaller quantities in dairies over the winter when cows subsist on hay. The cows are guided from village to *alpage*, and vice versa, through the tradition of transhumance--a seasonal and patterned migration of humans and nonhumans. During *inalpe* cows ascend into the Alpine pastures and are taken higher and higher throughout the summer by the herdsmen that are employed by farmers; during *désalpe* the herds descend and there are festivities arranged in different villages to celebrate the cheesemakers and the end of a season. These migration paths and rhythms aim to replicate the migrations that took place in the past more frequently due to communal grazing and the shared work of the *consortages*. During the festivities cheesemakers and villagers act out a reciprocal relationship through exchanging food, wine, and words of recognition. These acts are symbolically loaded gestures to the cheesemaker-villager relation of the past, when reciprocity for the common good and enforcing membership was essential to the functioning of whole villages and communes.

During the descent from the Alp, or *désalpe*, from mid-September to mid-October, the cows are all carefully decorated with flower crowns and ribbons and the

⁶⁰ Emile Durkheim and Steven Lukes, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 1st American ed (New York: Free Press, 1982).

commune gathers together to watch the cheesemakers and farmers process with their flocks down the mountain in a synchronized fashion, as each herd has its own schedule to abide by. Different organizations plan and prepare the event, such as local ski clubs, and a convivial party with plenty of Raclette for everyone to eat ensues after. While, I haven't attended either of these events because they did not coincide with the times I was there, *désalpe* was always brought up in my conversations with cheesemakers and often thought of as a highlight to their season--"a celebration for everyone." The cheesemakers, some of which rarely leave the mountain during the season, descend sometime in the afternoon and at the end of their journey they are met with townspeople offering wine and praises in a decidedly convivial and folkloric atmosphere. There are "traditional" alpine games, craft markets, music, and other folk groups.

These moments of exchange among community members take place after the season of long and arduous work on the Alp when there is cause for celebration. They are something like an ode to the past and a microcosmic reproduction of the reciprocal relations that once existed. Perhaps to service a longing for connections that are under threat and less salient than they once were. Several cheesemakers have expressed to me that they feel pressure to not let any of the farmers in the *consortage* down with the cheese they make. That is, the farmers who own the cows whose milk they work with. In drawing attention to the responsibility they feel to the farmers they signal a sense of pride and uneasiness they feel in their social role as cheesemaker.

The social mores geared towards membership in Valais are experienced through receiving a level of recognition, connections with local community members, and in building reciprocal relationships with townspeople. The sentiment behind these relations

remains important to cheesemakers in the Alp even though they are no longer oriented around survival. In some cases, survival is still evoked as a method of appealing to locals in order to build stronger ties. Eddy Baillifard, former cheesemaker and current “Raclette ambassador,” once staged an intervention with small business owners in Val de Bagnes in the year 2000 when a ban was lifted on the importation of cheeses. Ski stations and restaurants began importing cheaper Swiss-style cheeses. Eddy led groups of cheesemakers into these businesses and confronted the business owners directly on this matter, beginning with: “If you want to keep your ski slopes alive, you better keep us alive.” Eddy remembered the approach being rather successful.

Regional promotion measures and agricultural policy reform has increased direct payments to small-scale Alpine dairies and substantially changed how the landscape of the *alpage* is perceived. It has come to hold a broader aesthetic and ecological value and is increasingly recognized as a part of a general Swiss cultural heritage. However, work on the Alp is not simply romanticized as part of the past, it is far more complicated than that. In addition, mutually enforced social control mechanisms are still used by the *consortages*, and imbued with particular importance as tools to ensure proper environmental stewardship on the Alp and the proper supplies of cheese for people in the valleys. Cheesemakers in Switzerland are also crucial “environmental producers”⁶¹ in a context of the rapid industrialization of food production. Their artisan practices have become a sort of gardening technology, regenerating landscapes, and thus standing in opposition to the dominant agribusiness model. Food production-as-gardening technology could become increasingly important in light of the threats that anthropogenic climate change is posing to the security of national food systems. The adaptability and

⁶¹ Messerli, *Mensch Und Natur Im Alpinen Lebensraum*.

strength of the dairy *consortages* in Valais, throughout centuries, offers a unique opportunity to assess the ways in which common pool resource use strategies can be successful and local food systems strengthened. In an argument against the “tragedy of the commons,” and in defense of the agentive capabilities of people to manage their resources effectively, I visit the case of Törbel in the canton of Valais. A village that I did not have the chance to visit, but has been a continued subject of social analysis in its remarkable management of common forest and pasture. The case of Törbel is also demonstrative of the ways wider community governance works in the Swiss Alps.

In Defense of CPR Strategies based on Self-Governance

All of the Swiss institutions used to govern commonly owned resources have one striking similarity: the appropriators of the resources make all of the decisions about the CPR themselves. My argument for the potential of CPR use strategies relies on positioning my analysis in opposition to a dominant idea propagated by the infamous “Tragedy of the Commons” article published in *Science* (1968) by Garrett Hardin. Garrett Hardin’s expression, “the tragedy of the commons,” has been used countless times to describe what happens when some group of people use a scarce resource in common and consequently end up degrading their environment or destroying their natural resource base all together. Hardin frames the case of the commons as one where individuals are rational economic actors who think only in terms of self-interest,⁶² and he cites the philosopher Whitehead who defines tragedy as “the solemnity of the remorseless working of things.”⁶³ His claim to an inevitableness of tragedy in the way commons develop is based on the assumption that people are relatively incapable of solving complex problems

⁶² Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons.”

⁶³ Hardin, 1244.

on their own without intervention. However, I argue that the capacity of people to understand and extricate themselves from commons dilemmas are situated, context-dependent, and vary significantly from one case to another. Similar to how different policy goals require individual yet complementary policy measures, a good collective action scheme requires a rich combination of institutions that are rarely strictly public or private, “the state” or “the market,” and function on multiple levels. Most importantly, people who successfully govern a commons are essentially spending time governing themselves.

The structure of Hardin’s model is made accessible to the reader through the example of cow herders using the same pasture, a more general metaphor for what he sees taking place in overcrowding and population problems. He invites the reader to think about a pasture as “open to all,” and then examines the resource from the perspective of the rational herder. Each herder is most interested in receiving the direct benefits from their own animals grazing on the pasture and ends up suffering delayed costs associated with overgrazing. At the same time as each herder is motivated to add more animals to the pasture to benefit they also only bear a portion of the costs resulting from the overgrazing that is taking place, he notes, “Therein is the tragedy. Each man in locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit--in a world that is limited.”⁶⁴ This influential model has been used to explain a wide array of interlocking environmental problems related to resource destruction. The “free-rider” problem is one thread of similarity between many of its applications, in which there is little motivation for people to contribute to a joint effort when one can simply free ride off of the efforts of others.

⁶⁴ Hardin, 1244.

Hardin describes resource users as the prisoners of their own commons dilemma. While his example is obviously metaphorical it is still dangerous in its potential applications, particularly on the policy level. It is important to remember that on the level of empirical human action, not all users are incapable of changing their situation, and not all decisions made to change the rules can be seen as resulting in remorseless, self-propelling tragedies. In fact, the case of Törbel will illustrate quite the opposite. The human capacity to be inventive in the face of constraints and adapt to new circumstances is a part of our history as a species. The idea that intervention is needed, through the state or an institution of private property rights regimes, undergirds the most frequent policy solutions.

Policy prescriptions to centralize the control and regulation of natural resources have been followed extensively, in particular in the global South.⁶⁵ Using the metaphor of the meadow again, the proponents of such a strategy of resource management believe in the capabilities of an external government agency to decide who is grazing on the meadow and when, with how many animals, and for how long. In reality, central agencies are also at a severe disadvantage in achieving the optimal use of resources over time because of issues such as accuracy of information, their monitoring capabilities, and the costs of administration.⁶⁶ The other policy prescription in response to commons dilemmas is frequently to impose private property rights regimes. In theory, this solution, suggesting that herders divide the meadow up into separate parcels, works to counteract the competition between herders and incentivize each herder to maintain their plot. However, there are no clear borders that can be enforced in many common pool resources

⁶⁵ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 3.

⁶⁶ Ostrom, 8–14.

and this assumes that something like a meadow that ranges considerably (in terms of soil quality, biodiversity, how much rainfall is received etc.) is a homogenous and divisible entity.⁶⁷

Both advocates of centralization and of privatization seem to think that meaningful change in commons dilemmas must be imposed from the top down. In addition, they prescribe unilinear solutions to more complex problems that often require more than one solution. It is disconcerting that the theory of the commons that was made accessible to the public through Garrett Hardin's metaphor of the meadow does not account for the knowledge of the herders who work in the meadow. If they are using the same meadow over a long period of time it is certain that they are the ones with more detailed information on the carrying capacity of the CPR. In addition, it is not always necessary to impose monitoring and enforcement from the outside.⁶⁸ In fact, the self-interest of those that are members of a mutually enforced contract of users will lead to a natural desire to monitor one another and ensure compliance. This logic paired with the more accurate information of the herders renders the centralization argument less convincing, at least empirically. In the case of Törbel, a small village in the commune of Visp, the privatization of common pool resources would have been nonsensical precisely because of the understanding of mountain resource bases as heterogeneous and more efficiently or sustainably managed through cooperation.

When the peasant communities of Valais divided up lands into different "zones" of the forest and the Alp each household was able to maintain a relatively secure livelihood because each of them controlled the same means of production and were able

⁶⁷ Ostrom, 12–13.

⁶⁸ Ostrom, 18–24.

to strike a balance in the over-and-under-use of mountainous resources.⁶⁹ Robert Netting (1981), an Anthropologist known as one of the founders of cultural ecology in the Social Sciences, wrote his book *Balancing on the Alp* based on his fieldwork in Törbel. In the early 1970s he researched the ecological changes and continuities in the village using historical records spanning some 300 years and found that the community's strategies for ecological adaptation and technology had little changed since ancient times. The strategies he describes are largely based on the biological advantages of what he coins as "ecotone." An "ecotone" as an environmental system in a state of equilibrium:

No single support system is highly productive, but all together provide a high degree of security and a hedge against climate fluctuation. The largely self-contained nature of the ecosystem contributes to a lack of economic dependence on the outside world and sustains political autonomy.⁷⁰

Netting explains how both material and cultural factors coalesce to support a village equilibrium and the genealogical continuity of family lines in the German-speaking village for centuries, a situation that was quite unusual within the context of other "typical" peasant communities of Europe that were often characterized by migration and movement.⁷¹

The villagers of Törbel have intentionally preserved their institution of communal property; it remains their foundation for land use. Written legal documents dating back to 1224 have provided information of the types of land tenure, transfers, and the rules used by the villagers to regulate communally owned property. On February 1, 1483, the residents of Törbel signed articles that formally established their association in order to

⁶⁹ Netting, *Balancing on an Alp*.

⁷⁰ Netting, 15.

⁷¹ Netting, 70–73.

achieve well-defined regulation of the use of Alpine meadows, the forests, and the “waste lands”:

The law specifically forbade a foreigner (*fremde*) who bought or otherwise occupied land in Törbel from acquiring any right in the communal Alp, common lands, or grazing places, or permission to fell timber. Ownership of a piece of land did *not* confer any communal right. The inhabitants currently possessing land and water rights reserved the power to decide whether an outsider should be admitted to community membership.⁷²

The boundaries of the communally owned lands were established and indicated in a 1507 inventory document. Access to these well-understood common properties was limited to citizens of the village that were specifically given communal rights. Regulations for summer grazing grounds, written in 1517, stated, “no citizen could send more cows to the Alp than he could feed during the winter.”⁷³ This regulation, which Netting observes still being enforced, is administered by a local official that can impose substantial fines for any attempt to appropriate more than their share of grazing rights.⁷⁴ Since the cows are all sent up to the Alp to be herded by herdsmen this regulation has been relatively easy to enforce as they are counted immediately upon arrival. The number of cows sent up by each family also corresponded to determining the amount of cheese each family would receive at the end of the season. All citizens owning cattle vote on village statutes. There are also routine community meetings held to work out rules and elect officials.⁷⁵

Private rights to land are also important in Törbel and all of the other villages in the canton for that matter. Throughout the region, farmers use private property for their agricultural pursuits and forms of communal property for summer meadows where cows

⁷² Netting, 139.

⁷³ Netting, 139.

⁷⁴ Netting, 139.

⁷⁵ Netting, 139–40.

graze, forests, and stony wastelands. All of which surround private holdings.

Communities, i.e. local villages/cooperatives, own four-fifths of the Alpine property in all of Switzerland.⁷⁶ Robert Netting systematically demonstrates how communal ownership is not a thing of the past and that Swiss villagers are very familiar with the various benefits and costs associated with both private and communal tenure.⁷⁷

Communal forms of ownership in Törbel and other villages are better suited to certain problems that users face in Valais. The fact that the value of production per unit of land is low and the dependability of use or relative yield is also low makes a large territory more needed for effective use. Despite yields being relatively low in Törbel, the land has been continuously regenerated and remained productive, overgrazing has been more or less avoided, and communal work such as the manuring of fields and maintenance of roads/paths has enhanced the CPR.⁷⁸ Most recently, the value of labor on the Alp has risen significantly, and common property institutions are shifting to reflect this. Villages that rely on unanimity rules are, however, are changing more slowly.⁷⁹ Just as institutions are being forced to adapt to current circumstances, the artisan cheesemaking practice is also faced with a rapidly changing environmental and producer landscape. The next chapter looks deeply into the modern day artisan practice in the Alps.

⁷⁶ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 64.

⁷⁷ Netting, *Balancing on an Alp*, 140.

⁷⁸ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 64–65.

⁷⁹ Ostrom, 65.

Making Good Cheese Well on the Alp

The First Day at Alpage de Mille

“There is no cheese you are sure is made from real milk in France,” said Christophe. Etienne translated as best he could as Christophe digressed into a lengthy monologue about the places in Valais where there are no longer Héren cows--making cheese taste “flat.” I was intrigued by the way Christophe greeted us with lamentations that afternoon we visited Alpage de Mille on a total whim. After talking for awhile as he worked, he offered to host us in bunk beds that house tourists upstairs. I decided to cancel the engagement we had arranged later that day on a different alpage and Christophe called “the boss” to ask whether we could stay in the spare bedroom. When we arrived he was making the second batch of Raclette du Valais of the day. We watched through the top section of a Dutch door as he began cutting gelatinous curd in fours with a tranche-caillé. Once we stepped inside the cheese room, he began to explain what was happening in the copper vat he tended to on a microbial level: “the bacteria are feeding off of the sugar in the serum, and in order for the bacteria-caused acidity not to increase too rapidly I will add 10% water at 32 degrees Celsius.” In simpler terms, he cued us into the process of natural lactic fermentation taking place in the vat, the necessary precursor of coagulation when solid curds begin to form and separate from liquid whey.

Christophe stirred the mixture rapidly for fifteen minutes by hand, slowing down and speeding up for certain intervals of time. While he stirred he recounted the preceding stage we had missed, beginning with the milk’s arrival from a nearby pasture: “it came in at around 33.5 degrees Celsius and it was reheated in the vat for the bacteria to start working.” He told us that the speed at which the milk is transferred from the sealed metal containers (transported directly from the pastureland in a pickup truck) into the copper vat must be rapid to retain as much heat from the cow’s bodies as possible. Christophe thinks that it is best to add rennet at 32 degrees, and explained how in a village dairy the milk cools down

because it travels farther so, as a result, the bacteria are inhibited from doing their work. From this point onwards the heat, which is very low at the start, steadily increases. Christophe said it must increase five degrees each minute during the time span of twenty minutes, until the last ten minutes of the process where it should be increasing only two degrees every five minutes. During this precise heat-time coordination, Christophe was able to do other tasks, but he would frequently stop back inside the cheese room to check in on the vat.

Precisely thirty minutes later, he lined up the plastic molds that were lying in a disinfectant bath on the floor. As he arranged them on a stainless steel tabletop he told us that every few months he has to wash them by hand with chemicals. Then he dipped both of his arms deep inside the vat until they were elbow-deep. He knew the curd was ready by squeezing it together in his fist, gently pulling it apart, and rubbing it between his hands. He handed us both a chunk of warm curd to taste. "Le prix," he said. After the curd passed this test, Christophe began lifting it in giant loads by hand using a metal instrument. He held two corners of a cloth in his mouth and the others were attached to the metal device he held firmly in both hands. He dipped the metal into the vat to scoop massive loads of curd and then dumped them into the plastic molds that were lined up on the adjacent stainless steel tabletop. He told us that each load of curd weighs around forty pounds.

Next, he placed thirty-pound weights on top of each mold to compress the curd and flipped them several times. This was called a "pre-press." It was a loud, rhythmic part of the process where we could not ask any questions, for one because it was too loud, but he also seemed to enter a deep state of concentration in these rhythmic, habituated movements. As he worked, the excess whey poured from the molds and drained into the center of the floor. He told us that the molds would be rotated three to four more times that day and once more at five in the morning before he takes them to a natural cave for "affinage"--a period of time set aside for the cheeses' ripening, the cheeses' rinds are washed with a brine. He

instructed us that the cheese room must be hot enough when the curd is going into the molds as he carefully draped a tarp over them to help them stay warm, like a parent tucking in their children for the night. He then drained the leftover whey from the vat, which would be diverted to the pigs in the forest through a pipe.

The cleaning process, which primarily involves washing everything in the room down with hot water using a hose that is attached to the wall, was a constant intermediary activity when we were watching. Every bit of curd and milk in the room drained down into the middle of the floor. As Christophe cleaned, he addressed the effects that modernization has had on cheesemaking. He bemoaned the constant cleaning process. When he was growing up, his mentors (his father and uncle) used wooden tools and wooden casks to mold cheese, but after World War II processes of modernization brought plastic, and with it, a more complicated cleaning process. He equated the modernization of the food industry with obsessive, and somewhat unnecessary, sanitation practices. Christophe is a purist. If he had it his way he would go back to the wooden tools and all that went along with them. He pointed out that the hygienic turn is partly at odds with what one really wants to happen in a cheese room: flourishing bacteria.

The Next Morning at Alpage de Mille

It was 4:30 am and still pitch-black by the time we got down to the cheese room on the first floor of the homestead. Christophe gently knocked on our door to wake us up, and when we got down there he was already un-molding in a rapid, trance-like pace. After he finished he told us that the AOP and “Alpage de Mille” labels would go on sometime around 10 am. He wore a headlamp that bounced light off the white walls inside the cheese room and a tattered t-shirt that read, “Living the cream.” He cut the crust around the outer corners of the cheeses from yesterday with a small paring knife to give them a more uniform appearance, required by the AOP, and gave these to us to sample. The “petz,” he said. The rubbery string I was obliged to pop into my mouth out of courtesy was cold,

pungent and sour: it was everything I could do not to vomit. Luckily, he began loading the cheeses from the day before on a two-wheeler and I had time to recover. He was suddenly wheeling the cheeses off towards the hillside facing the valley below. The mountains were towering black faces with only two or three beacons of light shining across. We followed him down.

The stone cellar built into the hillside was cool and humid and had a dirt floor that was rather muddy. Condensation created droplets of water that rolled down the stone walls. In the dim light we watched Christophe work in one of the muddy aisles by head lamp. He told us that he rubs and flips each cheese during seven days and then every second day for some period of time. Some rub their cheese with a coloring agent in the water to achieve the characteristic orange rind of Raclette in a shorter time period, but Christophe said he only uses “morges,” rubbing them with a brine from the oldest to the youngest so that the older bacteria get into the brine he’s using and populate the younger cheeses. There is another natural cheese cave in a neighboring alpage that was incorporated by Alpage de Mille where Christophe works in cases when he is producing more than he can accommodate in this cellar. In that cave, he does affinage by candlelight because there is no electricity. He said those times are “magic” and expressed a sense of wonder in engaging with nature in such a capacity.

As the cheeses age they shrink in size, turn auburn orange, and begin to smell differently. If the cheese is not rubbed enough or Christophe forgets to turn them, they will develop black dots that compromise their attractiveness and they ultimately will not pass the AOP’s organoleptic examination. Christophe told us that in Sion there is an industrial Raclette factory where affinage is done by robots. “They don’t touch the cheese,” he said in a tone filled with indignation. He reminisced about the Comté he used to make in France and explained how it was also robotized after three weeks of hand-affinage in a massive cellar with 100,000 wheels in Les Rousse. He rambled on about robots replacing people in

cheesemaking, and said he refused to acknowledge such cheeses as “real.” It is “tasteless,” he said.

The transfiguration of milk into wheels of cheese is also “magic,” according to Christophe. Where others might say his method is too labor-intensive, he is confident that this magic and sense of wonder with nature is accessible through getting to know what is going on with the material on a microbial level. Perhaps counterintuitively, smaller cheeses are the most labor-intensive because they need the most maintenance. Making Raclette du Valais goes much faster than making Tomme, for instance. However, the funds come through faster in Tomme production because they can sell them after only fifteen days. The aging time for Raclette du Valais presents a financial constraint for Christophe, as does the seasonality of the cheese. He works on the Alp for a limited time in the summer months, as opposed to the year-round work that one would have in a village dairy. I asked him what was the most rewarding aspect of his career above the Val de Bagnes, also remembering how yesterday his partner Carmen told me that they were not in their line of work to make money. He told me that during désalp at the end of the season there are people “old and young” thanking him for his cheese and said that in France this kind of recognition does not exist anymore. He proclaimed, “I may not be Swiss, but I am still a cheesemaker.”

Christophe’s cheesemaking practice in Val de Bagnes illuminates a complicated longing for a cheesemaking past in Valais and tells us something about the historically produced values that inform the artisan practice. As an interloper, Christophe has been making *Raclette du Valais* in Val de Bagnes for six summers consecutively, and his position is still precarious, both economically and socially. I found the particularities of his everyday artisan practice important and representative of what making *good* cheese *well* means in this context, and why it should matter, in Switzerland and elsewhere. The code for making *good* cheese *well* in Valais is explicitly provided and regulated by the

AOP. This chapter, however, is concerned with how the code is interpreted on an individual basis through situated know-how. From the situated, context-dependent perspective, making *Raclette du Valais* is far more subjective than applying a code of practice to a technique and can be based on processes of “bodily reasoning”⁸⁰ that are tightly knitted with technique. I compare and contrast Christophe’s artisan practice with other cheesemakers in Valais to reflect how the *Raclette du Valais* cheesemaking practice relies on individually situated knowledges within specific “ecologies of production.”⁸¹ On the individual level, there are also sensibilities, values, and backgrounds that cheesemakers bring to their practice. I explain how these particularities often contend with the AOP-prescribed ideas of what the cheese should be, namely, they grapple with notions of “goodness,” “tradition,” and “authenticity.” Finally, I address the issue of membership in Valais that revolves around making *good cheese well* and point out the small tragedies of the artisan practice in a moment when increasingly industrial modes of cheese fabrication dominate the Swiss market.

A Hands-On Affair

Cheesemakers that make *Raclette du Valais* often identify themselves in the larger trade based on what they are *not*. It is in a contrast between the heterogeneity of the *alpage* and the product they fabricate to the homogeneity of pasteurized milk and in the contrast between the absence of human hands appreciating and handling the material that they are often elbow-deep in that they understand their practice as authentic and traditional. Consequently, they understand themselves as making *good cheese well*.

⁸⁰ Nicholas Shapiro, “Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime,” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (August 10, 2015): 368–93, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.02>.

⁸¹ Heather Paxson, *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*, California Studies in Food and Culture, v. 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Christophe, in particular, was very committed to his artisan practice and frequently identified himself in opposition to industrial modes of cheesemaking.

Christophe grew up in a family of cheesemakers and has had a long career in cheesemaking. His education began at a young age with his father who was a cheesemaker, as well as his uncle who was a part of a cooperative he visited every school holiday to learn from. His grandfather was also a cheesemaker. Christophe completed a degree in cheesemaking in France and worked for 28 years in the French Jura where he made Comté cheese from raw cow's milk, but he did not have a particularly good relationship with the farmers there. One of his friends told him about how cheese is made in Valais and he ended up in the *alpage* above Val de Bagnes making *Raclette du Valais* where he has been working for the past six summers—before that Alpage de Mille was inactive (for 23 years). This is an indicator of the decline in small-scale dairying in the Alp that is continuing to take place across the region.

Christophe informed us that there are fifty other producers at his altitude in Valais, and in Val de Bagnes specifically there are two other Alpine dairies and three village dairies. When we were there Christophe would begin work around 4:30 am, and Carmen would rise an hour later; they both work between the cheese room, the milking barns, and the cave into the late evening. Carmen is often keeping track of the ten goats the family owns in the surrounding meadows and forest throughout the day. Alpage de Mille is privately owned by a family, but there is a *consortage* structure above the family that has the ultimate power. Carmen said they do not hear from these owners often. Carmen and Christophe lease the land and infrastructure from the family. The dairy cows consist of two milking herds, one is the Héren breed, of which there are 130, and the

other is a mixture of Blanche cows and heifers. There is also a younger herd, and Carmen's ten goats that she herds and milks to make her "goat wonders." There are about 40 cows that are fighting cows in the Héren herd.

At the beginning of the season, Christophe would wake up at 4:00 am to begin working because they would receive around 1200 liters of milk, but when I visited in July it was more like 700 liters of



Figure 2 Carmen's goats

milk because the cows were higher in the mountains and eating less; they were also more tired from climbing higher and higher so their milk production declined over the season. During the course of the summer the cows go all the way up to 7,000 feet and there are times when the herdsman and farmers have to endure extremely cold and bitter climatic conditions. According to Christophe, however, the higher up they go the more concentrated the flavor, and he is always aiming for "exceptional, concentrated flavors" in his cheese. Working with different quantities of milk is one of the fluctuations he has learned to embrace in his practice. In total, Christophe produces over 1,500 wheels of *Raclette du Valais* sold locally in Val de Bagnes (except for a small portion that is direct-sale in Geneva). Because the Raclette is AOP certified it gets a label and the characteristic "Alpage de Mille" engraving on the rind, which Christophe called "a very Swiss practice." Both indications signify locale and ensure traceability to the consumer. I met Christophe as he was making cheese on one late afternoon in July and early the next morning when he transferred the wheels from the previous day to the natural cave built into a hillside for *affinage*. I also watched him begin making another batch of cheese that

morning. In sum, I was able tap into his rhythm, technique, and method of making *Raclette du Valais* during my brief stay. His method was true to the phrase, “hands-on,” and everything I witnessed was as much tied to a daily circadian rhythm as it was outfitted to the particular phase of summer we were in.

Making *Raclette du Valais* is a hands-on venture. By hands-on, I include hand-held tools and implements that range from simple knives used to cut and trim curd to *affinage* machines that are automated to rub the cheeses with a brine, but remain human-scale. In other words, the machines are operated by a human and do not necessarily speed up or alter the process of ripening that takes place. In terms of technological advancement, from premodern to ultramodern, cheesemakers on the *alpage* in Valais use a wide range of tools. However, hands remain the most important tools in every small-scale Alpine cheese room. The first thing that struck me about Doris Mudry, my first cheesemaker contact, were her thick and calloused hands when we introduced ourselves. The extent to which work by hand is necessary to make “real” and “traditional” *Raclette* is contested. As a mode of production, creating a working and viable *alpage* can involve many other tasks that quickly become too many if you are doing everything by hand. Some cheesemakers view the boundedness to the cheese room and the cave as a constraint.

Cheese rooms equipped for making *Raclette du Valais* have copper vats for heating the milk and cooking the curd that can be heated by different sources. I encountered everything from wood-fired vapor machines (closer to the “original” method of lighting a wood fire directly under the vat) to high-tech methane powered machines that are purportedly more efficient and cost-effective. Copper is required to heat the milk

according to AOP rules, and was a great boon to food production in the Bronze Age, it is twenty times more conductive of heat in comparison to stainless steel. Christophe attested to the benefit of this material for his cheese in its superiority in the way the milk is heated up quickly and evenly so that the heat from the cow's bodies isn't entirely lost in transport and in the transfer from jugs to vat. In a way, the vat stands in for the cow's body in the way he explained it. Other implements in the cheese room include: stirring devices that are either hand-held ladles or automated arms; knives and *trainche-cailles* for cutting the curd; implements for removing the curd such as the hand-held device Christophe uses or curd haulers that attach to automated arms; plastic molds for shaping the wheels of cheese; and implements for compressing the curd and expelling the whey that are typically either hand-held metal weights or pneumatic presses (those are rare on the *alpage* and more common in valley dairies).

Raclette du Valais is a washed rind cheese, meaning it receives a washing of brine that is brushed onto the crust during the maturation period, which lasts three months. The rooms used for *affinage* range from above-ground hermetically sealed and climate-controlled rooms that artificially maintain a desirable level of temperature and humidity to natural caves built into the land, some of which are hundreds of years old. With natural caves cheesemakers rely on the natural environment and simple technologies such as dumping water on dirt or stone floors to achieve the correct environmental conditions for aging the cheeses. *Affineurs* tasked with washing and turning *Raclette du Valais* make up a whole workforce within the cheesemaking division of labor in Valais in the big *affinage* rooms that house cheeses from the whole region. On the smaller scale *alpage* though, the cheesemaker typically doubles as *affineur*. Does it matter whether the cheeses are aged in

an artificial environment or not? Most likely yes, because the taste and texture of the cheese is impacted from the microorganisms of specific microbiota, and in general, the controlled environments will likely lead to cheeses that are more consistent in taste and texture. Cheesemakers that identify themselves as doing things “traditional” will often feel the need justify their use of a controlled environment. Does it matter that stirring devices and curd haulers do the work that humans would have done in the past? Not likely in the resulting taste of the cheese, but certainly in terms of the operation’s viability and how cheesemakers self-identify as cheesemakers in Valais.

Let us take two examples, using Christophe’s practice as our primary example, and Doris Mudry’s practice at Mondraléche for comparison. Christophe does everything, migrating between the cheese room and the cave, by hand. I have never witnessed an activity that is quite as true to the idea of being “hand-on.” He likes stirring curd by hand because he can adapt his speed to the material according to what he “feels,” and in general, he seems to enjoy the movement itself of separating curd from whey. Not all cheesemakers are as hands-on as Christophe. Doris Mudry at Mondraléche has a stirring arm attached to her vat and told me about all of the other things she can do while she has a batch going. She feels less bound to a kind of “factory clock,” in comparison to Christophe, who is somewhat bound to the vat. When Christophe is not stirring, cutting, hauling, or flipping curd he is still checking in on the vat intermittently throughout the day. In addition, Doris has introduced an automated curd hauler and an *affinage* machine. After fabrication, Doris transfers the cheeses to a relatively newly constructed aboveground climate controlled “cave,” that is directly adjacent to the cheese room. After

the AOP inspects the cheeses in the cool, damp and brightly lit room she takes them down the road to a hundreds-of-years-old natural cave where they are “finished.”

It is important to note that it is only after the cheese has received the official stamp of approval as AOP-worthy that they are aged in the natural cave, for a short period of time, before selling. In spite of all of the advantages Doris sees in the technologically controlled cellar, creating a uniform environment suited to the cheeses’ maturation process and the benefits of gaining time from the cheese-rubbing machine they use, she still insists on transporting the wheels to the natural cave in the end--a final step that is seemingly nonsensical within the context of reducing the amount of labor involved. A possible reason why she is not able to do away with this final step is because it is a part of what she talks about as “tradition in principle.” Regardless of the fact that the cheeses will not spend an amount of time there that is particularly determining of the resulting smell or taste of the product, they must still go there to age on the older, pine shelves where cheeses that came hundreds of years before were also aged. For Doris, the technologies she has adopted detract from the labor-intensiveness of making *Raclette du Valais*, but not the extent to which they do things in a way she considers “traditional.” She is mostly concerned with relieving her workers of the physical strain they experience working at maximum capacity--selling all of the cheese they produce.

Christophe, on the other hand, uses tools that more or less fit into the premodern category (short of using prohibited wooden implements) and he understands his operation as small enough to work alone. In fact, he talked about how the family employed a couple of migrant workers in the past, which is becoming very common on the *alpage*, to reduce the workload when it was the most difficult. He said he did not like working in a team.

He enjoys a solitary practice and uninterrupted engagement with the material--good, clean milk. He is able to “make cheeses like before,” and pay attention to the fluctuating volume and quality of milk that arrives at the door because in some sense he enjoys a certain luxury in being able to almost exclusively direct his focus to the work in the cheese room and cave. Others, such as Doris, are torn between multiple activities that go along with making Alpine dairying a more viable operation. Whether it be running a small café, hosting tourists, or working more with the animals (as Christophe explicitly said he would never do), cheesemakers are frequently having to adapt to economic circumstances by either diversifying their activities and/or scaling up and introducing more mechanized equipment/technologies.

Christophe lamented the growing cowherds that are more concentrated on Alpine land in Valais. Having more cows implies more work outside of the cheese room in managing and caring for the animals and creates more pressure to move in the direction of mechanization due to the increased workload. When he got worked up about robots replacing people in *affinage* and the way dairies in the valley let the milk cool down he is locating chasms that are forming in the trade: what he understands as “real,” “good,” and “traditional” Raclette through his situated practice and what is being justified as such do not perfectly align. He sees the beauty of the practice in a *necessary* extent of its “hands-on-ness.” Likely, expanding or mechanizing the operation at Alpage de Mille would compromise the great beauty he works for. He defends his denunciation of the industrial, productivist model of cheesemaking where they “don’t touch the cheese” through his claim that this method of cheesemaking cannot possibly result in “real” Raclette. This

claim arises from his situated understanding of his own method through his hands-on engagement as more “real” and in the vein of “tradition.”

Cheesemakers like Doris who have adopted certain technologies to detract from the strain of labor in the cheese room and cave are still able to justify their practice as “traditional” because they are using raw milk that has the ability to be unpredictable in quantity and quality from day to day. Most importantly, they still contend with this unpredictability, at least in part, with their hands. In both cases, small-scale Alpine cheesemakers work to identify themselves in opposition to industrial cheese dairies, namely because the industrial model has replaced people with robots. As Christophe brought up, robots simply cannot accomplish what cheesemakers do in cheese rooms. One of many reasons why Christophe is perplexed by the infiltration of robots in the big cheese “factories” in Valais has to do with the benefits he sees in a deep engagement with the materiality of milk. His sensorial “attunement” to curd has allowed him to improve his practice, and produce consistently better *Raclette du Valais*.

Getting Attuned to Curd and Finding Flow

Ostensibly, the cheesemaking process can be mimicked by anyone with the right materials, tools, and training. Yet the physical motions that entail each stage of fabrication are complex and accomplished through a self-reflexive engagement with the material at hand. Making *Raclette du Valais* requires a practice that goes beyond a method that simply applies tools to technique. *Raclette du Valais* fabrication can be simplified into basic steps, though they are more complicated in practice, because some steps, particularly the first three, are not particularly distinct: 1) Setting the curd (when

acidification and coagulation take place) 2) Cutting the curd 3) Cooking the curd 4) Draining the whey 5) Molding the curd 6) Salt-bathing the formed wheels 7) *Affinage*.

The intermittency between the first three steps are flexible time periods where cheesemakers rely on forms of tacit and embodied knowledges in order to know when and how to work with the material. There is a relatively consistent time-temperature relationship that is followed throughout the process and this is provided through the traditional recipe of *Raclette du Valais* outlined by the AOP in the *Cahier des charges*. However, cheesemakers also rely on their acutely attuned senses: taste, feel, and smell, to go beyond what a recipe, temperature gauge, pH meter, and other tools can provide in terms of knowing what is going on in their vats. Sensorial “attunement”⁸² to curd is also a mode of improving the artisan practice over time.

Attuning to curd is a way of somatically attending to the material and is situated within subjective processes of bodily reasoning.⁸³ Making cheese by hand is an embodied skill and tactile learning process. Working by hand extends the mind and the body into the environment such that the hand becomes an instrument of knowledge in itself.⁸⁴

Skilled touch⁸⁵ is perhaps the most important tool in the cheese room. It is important to

⁸² Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (June 2011): 445–53, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109>; Shapiro, “Attuning to the Chemosphere.” Stewart defines a number of bodily practices as “atmospheric attunements” and Shapiro builds off of Stewart’s theory on attunements as facilitating a becoming *with* and orienting *towards* low-level airborne chemicals in domestic environments.

⁸³ Paxson, *The Life of Cheese*, 128–57. Paxson also describes bodily and tacit knowledges that arise in the artisan practice of American cheesemakers from their senses in her chapter, “The Art and Science of Craft.”

⁸⁴ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203466025>.

⁸⁵ Cristina Grasseni, ed., *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, EASA Series, [v.] 6 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007). Grasseni writes about the “skilled vision” of cattle breeders and how, “good looking cows become the objects of an intimate appreciation.”

remember the way touch still maintains a guiding force behind the mechanical operations introduced to the practice on small-scale *alpage* dairies. People such as Doris who use mechanical equipment like stirring devices and curd haulers still understand their craft as keeping with tradition precisely because their hands guide the implements and she still tests the curd with her arms and hands. In practice, tactile bodily knowledge is supplemented by practical knowledge of milk's transubstantiation into cheese. The cheesemakers I worked with were highly knowledgeable about the local conditions of the dairy, where the herds were grazing that day and when they move, and other details that influenced tweaks they made in their method. Cheesemakers contend with environmental conditions and the complex state of milk they handle that constantly introduce variation into the practice by adjusting *towards* variation in a way that can be highly tactile and embodied.⁸⁶ Some cheesemakers are more attuned to curd than others.⁸⁷ For example, Christophe and Doris will not reach for a temperature gauge or pH meter if they already know the curd is ready by feeling it. Those who have experience in the cheese world from a young age or have been making cheese for many years are likely more attuned. Objectivist technologies might be employed to service the craft, but not relied on heavily in the way that the senses are.

Christophe has spent years getting a feel for curd and gaining from his attuned senses: in connecting a subjective assessment of material conditions to what he feels and tastes he can discern when the curd is ready for cutting and molding. His sensorial apparati seem to be calibrated to judge based on the past. His arms, hands, nose, and

⁸⁶ Shapiro, "Attuning to the Chemosphere."

⁸⁷ Paxson, *The Life of Cheese*, 128–57. Paxson also noticed a difference between cheesemakers with more tacit knowledge than others that was hard to explain.

mouth were also notably trained from a young age when he first started watching his uncle work in his cheese room in France. Similarly, when Doris dips her arms into curd to check if it's ready she is very confident based on a "dry" feel she gets. From my perspective her arms were anything but dry, but this only demonstrates my point. The "feel" can be intuitive in addition to being empirical which is why descriptions of the correct feel and taste are so elusive. Both Christophe and Doris have come to rely on "body meter"⁸⁸ more so than the devices that they might use to confirm their reading, like pH meters. Their confidence in skilled touch⁸⁹ brings to mind Harry West and Nuno Domingo's (2012) description of Portuguese cheesemakers as "folk meteorologists"⁹⁰ who read the changes in wind patterns and humidity changes in their cheese rooms correctly. The intermittent stages of tactile evaluation I have described usually last mere seconds. Once it has been established that it is time to proceed through touch, and often taste as well, a button is pressed, or, in Christophe's case, he is set back into motion. While it might seem rather straightforward to stir curd for a certain length of time in relation to a steadily rising temperature, it is much less clear *when* one should stop stirring, *when* to add enzymes⁹¹ that coagulates the milk, and *how* to go about the preceding step of cutting curd. Robotics can accomplish manipulation of curd at more precise time intervals, but hands delving into the vat can evaluate the curd somatically

⁸⁸ Shapiro, "Attuning to the Chemosphere." Shapiro uses the phrase "body meter" to talk about "bodies as sensors with uncanny precision."

⁸⁹ Grasseni, *Skilled Visions*.

⁹⁰ Harry G. West and Nuno Domingos, "Gourmandizing Poverty Food: The Serpa Cheese Slow Food Presidium: The Serpa Cheese Slow Food Presidium," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12, no. 1 (January 2012): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2011.00335.x>.

⁹¹ Cheesemakers that make *Raclette du Valais* use rennet, which comes from the fourth stomach of an unweaned calf.

and this affords a certain flexibility in timing that not only bends the prescribed recipe according to circumstances at hand (no pun intended), but also makes it possible to produce cheeses that are individually more unique.

Christophe tends to follow the clock on the nose in his practice, but his sensorial attunement to curd breaks him out of that clock-time. When he repeatedly grasps at the curd in his fist and pulls it apart with both of his hands he is already changing the course of the prescribed recipe due to the time lapse. These are moments of reflexive engagement with the material that contrast to the “flow” of his practice. The assessments give him the time and space he needs for a diverging action, if he deems it necessary. Christophe gets into a “flow” of habituated movements when he’s stirring curd and pressing it or shaping it into cheese. Where Doris feels bound to the vat Christophe feels extremely connected and absorbed by his actions. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) theorizes “flow” activities as intrinsically enjoyable in her essay on people who seem to sacrifice material rewards for elusive experiences:

action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response...⁹²

The flow state that Christophe enters is particularly noticeable in the rhythmic and repetitive actions involved in the practice that he will only disengage from when the task has been finished. These were also quite noticeably the periods of time that are silent in the cheese room, for example during the “pre-press” that I describe in the beginning of

⁹² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, 1st ed, The Jossey-Bass Behavioral Science Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975), 36.

the chapter. Csikszentmihalyi's description of dancers as being simultaneously in control and merging with their environment resonates with what I imagined taking place with Christophe when he gets into his flow.⁹³ When he gets into a state of deep focus and concentration his only object of attention is the material and action he is engaged with and there seems to be nothing that can divide that attention.

Several cheesemakers I interviewed told me about how cultivating attention in cheesemaking was crucial to a good practice. When I asked Eddy Baillifard what the most important thing for a cheesemaker to learn was, he summed it up as, "paying attention." I think that the emphasis on attention to detail that I encountered in my conversations about the practice has a double meaning. First, attunement to curd is a kind of intensive "paying attention" and it is crucial because it allows for strategic action according to highly contingent circumstances that exist in this ecology of production.⁹⁴ Milk pH and quantity from the same herd can fluctuate day-to-day depending on pasture conditions or herd health. Not to mention the environmental conditions that are always shifting. To understand the constant act of paying attention that the practice entails, which, I believe is similar to an attunement, one must also understand its situatedness within a whole ecology of activity that ranges from microbial to human.

In addition, the fact that attentiveness to detail was emphasized to me is also an indication of a felt importance of unwavering commitment to the material at hand. Overseeing each stage of the process is central to self-identification and feeling like a confident professional in the craft. If making cheese is about an intimate concentration,

⁹³ Csikszentmihalyi, 37.

⁹⁴ Paxson, *The Life of Cheese*.

and a “becoming *with*”⁹⁵ the living contents in the vat, then variations of timing and how the curd is cut cannot be solely based on the fixed rules in the AOP recipe. Rather, these choices are highly subjective and do not only result from habituation but also from an intimate knowledge of one’s milk within the context of a specific ecology of production.⁹⁶ This can also be a kind of tacit knowledge that undoubtedly enhances the *Raclette du Valais* that one produces. Yet it is very difficult to describe because it evades what can be easily outlined in a set of procedures. While Christophe generally knows a science of cheese, and he demonstrates this in his explanations of what is happening on a microbial level in the vat, and in the cave, he never signaled to me that he knew why.

My guess is that Christophe is not too concerned with the “why,” and more amazed by the “how” of the biological processes that occur in cheesemaking. He can certainly read a pH meter and temperature gauge and understand the information he reads, but “knowing curd” is on a different plane of understanding. I am reminded of Christophe’s use of the word “magic” to describe a few things on the *alpage*: the sunrise and view he is met with every morning, rubbing cheese by a candle’s light, and the transubstantiation of milk into cheese--liquid into solid. The lifestyle of cheesemaking on the *alpage* seems to appeal to his desire for engagement with natural forces, and a syncopated work rhythm with the rising and falling of the sun. His use of the word “magic” in the absence of an explanation for the natural processes taking places in the cave and cheese room offer a clue into a wonderment Christophe feels in a practice that is deeply engaged with the elements. He has an appreciation for what nature can offer him

⁹⁵ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Posthumanities 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁹⁶ Paxson, *The Life of Cheese*.

in his practice and is taken with the fact of variety at work. He would always say, “there is just so much variety going on here,” when overwhelmed by describing the processes going on across multiple scales that impact the cheese--from the lifeworld of microorganisms to the biodiverse ecosystem the cows are a part of.

A Tradition of Knowledge?

Method in cheesemaking necessarily varies depending on situated knowledges of what “good,” “real,” and “traditional” cheese actually means. Cheesemakers make decisions to switch to automation or to build a controlled environment for *affinage* after grappling with prescribed ideas of these qualities (from the AOP) and deeply personal ideas of these qualities. Both the prescribed and the personal are channeled into working out new rules. While the literal method of making the cheese may not be convincingly cast as “traditional,” in the sense of outstanding continuity and a transference of knowledge through generations, it is still grounded in a tradition of knowledge making. Several cheesemakers I spoke with understand the way they make cheese in Valais as traditional “in principle,” not practice. In other words, not simply the steps that take place in fabrication, but *how* fabrication is accomplished: with what technique, with what kinds of knowledge, and with what underlying values in mind.

The roadmap for making “traditional” Raclette, in terms of the recipe, steps, and timing, is more or less the same as hundreds of years ago, but modern tools and machinery have changed the quality and rhythm of the process. Cheesemakers that make *Raclette du Valais* assured me that tradition exists as long as this roadmap is followed and the cheese is fabricated accordingly, but each cheesemaker’s know-how was also undeniably emergent and diversifying in nature, not fixed by the AOP’s code of good

practices, the *Guide des bonnes pratiques*. Nowadays, more cheese can be produced faster with less labor due to more technological input. The Interprofession of the AOP is the body which designates the “authenticity” of *Raclette du Valais* and aims to protect “traditional know-how.” The use of the designation is exclusively reserved to cheesemakers which are:

- recognized by the *Raclette du Valais* AOP Interprofession;
- meet the specifications of the Valais Raclette AOP; and
- have their cheeses assessed by the Interprofession

Only then may they use the designation *Raclette du Valais* AOP. The first step towards being accepted by the Interprofession is full compliance with their handbook of good practices, the *Guide des bonnes pratiques*. On top of that, full compliance with the AOP Raclette terms of references, the *Cahier des charges*, sets out the official requirements that a cheese needs to meet in order to qualify for the label. In terms of control and oversight, the Interprofession is primarily concerned with the end product, but they conduct three separate tests on the cheeses. The first is a quality pre-qualification, the second test is a taxation mechanism, and the final test is the quality qualification where an organoleptic exam takes place and cheese samples are taken to the Cantonal laboratories to be tested before they can enter the marketplace.

The established knowledge in the AOP handbook and terms of references are meant to be employed in the everyday practice of cheesemakers who want to sell their cheese as bona fide *Raclette du Valais*. However, on paper, these rules do not seem to account for variations in different settings or to leave any space for interpretation. The situated knowledges that are employed in artisan practice are not simply derived from

these guides and applied to practice. The narrowness of the parameters that are examined in the final test (size, dimension, taste, smell, texture) are almost always met despite the fact that cheesemakers use different techniques in practice. Technique in fabrication is a knowledge in and of itself. I noticed how cheesemakers in Valais tended to use the word “knowledge” to describe what they do as much as they would use words like “profession.” Knowledge of the cowherd, fluctuating conditions in the environment, and science factor directly into technique. These kinds of knowledges are informed by ecologies of production and are developed in a dialectic between established knowledges (AOP) and forms of tactile, embodied knowledges that vary greatly from one situation to the next, mainly depending on the relative experience and background of the cheesemaker. The institution of the AOP and embodied knowledges are embedded in practice, and new rules and ways of knowing that are employed in the everyday are constantly worked out in this intermediary space.

In premodern times, *Raclette du Valais* would have been made over an open fire, wooden instruments would have been used, and no heavy machinery or automation would have supplemented human labor. Today, the AOP forbids the use of wooden instruments and an open fire for sanitary reasons, and now automated stirring devices, curd haulers, and even *affinage* machines are commonplace on the *alpage*. One might be quick to assume that as soon as there is less handiwork involved in fabrication it is no longer defensible as “traditional.” The physicality and “hands-on” aspect of labor in the craft is the crux of an argument defending “traditional” Raclette against industrial “modern” Raclette. The extent to which hands and other hand-held tools and machinery

are used in fabrication is key to how cheesemakers justify their cheese as “good,” “real,” or “traditional.”

In this analysis I am not interested in whether or not the tradition of a method of cheesemaking is true in this context, in the sense of unfettered continuity with the past, but with why it is frequently upheld as such in the production of locality.⁹⁷ Most cheesemakers are not concerned with whether their cheese “counts” as traditional, there seemed to be a general agreement that anyone producing *Raclette du Valais* is doing things in a “traditional” way. They grapple more with how they can create “good” and “real” cheese without too much modern equipment taking away from the bodily experience of the practices. This distinction is important because it’s not a method that is a relic of the past, but rather a carefully orchestrated *reproduction* of something from the past that involves a combination of premodern and modern tools and results in individually unique cheeses.

Importantly, the sentiment that there is traditional mode of production on the *alpage* was strong among the majority of the cheesemakers I met with who were interlopers and did not identify with the tradition. Surely, as Alpine dairies have declined, or been discontinued, rules and practices have been lost or if not lost, then constantly adapted to new circumstances. Yet, the principled tradition of working with raw milk to make *Raclette du Valais*, for instance, requires a complex combination of tacit and practical knowledge embedded in the practice. Cheesemakers’ capacity to employ combinations of ecological knowledge, a knowledge of herd diet and health, and a knowledge of science within an environment that varies significantly is crucial to raw milk fabrication, and in a sense, tradition. With these kinds of knowledges cheesemakers

⁹⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

can proactively avoid errors that might lead to a batch of cheese that isn't AOP-worthy and will not make it to the market. At the same time, cheesemakers are not only concerned with whether their cheese qualifies as AOP, but also with the pressure from *consortages* to do well (specifically, the owners of the cows) and with villagers who they enjoy recognition from to feel prideful in their object of knowledge and labor.

Cheesemakers still occupy an important position as citizens in what is no longer a closed-off and bounded Vailasson society. With their depth of ecological knowledge in particular, they are seen as crucial members of modern cooperative systems that have been adapted over centuries to uphold common goods from the perspective of agricultural policymakers. It might seem from the perspective of a bystander that Valais is avant-garde in its social tenets of localism, but principles of reciprocity and cooperation stretch back to the medieval farming peasantry and their nomadism within a relatively homogenous and self-sufficient Valais. The way groups of resource users in Valais have managed their commons wisely over centuries has become embedded, in an institutional sense, within local culture (See Ch. 1). The role of cheesemakers is increasingly twofold as both environmental producers and food producers within complex systems: food systems and resource management systems. They are ever more critical figures within the context of a changing climate.

Cheesemakers are also being put into a double bind of sorts when they must contend with the variety of modern constraints that go along with small-scale dairying while defending "tradition," which in some cases has led to the cheesemaker as renaissance figure. Cheesemakers are thinking like scientists and ecologists, but also like amateur historians and veterinarians. For my *alpage* cheesemaker interlocutors, the

seasonality of *Raclette du Valais* posed significant problems in the marketplace when there is too much cheese ready for consumption in the summer and not enough in the winter. Yet, *Raclette du Valais* is a cheese that “should be” conceived of as a summer cheese, produced from late May or June until the end of August according to the tradition of transhumance.

This custom is slowly fading due to the pressures of a productivist logic and economic rationalization that favor year-round production, particularly in consideration of the fact that high tourist season takes place in the winter months. This creates a tension within the trade, because the cheese is not “meant” to be produced in the winter and in practical terms the cows that are in the valley are not producing as much as they were on the *alpage* during the summer. In other words, the cheese is accordingly scarce for good *reason* according the “traditional” cheesemaker logic. Still, this creates a severe economic constraint for *alpage* producers and ultimately presents an incentive to dairies to amp up production in the winter months. The dairies in the valleys have become accordingly scaled up and industrialized to meet demand, which puts even more pressure on small-scale *alpage* producers.

Cheesemakers making *Raclette du Valais* are diversifying their economic activities in response to these pressures and in an attempt to resist the logic of scaling up their operation and/or moving to the valley. One way in which they do so is in collaborations with tourist offices in order to begin providing agritourism experiences for their visitors. As tour guides and hosts, they have become experts in the history of the *alpage* they live on or the valley or commune they are a part of, and are thoroughly knowledgeable in the business of hospitality. As though there was more time to spare, the

more stringent AOP protocols have also forced them to begin to think like veterinarians. Though cheesemakers have always been concerned with herd health since it directly affects the quality of milk they receive, it was not until recently that they were involved in any capacity of treating the animal's health. Typically, farmers and herdsman are tasked with taking care of the livestock. Now, in the event that an animal becomes sick, and antibiotics are needed to treat them, the cheesemaker is typically responsible for justifying a specific amount of antibiotics that is needed, not the herdsman and farmers that guide them through the pastureland and milk them day-to-day. This change has caused several cheesemakers I spoke with to improve their practice, as Nicolas Coppey mentioned they (the AOP) are "obliging him to do better."

Foreigners must go above and beyond other members of the interprofession to establish repute and recognition for the quality of their cheese. The population of cheesemakers in Valais is currently in flux. In general, the cheesemaker archetype, a Valaisan Swiss man, is becoming less and less defensible. There are increasingly more women getting into the field and the number of Swiss cheesemakers is declining as expatriates and migrant seasonal laborers have become the stronghold populations in the field. Generational and long-term cheesemakers in the region, of whom there are only a few remaining, are known across cheesemaker and consumer registers and represented as the faces of *Raclette du Valais* AOP marketing campaigns (see Ch. 3).

As such, I argue that cheesemakers are not complicit in an AOP marketing ploy of heritage foodmakers as bearers of a relic from the past (see Ch. 3). Rather, they view themselves as valued members and contributors to a robust (and always changing) Alpine community. They seek for their membership to be celebrated and interdependence re-

enacted to affirm their intensely current skill and service. Cheesemakers in Valais, perhaps unwittingly, reproduce a community and a culture through their craft. This labor of reproduction, rather tragically, lends itself to the exclusivity of the Valaisan narrative capitalized on by the AOP and contributes to sustaining the idea of *terroir* in public discourse while covering up relative disenfranchisement.

From Scaling Terroir to Losing Touch

Among other externalities, the industrialization of the food system in Valais is disrupting long standing connections between people, people and animals, and people and the land that are not only meaningful to people like Christophe, but arguably an ingredient for survival in an uncertain dairying future. Perhaps, the Old World idea of survival through self-sufficiency will resurface on the Alp in a new context of major structural change in the dairy sector of Switzerland that's been taking place over the past few years. Falling milk prices, technical "progress" through mechanization, and growing herds in the industrial or semi-industrial operations based in lowland areas have contributed to a sustained pressure on small-scale farmers to essentially "grow bigger or get out." Hence the resortion to other sources of income. The productivist logic inherent in industrialization pushes farmers on the Alp to rationalize production by doing things like increase their head of cattle, work year-round, and/or adopt technologies such as automatic milking machines--all of which result in less direct engagement between people, animals, and local ecology.

These connections that stretch across species are central and historically important to the Alpine enterprise, and for people like Christophe, represent something beautiful and magical that should not be compromised. Disjunctures in ecologies of production

have the potential to exacerbate the effects of climate change as certain understandings of resources are altered or lost as a result. The nature of the geography of Valais is such that different areas are affected differently in the longer or more intense periods of drought and rainfall that are resulting from a changing climate in the region. As temperatures rise, growing seasons are shifting and grassland management needs to shift in step, as with the past, these changes have been best facilitated through a cooperative effort and network that spans from lowland farmers to highland alpine farmers. Christophe pointed to industrialization as a “homogenization” process. The growing dairy industry in tandem with protocol implemented by the interprofession of the AOP and certification bodies have resulted in increasingly stringent hygienic measures and monitoring in cheesemaking. Christophe is put-off by the pervasiveness of sanitized, pasteurized milk in the Raclette-making trade and he describes the milk as flattening out flavor. The “flatness” of pasteurized milk is a truism I heard many times. “Flattening” is a good verb to describe how Christophe understands pasteurization as destroying the integrity of raw milk, a material with a beautiful diversity and complexity.

A revival in cheesemaking on the Alp could mean using the artisan practice as a tool to enhance the overall social and ecological sustainability of the region. In terms of social sustainability, consumers keep artisan knowledge alive vis-a-vis business and their social recognition. In an intimate moment we shared when Christophe was washing cheeses in the cave, he told me earnestly how he feels when the villagers, “old and young,” thank him for what he is doing at Alpage de Mille. He derives immense pleasure in his social role as a cheesemaker in the Val de Bagnes, and pride in doing this kind of work in a place where his knowledge is still valued and recognized. Even if it is on a

surface level, exchange between village customer and alpine cheesemaker inherently resists the logic of agribusiness where a robotized workforce has been mobilized to do the same work. Part of the reason Christophe decided to move away from home, in France, had to do with a re-rooting in place, and re-establishing connections he witnessed eroding in France, such as connections between farmers and cheesemakers, and cheesemakers with their milk, animals, and the land.

In Switzerland, the *consortage* system combats these disjunctures in its cooperative structure. However, despite the historical precedent for and the promise of mountain dairying as a stronghold in a resilient local food system, Christophe has a shifting attitude and concern that directed me to take a more complicated position on this matter. In particular, it seems that social sustainability might become an issue in the future. His statement, “I’m not Swiss, but I’m still a cheesemaker,” is particularly telling and draws out the issue of acting out reciprocal villager-cheesemaker relationships. In other words, these relationships do not seem to be intimate or substantive even if they are long lasting. His wistful comment referred to his heritage in Alpine cheesemaking, which he highlights to actively work and supplement his non-Swissness. It is possible that his identification in another Alpine dairying tradition has facilitated a kind of mutual recognition he can establish more readily with some people, but his tone suggested that this comes with a price.

The emphasis on membership in Valais is a constant reminder of the possibility of an inverse situation of disenfranchisement. As a newcomer, he was not easily received by some people in Valais who he views as “stubborn,” and perhaps unwilling to change their old ways of thinking. For outsiders who are not French men, establishing contacts that are

crucial to cultivating a social position of regard for their enskillment proves even more difficult and reproducing culture more burdensome. For instance, Doris Mudry, moved to Valais from Lucerne, a city in a German-speaking part of central Switzerland. She was one of two women in receiving a cheesemaking diploma in 1982. When she started making Raclette at Mondraléche she found it very hard to be recognized despite her skill. She recalled women in a nearby village telling her they did not support her decision to make cheese and that she would “mess it up for everyone and no one would have cheese in the valley,” which is not only a demonstration of a sexist bad faith in women doing the work of cheesemaking, but also a way of threatening her with the relinquishment of membership.

Christophe would point out certain Swiss sensibilities embedded in his method such as the use of Héren milk and doing the engravings of ‘Alpage de Mille’ and AOP insignia on the cheese as part of what makes “real” Raclette. He convincingly argued against any attempts of making Raclette outside of Switzerland, including those in France, which is now a leading producer! In standing by the tradition of knowledge in *Raclette du Valais* cheesemaking he identifies with something that he is simultaneously a part-of and cast out of by nature of his French heritage. I think he longs for connections with local people in a way that is conflicted by their accessibility to him. The oscillation he feels between participation in something meaningful based on his practice at the same time as he feels unseen is perhaps best understood through the concept of recognition. The struggle for recognition as a cheesemaker in Valais is one for a kind of esteem and pride. Esteem is fostered through the idea of the communes in Valais having concrete communities with shared values. In joyful moments Christophe locates and subscribes to

Swiss values and sensibilities and actively participates in reproducing culture (twofold), but in other moments it is clear that the values do not extend to encompass his identity, particularly if they go unrecognized. Certain things in Christophe's practice are self-affirming as much as they might be directed outwards to receive recognition. The way Christophe does *affinage* is a good example of how the artisan practice in Valais is about reproducing culture through *terroir*.

As I described in the beginning of this chapter, Christophe populates younger cheeses using the microbial flora from older cheeses to generate "*morges*." Though "*morges*" is a difficult word to translate into English it most simply refers to the microorganisms that are naturally exposed to cheese through the air that live on the cheese's rind. The communities of microorganisms living on the cheese are the responsible agents in developing its distinct and complex flavor. From wheel to wheel of *Raclette du Valais*, *morges* differ substantially: based on the geographical context of the dairy, the cheese's spatial context within the cave, and the proportion of salt to water used in the brine that is applied in washing the rind. In terms of visibility, *morges* manifests itself as a thick orange skin that gets progressively darker on the outside of the cheese's rind where a wild play of microbial activity unfolds—developing the cheese's consistency and flavor from the outside inwards.

The existence of diverse communities cohabitating the cheese draws attention to variety and the existence of *terroir* on multiple scales. The microbes on the cheese can come from the air and the earth in the room, the raw red fir shelves the cheeses rest on, and the forest and pasture just outside. Different levels of elevation in the Alps, material conditions, and different kinds of plant life have proven to influence the kinds and variety

of microbes that are around to populate the cheese. Over time, the life on the cheese is like a dynamic forest of its own that works to inform the *terroir* taste. The pockets of air in the wood beneath the cheese (due to it's being unfinished) open up room for the cheese to “breathe” and harbor these diverse communities across the entire surface area of the rind. The fact that raw wood is required by the AOP to be used in the *affinage* indicates a level of understanding in how to accommodate the life on the cheese in order to achieve the most diverse flavor, its *terroir* taste, and it is a testament to the historically situated virtue of variety.

Not everyone in Valais populates cheese from oldest to youngest like Christophe does. It is not a rule inscribed by the AOP into the code of practice, nor an informal rule I observed elsewhere, so I have taken it as a sign of tacit knowledge. In this particular action, he is literally reproducing generations of life; each cheese receives and is transmitted culture from that which came before. His *affinage* generates new forms and replicates in miniature an evolution of culture, i.e. how content is transmitted from one generation to the next to generate change, growth, and dynamism. Cheese is a substrate for varieties of lifeforms to develop and evolve, live and die, and in some sense, this must represent the ideal community to Christophe. In the alchemy of fermentation as the ingredients (salt, milk, rennet), the microbes, and the yeasts dying on the crust work together to age the wheel there is a resulting net positive impact on its flavor, texture, and appearance. In other words, its overall “goodness.” This process is a powerful metaphor for community making and a literal production of locality. Christophe, whether he is aware of it or not, is making a statement in the labor-intensive act of reproducing diverse communities that contrast to the less ideal human community he is a part of. One that

does not immediately embrace the diversity of people as they cherish the uniquely diverse “*terroir* tastes” of foods that are considered to be a part of their cultural patrimony.

The question of which scale is the most significant in the making of *terroir* and in harnessing variety is a pressing one. Value is ascribed to different scales of *terroir* by different actors. For Christophe, his subscription to *terroir* is very specific. The specificity of the *alpage* he works in is the primary determinant of the *terroir* he produces. This was clear when he talked about the positioning of other Alpine operations at the same altitude or the dairies in the same valley occupying a secondary importance because they are interesting to draw out similarities and differences in taste. He thinks about the qualities of the milk he uses to fabricate cheese in terms of the distinctiveness and variety of lifeforms in the cave or cheese room and the natural elements outside that he contends with vis-a-vis the milk he receives (soil, pasture, climatic conditions). On the other hand, there are certainly those that attribute the *terroir* taste to the valley. For instance, consumers might say they prefer Raclette from the Val de Bagnes because of the steeper terrain, level of biodiversity, or specific soil there. Differentiating *Raclette du Valais* based on the distinction of the valley is quite common. On the largest and most removed scale, there are those consumers who think about *terroir* as broadly as tasting the distinction of the region as a whole. With each broader scale there is a greater level of remove and distancing that corresponds to a lesser degree of value being ascribed to the labor of the actual artisan practice.

It is significant that Christophe told me about how he does *affinage* because of my position as an outsider looking into what I assumed was an insider kind of knowledge. At

the time, I thought he was surprisingly enthusiastic to share the minutiae of everyday life there and the details of his method with me, a practical stranger, in each stage of the Raclette-making process. Now, I think of his genuine excitement to share his practice with a tinge of sadness in the realization that he likely does not have the opportunity to do so very often and my very interest may have been a form of recognition to Christophe. The knowledge I understood was not “insider” knowledge. Quite the contrary, most of the time outsiders are interpreting and reproducing a tradition of knowledge that is only thought to be shrouded in a kind of secrecy that corresponds to belonging. In reality, most cheesemakers I met shared with me liberally. It is unclear how much of the artisan practice can be said to be directed outwards for recognition or inwards for self-affirmation in terms of establishing a sense of authenticity and belonging in the trade.

I suspect that the specificity of the work that takes place in the cheese rooms and caves on the Alp goes mostly unaccounted for, which suggests that the practice is self-affirming. Aside from the occasional tourist or neighbor peering into the cheese room and the AOP’s periodic organoleptic examinations, the *alpage* is mostly a place of solitude and isolation. The significance of Christophe’s daily practice is somewhat unknown, which is a small tragedy. Villagers maintain closeness with their local cheesemaker that is mediated through exchange, most sales are direct but not face-to-face. Many people in Geneva grow up knowing where their Raclette is made, in which commune, and even on which *alpage*, but they often struggle to describe *how* it is made or *who* makes it. When family and friends of Etienne would ask about my fieldwork at social gatherings in Geneva, Etienne always drew in the crowd with the specific details of how the cheese

was made that people, without fail, were quite surprised by. For instance, many people had never heard of rennet.

The gaps in knowledge between consumers and producers is growing and crystallizes in misunderstandings of how to properly handle and eat Raclette. JP Probst, the leading *affinage* expert in the AOP, told me that nowadays people taste *Raclette du Valais* “as if it were industrial.” Particularly when they use “raclinettes,” small, individualized cheese roasting devices as opposed to the cheese roasting ovens that are used to eat half a wheel in one sitting. He laughed, “and they wonder why their cheese is oily and why they have a bad experience.” He characterized the gap between producer and consumer know-how as a dynamic that has evolved between the cities and the countryside and as a general product of “commercialization.” He also pointed out how the outer layer of the cheese formed by *morges* is now “obligatory” to remove because consumers, in particular those that are city dwellers, do not know what it is or how to deal with it. To demonstrate this he told me a funny story about a woman fainting who did not know to remove the brown skin--she left her Raclette sitting in the sun on her kitchen countertop and it produced a horrible smell. In the past, it would have been common knowledge to remove the outer layer of the cheese. Now, there is a greater disconnect between people and what they find on their plates, namely between consumers and their food producers. Yet, at the same time, a greater desire to access the conditions of production through the consumption of food products. The chapter that follows seeks to explain and problematize the AOP’s code of practice, quality controls, and promotional materials and highlight the friction that ideas of goodness, realness, diversity, tradition, and authenticity tend to have underpin *terroir* in this context. I also

seek to explain the way in which *terroir* gets appropriated, fetishized, and ultimately sustained across the AOP-consumer spectrum.

Since I met Christophe last summer, he has left Alpage de Mille for reasons that I was not able to establish through contact. However, I was informed by a secondary source that it had to do with the rent going up. I can imagine that Christophe was conflicted about leaving, and hope he found somewhere else in the Alps where his practice were more accounted for. He was probably disappointed because in the old days reciprocity between the farmers/owners and the cheesemakers was the rule. Maybe he added another mental note to his laundry list of lamentations. Christophe seemed to worry about the future of cheese. Not just in Valais, but in greater Europe and the world. He was deeply committed to what it meant to handcraft *Raclette du Valais* as a kind of resistance against the industrialized mode of fabrication that dominates the market in Switzerland.

AOP Certification, Control, and Marketing

“It's like the memories of your grandmother cooking a fabulous soup with vegetables and finally you make vegetable soup out of a powder from a packet. It's a bit ideal vs. real, if you are a working mother with children and a real vegetable soup will take you two hours to prepare, and you're coming home at half past six and have to serve the soup by seven...finally the dream is over. You make it another way. Raclette is also on this tradition/modernity distortion. You are trying to get as close as possible to the tradition, the real thing. But in the end you live in a city, and you might not buy half a cheese because this is for eight to ten people, and you're only three people eating. That's where the dream is over. You also have a dream of bread and it's a real baker behind the bread you eat, but it's maybe made abroad by an industrial process and then they put it in to the oven in your gas station. You still have the impression you are eating real bread, but you are not. You eat apples that look the same, they are glossy with no brown spots, and you think it is healthy, but is it really healthy? Does it taste the same? Are these the apples you should eat? I think all food products are touched by this gap between origin, what is should be and used to be, and the forces of modernity. I think that a lot of people want it, and maybe it is possible with the future of internet shopping and ordering that people living anywhere in Switzerland can order some cheese in the morning and maybe by evening someone can deliver some real, genuine Raclette cheese to their doorstep. That would really help to go around COOP and Migro with all their requirements, they really push the price down, and they make up 90% of the food market.” (Madeleine Savioz, January 14, 2019).

Madeleine is a marketing professional that works for a regional promotion agency based in Sion. She works closely with the AOP Marketing Commission on *Raclette du Valais* messaging. What Madeleine says about the “ideal vs. real” has to do with the way we consume food in the 21st Century. Her identification of a nostalgic longing for “real” food, one that closes a perceived gap between what a food object should be (used to be)

and what the forces of globalization have morphed the food object into, is extremely informative in understanding *Raclette du Valais* from a consumer perspective in Switzerland. Madeleine likens the Swiss consumer's desire for "real, genuine Raclette" to a memory of one's grandmother taking the time to make a vegetable soup from real ingredients, as opposed to the indistinguishable contents of a powder from a packet. *Raclette du Valais* has become a repository for cultural memory in Switzerland. Like other food products with appellations of origin in Western Europe, namely France and Italy, the cheese has been conferred greater importance in a globalizing world that has resulted in declining traditional food cultures.

A keenness to remember and a marked fear of forgetting were undercurrents in Madeleine's analysis of the gap between origin and modernity. For example, the anxious way she questioned the apples one might buy in the grocery store encapsulates a moment that is situated within the age of agribusiness when the use of things like genetically modified ingredients make us question the "look" and taste of certain foods. She notes that the apples might look the same but she is not convinced that they are the same. Whether they really taste the same and if they are still as healthy as the apples "before" is the basis upon which she assesses their authenticity as "real" apples. Her keen sense that a desire for "authentic" foods has been sustained vis-à-vis nostalgia of the bygone days of making and eating food, in spite of the modern constraints inherent in the fast-paced lifestyle of city dwellers, begs the question of why? How can this longing for old foodways and concern for authenticity be explained? And what are the specificities of the national demand for "real, genuine" Raclette in Switzerland? I argue that *Raclette du*

Valais is not only a marker of a collective cultural identity but also an edible “site of memory.”⁹⁸

Nora defines *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory, as the remains of history and an indicator of the “memorial consciousness” that seeks out memory precisely because we have abandoned it.⁹⁹ According to Nora, the reason we produce sites of memory, such as monuments, museums, and archives, has to do with nostalgia for what is attainable:

It is the nostalgic dimension of these devotional institutions that makes them seem beleaguered and cold--they mark the rituals of a society without ritual; integral particularities in a society that levels particularity; signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal.¹⁰⁰

These projects are unattainable because they no longer occur naturally and must be maintained through commemoration. She identifies cultural identifies that are defended through building such sites of memory, and how this construction would not take place without the substantial fear of losing identity.

The commodification of “traditional foods” services a nostalgic desire for naturalness and authenticity within the context of a highly industrialized food system and increasingly globalized food culture. Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura” in his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” offers a lens to understand the nostalgia for, and increasingly popularity of, traditional foods. Though

⁹⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *University of California Press*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 19.

⁹⁹ Nora, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Nora, 12.

contrary to Benjamin's "aura" as it relates to works of art, I see the "aura" of *Raclette du Valais* intensifying rather than diminishing over time as it is augmented by a public understanding of *terroir*. The marketing power that *Raclette du Valais* derives from its AOP label is strong. The cheese's identification with ideas such as origin, authenticity, naturalness, and traditional know-how make it desirable from a consumer perspective when the goal is to connect with one's identity and cultural heritage, or as a tourist, with someone else's. I use Pierre Nora's "sites of memory" and Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" to explain the increasing consumer demand for *Raclette du Valais* in Switzerland. In a reading of the cheese as an auratic object vested with historical significance in the collective memory, and by drawing from Karl Marx's concepts of alienation and commodity fetishism, I take a critical stance on the AOP's certification, control, and marketing activities. The AOP's success in carving out a chunk of a cheese market crowded by industrial producers can also be understood in relation to a broader cultural context and moment in a globalized, technified foodscape.

Food as means of connecting to place and as a distinct marker of identity is ever more important in the globalized world we live in now. Processes of globalization have inspired many theories of rootlessness, alienation, and a greater psychological distance between people.¹⁰¹ The transformation into a speed-filled world has changed what we know as the cultural, the political, and on a psychological level, ourselves as being-in-the-world.¹⁰² It is no wonder that food inspires nostalgia in a context of hyper-globalization, and that there is a movement surrounding the protection of foods that can

¹⁰¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 29.

¹⁰² Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1. Indian ed (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ, 1996).

act as a medium through which memory and identity are accessible through taste. The Slow Food Movement, started by Carlos Petrini in Italy, centers around reviving old foodways around the world and protecting traditional foods that are coming under threat. Slow Food ideology closely informs my case.

In relating Benjamin's concept of "aura" to foods, I demonstrate how the commodification of *Raclette du Valais* gives the "original" food product (which no longer exists) an auratic quality that is magnified through the social fact¹⁰³ of *terroir*. Similarly to the way aura works with what are considered "traditional" food items, the concept of *terroir* is fetishized vis-a-vis social projection onto the object. I draw from a combination of my conversations with my interlocutors in Valais, the *Raclette du Valais AOP* website, AOP image campaigns, and the Slow Food manifesto as my core ethnographic data to complicate the Swiss ideals¹⁰⁴ of origin, naturalness, and authenticity that are promised in the AOP label and erroneously believed to be embodied in the cheese itself. While simultaneously, I detect what is being vacated from the label, namely the labor process behind the cheese.

The Aura of *Raclette du Valais* and Tasting Food to Remember

"There are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory [...] We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no lieux de memoire. Indeed, it is this very push and pull

¹⁰³ Durkheim and Lukes, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

¹⁰⁴ These are of course not *just* Swiss ideals, but for the purposes of my focus on a Swiss national project to preserve collective identity and memory I qualify them as such.

*that produces lieux de mémoire—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded”*¹⁰⁵

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin addresses a historical transition at the end of the 19th C when works of art became technologically reproducible.¹⁰⁶ By 1900, technology had not only reached a level of sophistication that permitted the reproduction of all works of art but it had also substantially altered the effects of the works on the public.¹⁰⁷ Technological reproducibility carved out a new space in artistic processes. Similarly, the advent of the mechanized mass-production of food items, particularly with craft items like cheese that were customarily made by hand in the past, completely altered the way we conceive of food and food-making processes.

Benjamin is perplexed by the way in which art objects lose something that is intangible yet crucial as time unfolds and technological reproduction becomes more sophisticated:

Even in the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art--its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence--and nothing else--that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. [...] The here and now of the work underlies the concept of its

¹⁰⁵ Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” 12.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin and Michael William Jennings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin and Jennings, 21.

authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded on tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day.¹⁰⁸

From this excerpt we can ascertain that the “here and now” of the work and its embeddedness within a particular ritual or tradition that has historical depth is responsible for its “aura.” Throughout the essay it is clear that Benjamin sees an erosion of “aura” associated with technical “progress”--there is a certain sense of modernity as a net loss. In the second version of his essay, Benjamin defines “aura” outright as “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”¹⁰⁹ Using examples found in nature, Benjamin observes that a mountain range on the horizon and a branch “at rest on a summer’s noon[...]until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance[...].”¹¹⁰ He associates the decay of aura with transience, the desire of the masses to “get closer to things,” and necessarily overcoming uniqueness through reproduction.¹¹¹ However, in my case, as we will see, uniqueness is thought to be preserved through reproduction.

Focusing primarily on photography and film, Benjamin calls attention to a fundamental shift in the way art forms are consumed by the masses, there is a traceable “change in the function of art.”¹¹² Essentially, photography and film opened up new

¹⁰⁸ Walter Benjamin and Michael William Jennings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin and Jennings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 26.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin and Jennings, 23.

¹¹¹ Benjamin and Jennings, 23.

¹¹² Benjamin and Jennings, 109.

avenues for seeing and being-in-the-world,¹¹³ in particular, in the way that things that ordinarily could not be perceived by the naked eye could suddenly be seen up close. In explicating aura's decay through technological innovations he speaks of the way things have become more accessible. In other words, an object's availability to the masses is the antithesis to the amount of aura it can accrue over time. Auratic objects are inherently perceived as authentic, and from my reading of Benjamin, they inspire a sense of nostalgia and looking-backwards. Whether with an object of consumable art or with food, the aura of authenticity cannot be understood as material, i.e. existing in things or in places. Aura is more of an idea that has a hold on the nostalgic consumer.

In thinking about the *terroir* taste of *Raclette du Valais*, grounded in empirical sensory apprehension, I can see how it might inspire a perception of aura that is very much nostalgic and associated with cultural loss. The concept of *terroir* is much like what Benjamin refers to as the "here and now," of an object with aura, a conditional element of differentiation and uniqueness that augments aura. With impressive agreement, there is a broad commitment to *terroir* in French-speaking Valais, but how the concept is sustained reveals its instability. I would argue that, with the inherent variability introduced in fabricating *Raclette du Valais* by hand and in the specificity of the conditions of production in Valais, one wheel of this type of cheese couldn't be exactly reproduced to begin with. In fact, cheesemakers convincingly informed me that the specific yet mutable conditions of production on the *alpage* make each wheel of cheese individually unique and impossible to recreate. Yet, the AOP pushes the narrative that it cannot be reproduced anywhere *else* and is based on a regional distinction.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty and Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The very notion of establishing a *Cahier des charges* for the cheese and having AOP status is premised on the idea that a specific place, production method, and to a certain extent way of life are uniquely implicated in the cheese's taste—making it authentically *Vallaisson*. In other words, it is based on the idea that the cheese, in fact, *can* be reproduced in accordance with tradition. This contradiction draws out conflicting motivations and ideals. For even as the AOP attempts to enforce strict guidelines in the manual and standardization through controls to get as close to the “original” and thus authentic food item as they can, they are essentially playing a losing game. There are inevitable variations occurring regardless. On the scale of one *alpage*, a batch of milk is likely different in fat content from another, and one wheel of cheese might be aged slightly longer or differently in comparison to another wheel in the cave.

As an intervention in Benjamin's analysis of aura associated with art works, the existence of aura is not necessarily predicated on an object's permanence. Where he links decay of aura to transience, and states that “uniqueness and permanence are closely intertwined,”¹¹⁴ I find that this position does not hold true in the case of food items where perishability is not only guaranteed by carefully facilitated. With cheese, aging the wheels (i.e. controlled decomposition), is an important factor in the development of a complex *terroir* taste, and contributes to its aura. The permanence of object is thus not essential to its aura. The ephemerality of food only supports the argument that aura cannot exist within the material object but only exists in an intangible realm of ideas, and most significantly, in memory.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin and Jennings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 105.

Raclette du Valais is part of what Pierre Nora describes as a *lieu de mémoire*, a vigilant site of memory that is used to defend a particular Swiss cultural heritage. Since traditional food cultures are threatened by global, homogenizing forces, AOP products, which are frequently referred to as part of different heritages across Western Europe, signify a more widespread fear of collective memory loss or the loss of a collective cultural identity--which are obviously tightly linked. Slow Food is an international movement with leftist leanings that has millions of members in 160 different countries. The movement began as a protest in Italy against the construction of a McDonalds near the Spanish Steps in Rome.¹¹⁵ Their mission, stated on the homepage of their website, is to give everyone access to food that is “good, clean, and fair.”¹¹⁶ It is also part of their mission to reject “alimentary monoculture,”¹¹⁷ encouraging eaters to slow down as they taste their food and enjoy the conviviality of eating in company with others. The Slow Food community is not only concerned with reintroducing home-cooking into the sped-up lives of consumers, but also with supporting artisanal food products, craft food items, and heirloom varieties that have histories. Under the umbrella of Slow Food’s “Ark of Taste” program local groups around the world are publicizing their “forgotten foods,” often with regional concerns about the impacts of agribusiness on their livelihoods and reference to the eroding consumer (tasting) know-how at stake.¹¹⁸ Food variety and

¹¹⁵ “How a McDonald’s Restaurant Spawned the Slow Food Movement,” Time, accessed April 29, 2019, <http://time.com/3626290/mcdonalds-slow-food/>.

¹¹⁶ “Slow Food International,” accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.slowfood.com/>.

¹¹⁷ Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste, Arts & Traditions of the Table* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 21.

¹¹⁸ Slow Food USA, “Ark of Taste,” Slowfood USA, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.slowfoodusa.org/ark-of-taste>.

differences are regionally circumscribed and represented as cultural patrimony in Slow Food member countries.

An underlying message in the Slow Food Manifesto, written by the movement's founder Carlo Petrini, is the idea that modern-day consumers can and *should* taste to remember:

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model [...]. We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the...insidious... Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods [...]. A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life[...]. Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us *rediscover* the flavors and savors of regional cooking [...]. In the name of productivity, Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer.¹¹⁹ (My emphasis added).

In rediscovering a taste memory, as Petrini suggests, we might hold on to the past as a defense mechanism and form of resistance to the “mcdonaldization” of society and sped-up lifestyle of the 21st C that political economic forces have made us subscribe to. The movement, in some sense, is one that is driven by the nostalgic consumer, who supports a production and consumption politics through the very act of eating good food or what I heard in reference to good Raclette as the “real thing.”

The desire for the “real thing” in Western countries is related to food becoming more alien to us due to the distance it travels to our plates, likely from multiple locations we are not familiar with. The fear that foods we buy in the grocery store, that are packaged in plastic and standardized in terms of appearance, might have been morphed

¹¹⁹ Petrini, *Slow Food*. The Slow Food Manifesto.

into something that is completely foreign and apart from the original food item due is likely due to the introduction of genetically modified ingredients. There is concealment and a distancing involved in the consumer experience that seems to have resulted in a cognitive dissonance with food. Navigating this dissonance as an ideal/real space is symptomatic of our modern food situation--as Madeleine observes. The conference of ever-increasing auratic power onto the traditional food item is a somewhat ironic response to the dream of “real” food that has actually led to the commodification of typical, regional food products in Europe. Thus, contrary to Benjamin’s argument that aura is lost through technological reproduction, there is a way in which the traditional food item’s availability to the nostalgic consumer has augmented its aura of authenticity.¹²⁰

Since traditional food cultures are seen as eroding, nostalgic consumerism can be understood as directed towards maintaining a collective body-memory (e.g. the artisan practice in the Alps). The idea that, as a consumer, one can support a traditional mode of food production is central to the nostalgia that is physiologically realized through tasting the cheese. The “traditional know-how” that is virtually preserved through the *Cahier des charges*, the reproduction of the traditional recipe of *Raclette du Valais*, stands in to comfort consumers of a more general “Swiss know-how.” That is, anyone who is Swiss, and particularly people from Valais, can identify with the know-how as their own. Even if they have never seen the inside of a cheese room! Buying products with the AOP label can be seen as an imaginary tool in a toolbox used to protect what a national group “knows,” from what others do not know. However, as we have seen with the case of *Raclette du Valais*, this know-how is increasingly learned, adapted, and then reproduced

¹²⁰ Or, perhaps, an aura of the ancient.

by migrants falling outside of the bounds of what is determined as cultural belongingness in Switzerland. The question of who owns the know-how behind the cheese is not a straightforward one to answer and requires further analysis into how geographical distinctions are treated more generally.

Knowledge as Property: Geographical Distinctions

Raclette du Valais' distinction from other cheese on the market comes from its associations with its uniquely *different* taste, a specific place, and a traditional form of production. Like many of the other Swiss cantons, Valais is often distinguished by its traditions propagated through local know-how and distilled through generations over centuries. Cheesemaking is but one domain of cultural activity implicated as part of a robust Swiss cultural heritage. Even though Valais is known for many types of cheese that are "typical" and do not leave the country, the *Raclette du Valais* AOP is regarded as (by far) the most important one from the perspective of cookery media sources.¹²¹ Still, the demand for the cheese is mostly limited to Swiss borders; it is by no means an export-driven commodity.¹²² After having received the "appellation of origin" fairly recently, in 2008, *Raclette* producers with a designation of origin are still in the process of crafting their "brand" as a foodstuff with "distinction."¹²³ They were able to obtain the appellation in the highest court in Switzerland by showing documentation of people who knew of the cheese in Valais since the 1500s.

¹²¹ Catherine W. Donnelly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Cheese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹²² Reviron, Sophie, "Switzerland: Raclette Du Valais--Cheese--Claiming PDO."

¹²³ Sarah Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*, California Studies in Food and Culture 47 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Cheese has long been a part of a geographically differentiated market. For example, Roquefort is frequently set apart as incomparable to other blue cheeses. In total, France leads the way in this respect with 56 types of cheese that are registered in accordance with French law with the highest form of protection--the *Appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC), first codified in 1905.¹²⁴ The *Appellation d'origine protégée* (AOP), which translates in English to “protected designation of origin,” is a latter and more stringent offshoot of the AOC system used in France that has been enforced on a legal basis in Switzerland since 1997. Under the adaptation of the Agricultural Act in 1996, the Federal Council first created a register for Geographical Indications and finally, with the Swiss Ordinance of the AOP-IGP in 1997 the protection of Geographical Indications for agricultural products was officially adopted. The Ordinance defines the types of designations, their protection, and control requirements.

Food producers that want to have AOP status in the canton of Valais must use raw materials from that geographically bounded region and each step of the process must take place there. AOP is not exactly a label, but rather an official Swiss-government issued stamp of origin that verifies certain food items were made within a particular geographical location and that they are protected in the name of the designation. To the consumer, however, the AOP marking functions like a label because it guarantees traceability, confers the authenticity of a tradition, and promises a distinct *terroir*. The Federal Office of Agriculture (FOAG) is the responsible body that receives applications for the registration of AOP, keeps a register of all the designations in the state, and supervises the regulatory certification bodies that enforce controls against the regulation.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Barham, “Translating Terroir: The Global Challenge of French AOC Labeling,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 2003): 127–38, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167\(02\)00052-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167(02)00052-9).

Within a wider context, AOP status is a part of a global Geographical Indication scheme. European countries are increasingly implementing labeling policies of genuine regional food products with reference to their *terroir*. Contemporary GI laws established by the World Trade Organization (WTO) evolved out of national laws that were concerned with curtailing any imitation of food products that derive their value in a specificity of origin and traditional form of production.¹²⁵ A “Geographical Indication,” is any material or linguistic symbol that is deployed in the establishment of a food product from a particular locale.¹²⁶ As an international intellectual legal distinction, Geographical Indication protects the use of the phrase *Raclette du Valais* itself within the EU countries (since 2011). This means that cheese producers in Europe cannot use the name unless they are certifiably making the “real thing” within the cantonal borders.

Geographically distinguished craft food production has mostly been addressed in literature from the modern-day consumer’s perspective.¹²⁷ In an increasingly globalized world consumers are looking for differentiation in a food system where food comes “from a global everywhere, yet from nowhere that [consumers] know in particular. The distance from which their food comes represents their separation from the knowledge of how and by whom what they consume is produced, processed and transported.”¹²⁸ In consuming *Raclette du Valais* over a generic and essentially “placeless” Raclette, buyers imagine that they are supporting a “traditional” know-how of food production linked to place. The exclusive characteristic of the product, in its unimitatable qualities, and its

¹²⁵ Barham.

¹²⁶ Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction*, 22.

¹²⁷ Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction*.

¹²⁸ William Vitek and Wes Jackson, eds., *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 113.

related heritage connotation, is also what makes it so appealing from the consumer perspective.

In accordance with federal legislation, and as one of the 22 registered food products with AOP status in Switzerland, the *Organisme Intercantonal de Certification* (OIC) body and by extension the government of Switzerland are entitled to “ownership” over the words, *Raclette du Valais*. As well as the *Raclette du Valais* flag logo that is imprinted on the cheeses (See Fig. 1). GI status aims at thwarting the imitation of the cheese, or “black market” cheeses as one of my interlocutors said jokingly, that bear the words “Raclette” and/or “Valais” on their packaging. The OIC convincingly argues that juridical protection is in the interest of small-scale Alpine cheesemakers who are afforded a better market for their niche product this way.



Figure 3 The AOP flag on the right-hand side of the image is applied to the cheese after fabrication.

While it may be true that *Raclette du Valais* has found greater market stability with its designation,¹²⁹ and consumers certainly benefit from the transparency afforded in buying a “pure” product, it is worth wondering how much cheesemakers are actually benefiting from this distinction.¹³⁰ The know-how embodied by cheesemakers seems to be rendered the property of corporate owners. The presumably beneficial aspects of the

¹²⁹ Urs Guntern, the Director of the AOP, has monitored this progress.

¹³⁰ I feel that this is a very important question that I cannot answer with the ethnographic data I have. If I had more time I would have liked to follow up on this inquiry by investigating the wellbeing of *alpage* workers, both in terms of market and non-market mechanisms.

designation for all parties involved must be situated within GI's assumption of a "natural" connection that exists between cheesemakers with their know-how and Alpine dairies in Valais that is premised on belonging in Valais. As we will see through AOP marketing schemes, GI renders a complex set of relations between the Alp, labor, and management into a singular and fetishized element of "nature," placing the Vailasson man at center stage. However, before we get there, I will outline the structure and workings of the interprofession of the AOP.

The Interprofession of Raclette AOP: Establishing Knowledge

The interprofession for *Raclette du Valais* AOP enforces membership, quality standards, and controls on the cheese throughout each season. They established in the district of Conthey in March 2009 and started their activities in January 2010. The key roles that the interprofession fulfill are: 1) the protection of the appellation of origin, 2) the promotion of quality/sales, 3) planning and regulating production, and 4) representing interests to the authorities and the public.¹³¹ The cheese's protected designation must be registered by the FOAG before any of the activities of the AOP begin. They function through a system of "collective quality action," their institutional structure is much like that of the *consortage*. Monitoring and inspection of production conditions and the product against the specifications of the AOP label are accomplished through a collective: public authorities, members of the AOP through self-regulation, and a committee of elected experts that assess the quality of the wheels of cheese before they enter the marketplace. Under this politically charged and bureaucratically regulated system, only certain Raclette may be sold as *Raclette du Valais*. The creation and negotiation of a relevant supply is also established by the interprofession. Product quality

¹³¹ "Portrait," Raclette du Valais, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.raclette-du-valais.ch/fr-ch/portrait>.

management and marketing are handled by smaller commission's that are delegated by elected board members.

The members of the interprofession are a combination of legal and natural persons and can be divided up into three groups that Urs Guntern, the Director of the AOP liked to call “the three families.” However, these groupings do not remain distinct in most Alpine enterprises: 1) milk producers whose milk will be used in the fabrication of *Raclette du Valais*, 2) the manufacturers of *Raclette du Valais* (including valley dairies and *alpage* dairies), and 3) the refiners of *Raclette du Valais*. In the case of *alpage* production, which is my focus, the cheesemakers are also the *affineurs* (or the refiners) because *affinage* takes place on site, often in natural caves (see Ch. 2). The milk is delivered to the cheese room everyday by the milk producers i.e. farmers (often the owners) and herdsmen where it is transferred to the vat as quickly as possible to retain freshness. Those members that are accepted and represented by the interprofession upon qualification are limited to these cohorts: farmers, cheesemakers, and refiners. Employees on the *alpage* are most often seasonal migrant laborers from Spain, Portugal, and some Eastern European countries that typically work alongside the cheesemakers or as herdsmen with the farmers. They are put into a camp of auxiliary labor and are not represented in the interprofession.

The board members of the interprofession delegate to management/commissions and are elected by “The Assembly of Delegates.” The assembly is made up of all members, totaling 50 people when I interviewed Mr. Guntern, and votes frequently happen on all important decisions for the functioning of the AOP. Thus, its actions are democratically conducted. In order for change to be affected 3/4th of the assembly must

agree. The assembly also elects the board of 10 people. Each “family” can nominate three members for the board, and the last member must not belong to any of the three. The board, then, elects management. Within management there is 1) a marketing commission, 2) a taxation commission, 3) an appellation commission, and 4) a quantity commission. Cheesemakers can appeal if they do not agree with the taxation commission’s organoleptic examination through the appellation commission. The quantity commission sets production requirements. For each cheesemaker they allow a maximum production per quarter/per year. They typically limit production in the first quarter when milk yield is highest to account for the oversupply of cheese that happens in the summer after those cheeses go through *affinage*. Each month the taxation commission goes to each *alpage* and village dairy to exercise controls and perform the examination. If 2-3% of the cheese produced does not meet their quality standards they are stamped with a mark that signifies that they fall outside of AOP quality and cannot bear the designation of *Raclette du Valais*.

To become a member of the interprofession of the AOP in Valais there are certain criteria that must be met. The criteria are all detailed in the AOP’s handbook of good practices, the *Guide des bonnes pratiques*. First and foremost, production must take place within the geographically bounded canton of Valais. Also of utmost importance is the use of raw milk in fabrication. The cow’s diet on the *alpage*, consisting of an array of grasses, herbs, and wildflowers, contributes to the fatty flavorful milk that contributes to the cheese’s qualities. Pasteurization and centrifugation are prohibited because the unique milk flora that is closely linked to the cow’s diet along with the soil and natural environment of Valais and are cornerstones of the *terroir* taste. Feeding the cows with

silage fodder is strictly forbidden. A copper vat must be used to make the cheese, and the cheese must be submerged in brine (salt bath) for at least 24 hours after the curd is pressed and formed. Each wheel of *Raclette du Valais* receives the AOP quality seal, engravings on the circumference of the name of the valley and *alpage* it was produced, and what they call a “passport” (the casein brand). Each cheese is also dated because both the time and origin of manufacture are essential to ensuring the traceability of the product. The AOP labels cost around 5 francs each, and certification costs have reached roughly 800 francs per year. During maturation, which is required to last at least three months, the cheese should ripen on shelves made of red spruce and be washed and turned regularly. *Raclette du Valais* can be marketed as *Hobelkäse* (to be sliced) after a nine-month maturation period. The only ingredients permitted in fabrication are untreated milk, rennet, selected lactic bacteria, and salt. The heat treatment of milk and the recipe for fabrication are both specified in the handbook (AOP).

Those that become members of the AOP agree to these specifications in the guide upon entry, and they also agree to have their fabrication operations and cheeses assessed on routine basis by multiple persons. After initial approval, controls are exercised regarding the conditions of production. Consequently, every two years, there are more controls of the structural and traceability conditions of the enterprise. Each month, there is the final product test carried out by the committee of experts from the AOP who perform an organoleptic exam in the cheese caves and a chemical analysis in partnership with cantonal laboratories. In all cases, these controls are geared towards a full compliance with another AOP handbook. The *Cahier descharges*, or control manual, elaborates very specific and narrowly defined requirements. For example, they describe

the correct smell, taste, texture, and appearance of the cheese. Interestingly, the handbook is not only concerned with the mandatory control issues in cheesemaking that are outlined in the, “Safety and Production Requirements” section. Their authenticity goal is central to the project of monitoring the dairies and is detectable in the detailed instructions for manure management, forage quality, the milking and keeping of the cows and so on. For instance, as soon as a cow eats imported fodder, food derived from genetic engineering, cauliflower, or beets it is thought to tarnish the authenticity of the milk and these are consequently forbidden as ingredients in the making of *Raclette du Valais*.

In terms of the hygiene criteria, which are crucial to cheesemaking with raw milk, the interprofession primarily relies on self-supervision. Quality assurance i.e. if anything goes wrong with the cheese, ultimately falls back on the cheesemaker who complies with legal requirements for food safety in Switzerland. The enforcement of those laws are carried out by state authorities, and are not technically related to the AOP’s workings-- though their reputation is certainly at stake. Similarly, compliance with the handbooks is mostly not enforced by the interprofession itself, aside from the organoleptic examinations. Rather, the state-run OIC body that oversees all AOP foods in the French and Italian-speaking areas of the state in tandem with livestock farming governmental offices regulates and control for compliances across the region. The most significant role that the interprofession plays, in terms of control and oversight, is in the final examinations of the cheeses. Shortly before this final quality qualification there is also a taxation mechanism. They probe the cheeses with an instrument to take lab samples and then taste the cheese with the cheesemaker until they can establish an appropriate “grade” in accordance with a scale of permissibility. Basically, if they meet a minimum threshold

then they are approved. Each year, there are medals (gold, bronze, silver) given out to the best cheeses. These were often on display in the different *alpages* I visited which suggests they are a source of pride and a reference to the forms of recognition that cheesemakers value.

Jean-Paul Probst, one of the three experts in the taxation commission, has been the “representative” of the *affineurs* since the interprofession’s conception. He checks in on each *Raclette du Valais* cheesemaking operation (monthly) to assess the cheeses against the specifications of the *Cahier des charges*. He conveniently takes credit for building the “know-how and discipline” that is regulated on the *alpage*, but, was once virtually nonexistent, according to him. He would often qualify the past cheesemaking in Valais as “total catastrophe” and the current level of expertise as “*classé*,” which means top-shelf. JP, who now looks to be in his seventies, was involved with *Raclette* cheesemakers in Valais from an early age as a cheese purchaser in a large cooperative. He is the fourth generation in a Gruyere cheesemaking family. Originally, he wanted to get into the butter business, or work in labs, but finally he ended up taking a position in Valais purchasing cheese after he found an advertisement for the position in his local newspaper. He found the opportunity attractive because it was a good way to stay in the dairy sector but also be in the army. In his descriptions of encounters with cheesemakers in the beginning of his career he discovered that the cheeses in Valais were all wrong according to what he had known growing up. His critiques that they were “too bitter,” or “too bloated,” were met with demands for legitimacy, and even violence in one case where he said his military training saved him. In summary, he said, “I had to threaten them in the beginning to rise to my standards and make the cheese well.” After retiring

from the trading job he found a replacement that he was quick to describe as “lacking cheesemaking knowledge.” Not wanting the know-how he takes substantial credit in forging to dissipate was his primary motivation in becoming a part of the AOP Taxation Commission.

JP was overt in the sense of entitlement he feels in exercising controls on cheesemakers according to the specifications of the *Cahier descharges*, but also, ultimately, according to his will. I got the sense that his idea of what *Raclette du Valais* should be was carved in stone, with very little flexibility. He referred to his refined “habit” to taste *Raclette du Valais*, which he has been cultivating over the course of 36 years, to defend his judgment of the cheeses as objectively fair. This was in response to a question I posed about the potential subjectivity involved in the exams. He oriented his practiced taste in his childhood: “Taste is habit. If you are raised eating industrial cheese or potatoes you are used to tasting it.” Practiced taste locates distinct flavor profiles, as was evident in his later description of people that he joins on a tasting panel that judge Alpine cheeses in a competition every two years. Referring to the other panelists according to their profession, he said that, for example, the veterinarian couldn’t explain why one cheese was different from the other when he would ask him. Taste is one of the five qualitative measures that are evaluated in the organoleptic examination of the cheese before it is deemed AOP-worthy. Alongside the cheesemaker, and expressing his thoughts openly, JP assesses 1) taste, 2) texture, 3) smell 4) openings, and 5) the exterior in accordance with the specifications, but also, according to his embodied knowledge of what the cheese *should* taste, smell, feel, and look like.

The texture of the cheese in the handbook is described as “smooth and supple,” the odor as “milky fresh with floral notes,” and the taste as “milky fresh with the suggestion of acidity and dominant herbal and fruity notes.” From my experience eating *Raclette du Valais*, the cheese does not smell “milky fresh” but rather funky, and I am certainly not able to distinguish the floral or herbal notes when I taste it. As an amateur taster, I only reached the level of apprehending differences in the strength and consistencies of cheeses. On the other hand, JP is able to go into even further detail than the manual achieves, and make connections between different characteristics of the cheese at hand that harken back to the multiple processes of fermentation that take place. This is evidence of JP’s tasting “habit.” JP says the taste should not be “soapy, bitter, or sweet,” and needs to be “frank,” the texture should be “soft, creamy, flexible, and toothsome,” the exterior “soft and silky” not like “the skin of a toad,” and there should be 2-3 opening per sample no larger than the size of a pea. He drew attention to the way in which some of the criteria are tightly linked: If the holes are too big, it will be too sweet and likely have too much propionic acid that can also contribute to producing a pungent smell. Or, if there are lots of tiny holes, it can signify too much lactic acid. Similarly to how Christophe follows the *Guide des bonnes pratiques* with wiggle room that is afforded by his embodied practice and attunement to curd, JP Probst assesses the cheese somatically against the established specifications in a way that relies on highly embodied knowledge that is influenced by his background.

It is indubitable that JP Probst has a practiced taste, sense of smell, and feel for *Raclette du Valais*, but nonetheless, the way he positions himself with a superior taste

judgment¹³² to others and the indispensable repository of know-how in Valais is dubious. He recounts the savior narrative of cheesemaking Valais with such charisma and confidence that I felt as though he had told the story many times, and perhaps it became more dramatized. The idea that he single handedly introduced order and discipline, that was so desperately needed in order for cheesemakers in Valais to be good at what they do, socially accepted, and invested in by the community, is likely skewed. However, that does not mean that his story should not be taken seriously. It is particularly telling that he was the main character of his story and his portrayal of cheesemakers was oriented in the past when he depicted them as resistant, stubborn, and sometimes violent. In taking substantial credit for the know-how of cheesemakers in Valais, and talking about cheesemakers in the past tense, JP obfuscates the current labor process and the how making “good” *Raclette du Valais* in modern-day Switzerland is possible. In addition, JP identified the notable differences in the *terroir* taste of cheeses from Valais for me in what the cow eats and differences in altitude. He did not mention the laboring bodies that are instrumental to these flavors arrival in the cheese vis-a-vis the artisan practice. His understanding of *terroir* vacates the labor process from the cheese.

Grounding *Terroir* in a Reading of Marx

The AOP’s explanation of *terroir* on their website refers to the geographically related material conditions of Valais (such as soil and climate) as well as the sociocultural landscape as expressive in taste. However, the social component is glossed as “traditional know-how.” This verbiage obscures the labor power and process of *Raclette du Valais* fabrication, both in terms of the people laboring, who are not all Swiss natives with a

¹³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2010). This recalls Bourdieu’s description of taste as a class phenomenon where those with more “cultural capital” judge what constitutes proper taste in a society.

background in making the cheese, and the process itself, which is increasingly more modern. Through an analysis of the OIC's certification-and-control processes, and the stories that the AOP tells using the language of *terroir* in their marketing campaigns, I will analyze their activities in terms of Karl Marx's concept of fetishization to consider how labor is alienated from the product when it reaches the consumer in commodity form. Though the AOP marketing strategy appears to be corrective of commodity fetishism, they actually produce a kind of double fetish through the concept of *terroir*.

Marx's theory of alienation involves at least four different types: 1) when a worker does not own their means of production, 2) when other people are in control of their subjective state of being or action, 3) when they become a "cog in the machine" in the mode of repetitive production, and 4) when they become estranged from other people. Essentially, in each case, alienation presupposes a worker laboring under a capitalist system that deprives them of autonomy in their actions and ownership of the product. For the purposes of *Raclette du Valais* production, focusing on the first form of alienation, that of the worker from their product of labor, will be the most apropos. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), Marx identifies these four kinds of alienation and addresses them at length. Overall, alienation for Marx produces a kind of dominating system that stands outside the worker, one that they has no power over, yet one that thwarts their freedom.¹³³

The alienation that arises in the worker's relationship to the products of her labor has to do with the fact that the worker is very much a one-sided dependent on the industry and does not own or control any means of production. At this point, the worker becomes a commodity producing commodities, which results in a situation where the

¹³³ Karl Marx, "Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 81.

product of one's labor becomes alien to the labor itself. The product has its own life and power outside of the producer.¹³⁴ This phenomenon of alienation is heightened when production is increased: "The more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital."¹³⁵ According to Marx, the more of the product of their labor becomes alien to them the poorer their "inner world" becomes, and the less belongs to them.

This form of alienation from the product of labor does not only involve the objectification of the labor itself. Marx also describes this labor exiting the worker's body and existing outside as an independent force:

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.¹³⁶

The idea is that the worker is increasingly deprived of life through this arrangement where life is actually conferred on the object produced. The worker-object relationship becomes one that is increasingly asymmetrical. Where the more the worker produces, the less they have to consume, the more value they add to their product, the more devalued they become, and so on and so forth. In Marx's conception, they ultimately become "nature's servant."¹³⁷ This direct relationship of estrangement between worker and

¹³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹³⁵ Marx, 29.

¹³⁶ Marx, 29.

¹³⁷ Marx, 30.

production is virtually erased in the way the political economic system works according to Marx's thinking.¹³⁸

The alienation of the worker from their product of labor is not conjured up by the worker or the object. Rather, they are forced into this relationship by the capitalist actors who own and manage the means of production. The relationship becomes one where the worker's object of labor actively works against their interests. Aside from the workers' lack of control over the production and how it is produced, the alienation that results also has to do with the objectification of the worker's labor i.e. the worker's labor-power becomes a commodity in and of itself. Similar to other products, the worker's labor-power has an exchange value on the labor market. The profit (exchange value) of the object the worker produces funnels into the hands of capitalists who pay the worker a wage at the lowest rate for them to maintain the highest returns. This dominant arrangement is one of asymmetrical exploitation where the capitalist maintains control through purchasing the worker's labor-power. Further, the arrangement is self-perpetuating, meaning the more the worker produces, increasing their productivity, the more they, in turn, benefit capitalist owners.

Essentially, the first form of alienation Marx describes in the *Manuscripts* infers that labor becomes alienated when it does not own what it produces, and consequently the worker becomes a slave to what they produce. When not only the worker's product, but also their labor is reduced to a commodity with exchange value over use value, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism comes into play. In, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," Marx introduces the commodity as a transcendent and mystical thing in the way its material form becomes imbued with human power.

¹³⁸ Marx, 30.

Commodities appear to have intimate social connections, as opposed to people who become increasingly more related by their labor. Marx's diagnosis of the capitalist, industrial system is that there are increasingly, "material relations between people and social relations between things."¹³⁹ These relations are crystallized in the moment of exchange. When a consumer is unable to perceive the social relations between people that produced the thing, then the thing becomes increasingly relatable to other things vis-a-vis the relation crafted between two commodities--money and the thing purchased. Hence Marx says, "If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident."¹⁴⁰ He takes the position that it is "absurd" that this material, concrete labor is perceived as anything but immaterial in the commodity form.

Marx locates commodity fetishism within the sphere of production, but the idea can also be understood from the point of view of the consumer. From a Marxist perspective, the object that the consumer buys, somewhere down the line of the commodity chain, has been entirely vanquished of its production process. In other words, the physical apprehension of the object and its assigned exchange value work to obfuscate the original production process that took place. Marx's concept presumes the inability of the consumer to access the social relations of production in the commodities they purchase. The commodity comes to have a fetish character in the way that consumers fail to see the labor process, and as a result, attribute their own qualities to the good. Marx aptly describes the resulting commodity as a kind of "social hieroglyphic we

¹³⁹ Marx, 321.

¹⁴⁰ Robert C. Tucker, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, eds., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 324.

try to decipher...to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.”¹⁴¹ Value, in Marx’s view, seems to be assigned through some “mystical” force i.e. the fluctuations of prices of commodities in the market, and the product itself is removed from the labor power and time that actually went into its production. Thus, it can be ascertained through Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism that labor’s abstraction is normalized in the consumptive experience.

Marx’s concepts of alienation and commodity fetishism pose crucial questions in marketing a “taste of place.” The AOP website’s description of the designation of origin, and what the appellation ensures to the consumer, aligns nearly perfectly with their definition of *terroir*: “Everything, from the raw materials to the production process, comes from a clearly defined region of origin. Moreover, the product has to have been manufactured according to traditional methods” (Raclette du Valais AOP). This alignment generates the basis for which the label becomes “proof” of *terroir* across consumer and producer registers. The AOP is the sole organization responsible for marketing *Raclette du Valais*, and their strategies speak towards what the concept might affirm and stand in for in a symbolic realm of consumerism. Through their marketing, it is also possible to detect the extent to which various workers’ labor in the cheese’s production are removed from the product.

Cheesemakers in Valais are very interested in how *terroir* is expressed in the taste of their cheeses through the processes of fabrication and *affinage*, but they tend to think about *terroir* in terms of the scale of the *alpage* from a perspective of production. They wonder how factors such as relative levels of biodiversity, altitude, and soil composition

¹⁴¹ Tucker, Marx, and Engels, 322.

set their cheese apart from other cheesemakers in their valley. On the flip side, from a consumer perspective, “*terroir* foods” such as *Raclette du Valais* are conceived of on the scale of the region. This different calibration of scales in understanding *terroir* reveals different ideological commitments. The way that *Raclette du Valais* is marketed, in terms of regional *terroir*, plays a role in shaping a consumer commitment to a regionally broad food “tradition” and its authenticity. What the concept does for producers is more complicated. The concept is useful to think about the factors and conditions they understand to influence production. Yet, for expatriates and migrant laborers, sustaining *terroir* is also a burden to bear because it fundamentally denies their identities and presence.

Marketing the Taste of Place

The AOP marketing strategy reveals the environmental and social context in which *Raclette du Valais* is fabricated, but the stories they craft are partial and tend to obfuscate aspects of the labor process behind the cheese. The environmental context is foregrounded over the social component of production, which might be referred to in brief interludes, almost always as “traditional know-how.” The extent to which *Raclette du Valais* can be considered “traditional” is questionable within the context of a rapidly changing producer and environmental landscape over many years. The *alpage* has its own hierarchy according to the AOP’s rhetoric; there are “master” cheesemakers and “farmers” who inhabit higher positions in relation to employees. “Master” cheesemakers tend to fit the script of Valais tradition borne out of and partially constructed towards a regional and national patrimony. This figure is often a ruddy-cheeked Swiss looking man featured in their image campaigns. The migrant labor that produces the cheese is

invisible. Primarily Eastern European, Spanish, and Portuguese migrant laborers travel to Valais to work on the *alpage* in the summers. Yet many Swiss consumers remain oblivious to this labor force because it has been excluded from the marketing narrative, or they look in the other direction, because it does not align with the AOP's crafted images of affective belonging and *local* product.

The AOP is implicated in a production of place that contributes to a nostalgic public imaginary in Switzerland, one of a timeless association between a particular people with a particular place.¹⁴² In their view, culture certainly “sits in places.”¹⁴³ A considerable tension is produced in this strategy: by calling the consumer's attention to a social and environmental context they seemingly employ *terroir* to defetishize the food commodity, but they are also alienating migrant labor and capitalizing on *terroir* language. Their definition of *terroir* is predicated on the supposed authenticity of a regionally circumscribed food tradition that dates back centuries. However, what happens when the people who are reproducing this food “tradition,” who are reproducing culture, are mostly *not* from Switzerland? The “traditional” know-how in *Raclette du Valais* fabrication is less and less practiced by the ideal subject--namely the Vailasson man from a long line of cheesemakers. As more migrants and women enter the field, using the word “traditional” in the way the AOP does surely becomes less defensible, but the problem lies in the way that this imaginary, and the concept of *terroir* itself, is sustained in spite of

¹⁴² Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–15. Gupta & Ferguson (1992) critique the implicit and naturalized assumption that culture can be mapped onto places, particularly when there are those that inhabit borderlands and not discrete spaces. In this case, migrant seasonal workers who spend half the year in Valais and the other half of the year somewhere else in Europe carry their culture with them and defy Swiss ideas of localized culture.

¹⁴³ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

the realities of a changing socio-cultural landscape and the radically different ideals that exist on the *alpage*.

When I met with Madeleine Savioz, the member of the AOP marketing commission I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, she told me that their scheme for positioning *Raclette du Valais* is that it is “just different.” They are convinced that consumers can notice the difference if they try the cheese. The word “difference” implies *terroir* at work and on a more basic level the variety depicted in accompanying images of Alpine landscapes peppered with wildflowers in image campaigns. The cheese itself, a product of the heterogeneous mixture of milk, rennet, salt, microbes, and fungi, is a wildly diverse entity. As Madeleine says, people know, expect, and enjoy these differences they can notice in the cheese. In COOP and Migro stores, the two main supermarket chains in Switzerland, there are usually combination packages with three different types of *Raclette du Valais* from three different valleys. However, the AOP, always in alliance with the consumer, would certainly not publicize difference in terms of the labor behind the cheese.

Consumers want to turn a blind eye towards difference when it comes down to migrant labor. Madeleine’s take on this phenomenon made this selective perspective of difference very clear:

In Switzerland, everyone is aware that if you are eating salad from Vaud it is probably not a local farmer picking and watering the salad. But it is a part of the image you do not want to see, you want to believe in something really genuine. All it would take is some journalist saying OK now we are going to show these people what is behind this image of Heidi in the mountain with Peter and well it’s not Heidi and Peter it’s Pablo and Boyan so hmmm...I think people would say

OK, I knew it, but if they would really have to face the figures they would be kind of disappointed.

By “face the figures,” Madeleine is referring to the increasing number of migrant seasonal laborers employed in Valais in the summers. I think she responded to my question about temporary migrant labor on the *alpage* strategically by referring to migrants that harvest lettuce instead. When I asked a certification expert from the OIC, Corinne Couillerot, why she thought people know about but do not want to see migrant labor she said there is, “fear embodied in protecting what ‘you know’ and they don’t know.” Both Corinne and Madeleine suggest that the fear of seeing migrant labor in Switzerland has to do with a fear of “the other” co-opting what they want to claim as their own, authentically Swiss know-how. The belief in something “genuine,” as Madeleine says, perpetuated through image campaigns that not only promote local food products, but also the region as a whole, becomes consumable through tasting the cheese.

The engravings in the cheese, which include the AOP label, the valley it was produced, and the name of the *alpage* cheese-making operation, provide explicit references to place and are thought of as bona fide “proof” of *terroir* across producer and consumer perspectives. Traceability through taste and reading the engravings in the cheese render the environmental context of place (both inherently through taste and intentionally through AOP marketing) much more accessible to the consumer than the human labor conditions and process. When the social context *is* revealed in media campaigns, the story is partial to the primary operators in the *alpage*. Interestingly, in many of their promotional photographs on the *Raclette du Valais* AOP website, the

landscape dwarfs the cheesemaker, or a photo of the cheese itself, which also works to emphasize the environmental context of production.

The general composition of the AOP media campaign is a landscape image, a male Swiss-looking cheesemaker or farmer and the product. Some advertisements pair

the cheese with complementary AOP-certified products from the region in a cornucopia of heritage foods. Accompanying the image of the cheesemakers, farmer, and *affineurs* are words such as, “roots,” “tradition,” or “know-how” (See Fig. 4). In one campaign, there is a depiction of the iconic Matterhorn in the



Figure 4: “Roots, know-how, character (personality)”

background, a pyramid-shaped mountain that is the most recognizable peak in the Alps and a massive tourist attraction (See Fig. 5). In the foreground there is a photograph of a man scraping *Raclette du Valais* onto a plate, but you do not see his face. There is a fire burning in the background of the photo, and the cheese he scrapes oozes onto the plate next to the traditional accompaniments of potatoes and white wine. The caption reads, “the summit of taste,” a pun that once again closely aligns the Valaisan environment with the taste. In a recent campaign from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, there is a photo of a man’s body, presumably that of a farmer, with a cow’s head chewing fresh grass (See Fig. 6). The caption reads, “the main farmer only puts the best grass in cheese.”



Fig 6: “The main farmer only puts the best grass in cheese.”

The advertisement is, perhaps ironically, referring to the cow as the main farmer. In replacing the head of the farmer with the head of the cow, however, there is an overt papering-over of the labor behind the cheese and, again, the reference leaves us to our own devices to decide what the face of the farmer looks like.



Fig 5: “The summit of taste.”

Alaine Farine, director of the Swiss association of AOP-IGP, sends readers a letter in the most recent edition of the AOP’s magazine *Tradition and Terroir* that addresses “concrete” added value the label brings to the cheese. His tone is slightly romantic but mostly didactic. The theme of distinction through naturalness, authenticity, and origin are central throughout his letter:

But what are the concrete added values that AOP brings to cheese?

The milk is produced, processed into cheese and matured exclusively in the region of origin. The origin of the product is therefore guaranteed...Since the bacteria that make up the milk flora are closely linked to the geographical environment, they guarantee a typical sensory quality of the milk, and therefore of the cheese. For this reason, milk must not be processed and pasteurization, centrifugation or micro filtration are prohibited. Only in this way is the authenticity of the product guaranteed...The PDO¹⁴⁴ or PGI product is managed by an interprofession. The legislation requires that all the actors in the sector be represented and that the structure be conducted in a democratic manner. The added value

¹⁴⁴ PDO is the English translation of AOP.

generated is thus distributed fairly throughout the entire value-added chain, from the ripener to the milk producer...¹⁴⁵

Throughout the letter Farine speaks towards the production process as though the milk springs from the land itself, in a way that is free of actors, a clear fetish. He does not represent the agents of production in his description until he mentions the interprofession which he claims is fair and representational, perhaps reassuring consumers of what they fear is not true. He always circles back to the ideals of authenticity, naturalness, and origin with the confirmation that these qualities are consumer-guaranteed. He is careful to make those ideals, which I would posit are Swiss ideals, seem literally consumable.

Farine directly links these consumable qualities to the environment. It is somewhat obvious that laborers constantly mediate the environment and vice versa to produce these qualities, but these interactions are not central to the story he crafts. Rather, he constructs a depersonalized narrative of cheesemaking that is informative but does not include the agentive power and skill required to create the cheese. The cheesemaker is always connected and part of the cheese they produce in the mere fact that milk is an alive fluid that they delve their arms deep inside of the vat throughout the fabrication process. The workings of human and nonhuman actors certainly factor directly into what is thought of as the *terroir* taste of *Raclette du Valais*. Yet, human and nonhuman laborers are, for the most part, missing from descriptions of the *terroir* that makes *Raclette du Valais* so unique.

The magazine, *Tradition and Terroir*, invokes a national public and encapsulates the primary message that is divulged to a base of consumers in Switzerland. What “tradition and *terroir*” talk does in AOP marketing is call consumers attention to a

¹⁴⁵ Franco Jenal, “Saucisson neuchâtelois IGP et Saucisse neuchâteloise IGP,” 7.

particular story of a social and environmental context that seemingly works to defetishize the commodity, but the words themselves, “tradition,” and “*terroir*,” risk fetishization as they become increasingly capitalized on. As a result, it is almost as though a double fetishization takes place. Meaning, the commodity is fetishized beyond its original basis. Accounts of tradition and *terroir* could also contribute to the phenomenon of cultivating taste as a marker of distinction as JP Probst does in the cultural and professional authority he assumes through his practiced taste for Alpine cheeses.¹⁴⁶

Distinction is also useful to think with in terms of explaining how *terroir* language works on a national public in the AOP’s campaigns. The commercial and affective value that *Raclette du Valais* derives as a local, *terroir* product is primarily based on the notion that through the experience of tasting difference there is accessibility to the distinctive features of the landscape. In, “The temporality of the landscape,” Tim Ingold discusses his “dwelling perspective” of landscape where it is “constituted as an enduring record of--and testimony to--the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in doing so have left something of themselves.”¹⁴⁷ It seems that the nostalgic Swiss consumer also has a dwelling perspective, though it is perhaps less innocent. Given that *Raclette du Valais* fabrication has the temporal depth of centuries, and that the distinctive features of the landscape are foregrounded in the cheese’s *terroir* taste through AOP discourse, it is understandable how the cheese is consumed as tangible heritage—it is a tasty site of memory.

Mapping *Terroir* onto a Fetishization Process

¹⁴⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

¹⁴⁷ Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” 189.

Keeping the tensions in mind, of what *terroir does* for different individuals across the producer-AOP-consumer spectrum, the main question at hand becomes: How are these partial stories that fetishize the concept of *terroir* actually produced? They begin with the AOP-driven certification-and-control process, which can be described as a “fetishization process,” and end with the story divulged to consumers through AOP content. As Hudson and Hudson argue in, “REMOVING THE VEIL? Commodity Fetishism, Fair Trade, and the Environment,” labor processes have been intentionally re-embedded into the consumer’s exchange experience in a number of ways in the modern global capitalist system. While Hudson and Hudson focus on fair trade and organic certification in their analyses, their conception of the process of certification, in a general sense, underscores fetishization as a social process that entails corporate decision-making. The idea of fetishization as a social process whereby certain decisions are made, in terms of revealing and disclosing forms of labor in a product, is directly applicable to the AOP/OIC certification-and-control process. The Hudsons’ adaptation of alienation and commodity fetishism theory informs my case more closely than Marx’s original conceptions.

While Marx’s concepts of the worker’s alienation and the fetishism of commodities are not directly applicable to the OIC’s activities in their original conception, they are highly adaptable to the case. The reason they are not immediately applicable likely has to do with the time of Marx’s writing. Marx was writing against a time of rampant industrial change. His concepts were narrowly defined to encompass an asymmetric exploitative relation between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the proletariat, primarily within the context of factory labor. Hence, why Marx refers to “workers” in

blanket-statements throughout his writing with very little specificity. The case of *Raclette du Valais* fabrication requires the analysis of different *kinds* of workers, qualitatively different types of laboring, and accordingly, different levels of alienation.

What is of particular relevance to the *Raclette du Valais* case is the homogenization of these different kinds of labor into one form of abstracted labor that takes place in the resulting commodity. My case also forces a departure from Marx in his devaluation of the power of sensory apprehension in his views on consumerism. While consumers of *Raclette du Valais* may not be able to access the worker's conditions of labor through taste, a practiced taste for *terroir* is definitely cultivated among some consumers who can blindly account for flavors that they trace back to a particular valley in the region.¹⁴⁸

The AOP interprofession's members and the employees on the *alpage* inhabit spaces of quality certification, and in fact, their livelihoods come to depend on them. There are varying and contradictory goals within certified spaces that make them places of contestation and negotiation. Corinne Couillerot, the former director of the OIC, made the analogy that they are like the police. As a kind of law enforcement they try and work according to the AOP rules and it can result in a very difficult clash of ideals when they see infractions. Though not necessarily frequent,¹⁴⁹ the enforcement of such a stringent code of practice on one day every few years seems to be removed from the everyday practice of making cheese on the Alp.

¹⁴⁸ The realm of taste apprehension in the consumptive perspective is not within this project's scope, but worthy of mention to make this intervention.

¹⁴⁹ As Corinne assured me, there are problems around 1-2% of the time.

Where cheesemakers in the interprofession have goals related to being good cheesemakers i.e. making *good* cheese *well*, the OIC has goals geared towards promising the consumer what they bargained for. The ideals of origin, naturalness, and authenticity constitute an agenda for the OIC in these processes, and these goals can be seen as, above all, qualities that are consumable. Cheesemakers are aware of the buzz that words like *terroir* create in marketing, particularly in tourist-heavy locations. Which suggests that, in a departure from Marx's conception of alienation, the cheesemakers in Valais are entirely conscious of the way their labor is progressively alienated in the construction of ideas through the certification-and-control processes.

At the same time as ideas of place, and a specific people with ancestral "know-how," are capitalized on, the extensive monitoring of the labor process on the *alpage* remains veiled. The migrant laborers are not represented in the interprofession as the employees of what are referred to as "master" cheesemakers. As supplementary workers to the farmers and cheesemakers who are imagined to possess the "traditional" know-how, they are alienated from their labor to a higher degree than the others are. However, even the "master" cheesemakers from other parts of Europe, such as Christophe who is from France, and particularly female expatriates, that might share an affinity with Switzerland in a history of Alpine cheese production, are still less recognizable in the product compared to the Swiss male cheesemaker. Different degrees of foreignness can be seen to correlate with different degrees of burden that the concept of *terroir* might have on the people behind *Raclette du Valais*.

Raclette du Valais is a signifier of *terroir* that relies on continuous reproduction. Consumers that understand the production of the cheese as a kind of heritage preservation

are committed to reproducing culture in a way that is not necessarily class-driven, but almost certainly has a class dimension. The labor-power and time behind *Raclette du Valais* production is perversely regulated by a value system that caters to the consumer through the certification-and-control process. The fetishization process that takes place, transforming *terroir* into a commodity fetish, is driven by the cultural capital that allows *Raclette du Valais* to enjoy its niche market as an authentic *terroir* product. The way the cheese is marketed using “tradition and terroir” talk reveals a social and environmental context that is produced as relatively static. All of this points towards varying levels of absence and alienation that can be detected: the full absence and alienation of the migrant workers’ labor and the less absent semi-alienated labor of the less “traditional” cheesemakers from outside of Valais.

The concept of *terroir* that is premised on a natural connection between cheesemakers, their know-how, and the Alp is sustained by the kind of consuming publics that the AOP reaches and works to inform a Swiss national imaginary. This national public in Switzerland is also a part of wider publics of “traditional” food eaters that are nostalgic for “forgotten foods.” I would argue that not all of the consumers in these publics imagine the preservation of cultural heritage taking place through the commodification or reproduction of a food item. My case demonstrates how a Swiss consumer public is connected to people they have never seen through wheels of cheese that are impossible to replicate—and thus do not exist in an original form. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as “depoliticized speech”:

[Myth] does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and

eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.¹⁵⁰

Could it be that *terroir* is mythical or perhaps even part of a myth-making project in Switzerland? The way in which *terroir* seemed self-evident to my interlocutor's was always fascinating and perplexing. It was something related to the cheese's production that "goes without saying." In making a social and environmental context of the *alpage* visible it simultaneously annihilates the complexity of the situated artisan practice and boils it down to a singular, fetishized element of nature that is essentialist that favors the male Swiss cheesemaker. *Terroir* is mobilized to build memory, and its sustaining hold on a nostalgic consumer public allows for the reproduction of *Raclette du Valais* as heritage consolidated.

¹⁵⁰ Barthes and Lavers, *Mythologies*, 143.

Conclusion

Even though cooperation is very much alive in certain public projects and the joint-ownership of land in the canton of Valais there is a considerable economic incentive to reconstruct landholdings so that they are less fragmented and can become more profitable. In addition, since the 1950s, more and more Alpine farms used for summer cheese production have been abandoned because of the economic pressures put on rural areas by increased migration of local populations to low lying areas and cities.¹⁵¹ Other evidence suggests that the abandonment of agricultural land in the mountainous regions of Switzerland has to do with a value-based resistance to changing traditional land structures and rejecting the modern farming requirements that seek to reconstruct land into larger, more productive allotments.¹⁵² The Swiss government has been implementing state-led programs to improve rural areas in the Alps since 1984.¹⁵³ Programs range from the improvement of mountain pastures to the refurbishment and reconstruction of buildings and roads. Since then, an increasing number of state programs and the direct payments subsidy system have been geared more specifically towards supporting mountain farms and summering practices.¹⁵⁴ Which, obviously, favors the modern Alpine dairy that operate in the summer's as opposed to the more industrial year-round dairies located in the valleys. The system also favors the summering of livestock from year-

¹⁵¹ Tobias Schulz, Stefan Lauber, and Felix Herzog, "Summer Farms in Switzerland: Profitability and Public Financial Support," *Mountain Research and Development* 38, no. 1 (February 2018): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-16-00118.1>.

¹⁵² Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog, "Summer Farms in Switzerland."

¹⁵³ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

¹⁵⁴ "Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland: Country Study," OECD Environment Policy Papers, December 19, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53c0e549-en>.

round dairies on Alpine pastures. Looking closely at the recent iteration of the direct payments subsidy system I postulate some of the possibilities and constraints in an Alpine cheese revival.

The most recent reforms of the direct payments subsidy system in Switzerland are analyzed in an OECD environmental policy paper published in 2017. Prior to the 1990s, Swiss agricultural policy guaranteed farmers fixed prices and markets, but this production-based approach ended due to adverse environmental impacts.¹⁵⁵ Major reform began in 1993 when direct payments were introduced, including general direct payments and ecological direct payments.¹⁵⁶ In spite of the initiative to direct the payments based on “proof of ecological performance” and good animal husbandry practices, the system led to the intensification of livestock farming and increased pressure on the environment.¹⁵⁷ One reason for this was that the payments were based on the number of cattle in the operation. The newest direct payments subsidy system, aimed at supporting biodiversity, was introduced by a series of reforms from 2014-2017.¹⁵⁸ The payment per head of cattle, a contentious issue between larger scale and smaller scale farmers, was eliminated. The powerful Farmers Union was against the reform, but smaller lobbying groups, such as with organic and Alpine farmers, were the net beneficiaries of such change.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ “Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland.”

¹⁵⁶ “Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland.”

¹⁵⁷ “Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland.”

¹⁵⁸ “Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland.”

¹⁵⁹ “Reforming Agricultural Subsidies to Support Biodiversity in Switzerland.”

Ecological direct payments to preserve biodiversity are based on the presence of indicator species that are specifically identified depending on the location. These payments are unique in that they are based on the physical features of the landscape rather than human action. The direct payments for summering livestock differ in that they are oriented towards actions. For example, beneficiaries must meet stocking targets that are meant to balance the over- and under-use of pasture. Over the last decade, the number of cattle sent to the Alp during the summer has declined.¹⁶⁰ Simultaneous patterns of land abandonment and over-exploitation of productive surfaces have resulted.¹⁶¹ The direct-payments for summering livestock are rather comprehensive, but have fallen short of what is needed to keep pace with livestock breeding and have been found to inaccurately reflect the carrying capacity of Alpine meadows since stocking targets were established twenty years ago.¹⁶² According to multiple studies carried out, summering in Switzerland would no longer be economically feasible without these supports. Alpine dairies have come to rely on the support provided by these programs.¹⁶³

The success of these programs is still being assessed, but attention to the problems of accurate enforcement¹⁶⁴ that Elinor Ostrom identifies as the most prominent complication in the state's regulation of commonly owned resources are already surfacing and are emphasized in a 2018 article published in the journal *Mountain Research and Development*. Given the recent implementation of the new subsidy system

¹⁶⁰ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog, "Summer Farms in Switzerland."

¹⁶¹ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

¹⁶² Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

¹⁶³ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

¹⁶⁴ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

and the slow rate of structural change in mountain communities in Valais, much of the results remain to be seen. What is abundantly clear, however, is that success depends, in part, in the flexibility of CPR institutions. It is interesting that the current policy reforms are more focused on the Alpine landscape as a generic Swiss public good. This poses a certain danger because it is essential to elevate local actors in the discussion as the agents providing the public good through their specific common pool resource strategies that have been closely adapted to the environment over time. Local bodies should not just be legitimized through the state's intervention, but their voices must be incorporated into policymaking.

While it remains to be determined whether or not CPR institutions will be preserved and/or how they will shift as a result of recent reforms. There is an increasing pressure for a cross-compliance for Alpine land management plans that require coordination between the state, cantonal, and local levels.¹⁶⁵ The success of state programs necessarily depends on the how the local CPR institutions are able to adapt to changing structural conditions. Despite the state's focus on the sustainable management of summer pastureland in the Alps by legitimizing forms of communal property there are still internal and external factors that are working against the modern day Alpine farmer. External factors include decreasing human resources, the changing climate, and changing relative prices that are affecting what livelihood strategies make the most sense. The issues regarding the erasure of migrant labor and women from the *alpage* are likely to be exposed at some point and could pose problems in the future as well. In addition, Alpine tourism, a growing sector in the canton of Valais, is accelerating the structural changes in agriculture, which increases pressures on institutions to adapt. Elinor Ostrom's (2005)

¹⁶⁵ Schulz, Lauber, and Herzog.

prediction that the “faster key variables change and the more variables that change at the same time, the more demanding is the problem of adaptation to new circumstances”¹⁶⁶ is particularly fitting for this case where there is a certain resistance to change and adaptation.

This phase of structural change in the canton of Valais is also hopeful, and not only riddled with constraints. If the regional tradition of cooperation to propel the Alpine dairy into the future is successful it will not be possible without considerable change and sacrifice. However, change could also open up new avenues for an Alpine cheese revival that might bring *Raclette du Valais* into the present. I suppose that the requirements that could be met with resistance in Valais are intertwined with longstanding traditional values of the Old World. For example, there have been unsuccessful consolidations of landholdings in Valais, which is demonstrative of values and tradition taking precedence over an economical way of thinking.

The resources from the state programs are meant to target surfaces for purposes of biodiversity conservation, forage production, and tourism. The hopeful aspect of redirecting these resources is that there are increasingly more women entering the field of cheesemaking that are using organic practices and perhaps other newcomers will begin to feel more recognized and supported as well.¹⁶⁷ However, these changes will require significant coordination between actors in agriculture, tourism, and public administration on the regional level and, most significantly, that the Alpine cheesemaker continues to diversify their economic activities and/or focuses on adding more value to products, if it is to remain sustainable over the long-term. There are certain disadvantages of this aspect

¹⁶⁶ Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 272.

¹⁶⁷ “La part d’agricultrices à la tête d’exploitations progresse en Suisse,” infoSport, rts.ch, October 3, 2018, <https://www.rts.ch/info/suisse/9889645-la-part-d-agricultrices-a-la-tete-d-exploitations-progresse-en-suisse.html>.

of the changing reality for cheesemakers like Christophe that have found their vocation in artisan practice and are not interested in dividing their labor between multiple economic activities.

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