

# Food as Fear, Food as Social Change: A Split-Personality or a Dynamic System?

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In recent decades food has seen a resurgence in its capacity as a cultural catalyst. A food-centric popular culture has seen the revival of local cuisines, the glorification of chefs, and the celebration of sustainable ingredients, not to mention the flood of cooking blogs, culinary television shows, and restaurants upholding the virtues of food. This food-as-culture movement has been paired with the idea that alternative food systems, namely, the organic-local production system can be a vehicle for substantive societal change. In this sense, it appears food has been invested with ideas of equality, social exchange, progress, and democratization; and, to participate, all we must do as consumers is eat it. Interestingly, we are also living in a food choice environment where there is much room for anxiety, fear, and confusion. Food scares spread fears, while conflicting or opaque nutritional information on “good” foods and “bad” foods create a dubious foodscape to navigate. How do these two conceptions of modern food coexist?

Examining some of the spaces within food’s journey from farm-to-table may shed light on this apparent inconsistency. From its beginnings in the earth to its arrival at our tables, food is operated on by various actors and trends. These actors and trends influence what we see on the shelves and the construction of what we value as “good” food and what we dismiss as “bad” food. One such space within this farm-to-table trajectory is central to our food acquisition and a key hub in this transformation process: the grocery store. The modern supermarket represents more than just an array of product choices, and further, the food stocking the shelves does not remain in its simple identity – in other words, an apple as an apple – or function as mere caloric value. Rather, prior to and upon entering this space, food evolves in a more profound, constructed sense, taking on an identity that can

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be at once certified and misleading, factual and illusory. That apple could become a link to a small-scale farmer or an investment in “natural” diet. How is it that food can be both produced in the “traditional” ways of a given culture, yet sourced from a large, transnational corporation? Consumers, moreover, enter this space not as objective, rational decision-makers but instead arrive with paradigms that filter and tint their understanding of the rampant informational cues found within the grocery store. Do we have a commonly agreed upon understanding of what terms like “natural” or “local” actually mean? Do we all trust the same standards or seek different emblems of certification? In other words, this is the space where nutrition science, marketing strategies, government certifications, cultural trends of consumerism, and personal ethics collide in a multitude of signals and nudges.

In order to analyze this informational maze, a series of questions may be useful. First, how can we reconcile the views of food as both a source of fear and a mechanism of change? To explore this question, we should first look at the causes and consequences of these two identities. Second, what communicates these inconsistent identities to us as consumers? Some answers to this question can be found in an examination of product cues such as brand imagery and label rhetoric. Third, what kind of cultural paradigms do consumers bring to the grocery store and what foundation does this establish for these cues to take root? After an investigation into these questions, we can then begin to trace how this phenomenon occurs and reconcile the tensions found within our split personality in food choice.

### **Food: A Source of Fear or Social Change?**

While food has garnered much attention as a mechanism for social and environmental progress, not all foods are celebrated equally. One type trumps others as the source for positive change and the sustainability of our collective future: local, organic foods. The idea of food produced close to home and in a more “traditional” manner finds its roots, or at least, its current momentum in the Slow Food movement, which, in its philosophy, offers a basis for food’s virtuous capabilities.

#### *Food as Progress: Slow Food is “good” food*

In 1986, Italian journalist Carlo Petrini was appalled by McDonald’s move to Rome and was inspired to create what was to become a worldwide network of concerned eaters (Simonetti, 2012; “About Us”). In reaction to what its founders considered an industrialized culture concentrated on profit and efficiency, Slow Food rejects the standardization of food in favor of recognizing the “fundamental right to the pleasure of good food” as well as the “responsibility to protect the heritage of

food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible” (“Our Philosophy”). The guiding principle of this vision is simply stated: on the side of production, food should be good, clean, and fair (“Our Philosophy”). On the side of consumption, Slow Food has reconfigured eaters as “co-producers.” A co-producer refers to “an eater who is informed about where and how their food is produced and actively supports local producers, therefore becoming part of the production process” (“Our Philosophy”). Slow Food makes consumption a political act by promoting the idea that we vote with our dollars and forks. In fact, the organization claims, “Collectively our consumer choices can bring great change to how food is cultivated and produced” (“Our Philosophy”). These terms begin to lay a foundation for food as a means to positive social change, thanks to their emphasis on politics through pleasure, justice through social and environmental responsibility, and normative assertions of pricing and production conditions.

Slow Food’s ability to organize international conventions and to inform on policy indicates the movement’s international popularity and political clout. All the while, however, food critics and scholars alike have criticized the movement’s claims and challenged its foundations. Some of the most common critiques suggest the Slow Food movement is elitist, exclusive, hedonistic, or privileged—promoting luxury foods as “good” food while using a social consciousness as veneer (Simonetti, 2012; Kummer, 1999; Hirsch, 2008). In a report reviewing a 2008 Slow Food Nation event, Hirsch (2008) writes, “Panel discussions of how to help impoverished farm workers were accompanied by a *mélange* of dinners, some well over \$100 a plate, and samples of artisanal foods.” His point is to remind us that gourmet concerns are not a reasonable reality for many. Taste, in other words, cannot be the motivation across all classes in terms of what foods to buy, nor can the celebrated foods of Slow Food necessarily be enough to sustain diets of all budgets. However, when pleasure is presented through principles, Slow Food can then effectively distance the idea of pleasure as social change from pleasure as indulgence, which sees the triumph of the “good” principle over the “fair” principle of Slow Food (Schlosser, 2008).

A second significant critique surrounds Slow Food’s selective view of our food reality today, including the challenge of feeding a hungry world of billions and the discrepancy amongst incomes (Laudan, 2004; Simonetti, 2012; Hirsch, 2008). This perspective challenges the rejection of fast food culture as a sign of cultural destruction and instead recognizes the possibility that it is, in fact, desirable by many. So while Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini reportedly considers fast food culture “barbarian” and a “decay or debasement” of culture, critics offer an alternative view

(Simonetti, 2012, p. 170). Simonetti (2012) writes, “the premises of this argument are not only elitist but unproven. These prejudices prevent SF from recognizing that fast food, like other mass products, attracts consumers not because of their lack of culture or the hypnotic influence of media and advertising, but because it can be consumed quickly and at a low price by people without much time and/or money” (p. 170).

A third critique of Slow Food examines the movement’s claim that change is possible through consumer consumption. To illustrate, the Slow Food Manifesto proclaims, “May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude that mistakes frenzy for efficiency” (“Manifesto”). The movement’s success, it has been claimed, comes from its intention to celebrate and to enjoy rather than to protest (Kummer, 1999; Simonetti, 2012). That is to say, Slow Food followers are not necessarily taking to the streets when a “mom and pop” charcuterie shop is forced out of the market, but rather, these foodies opt to show support through the purchase of a local, cured sausage.

And finally, in response to Slow Food’s mission to “make life livable again, starting from basic desires,” Simonetti concludes that the Slow Food movement serves as an “ideology,” concealing reality and serving to absolve guilt in the continual pursuit of pleasure (Simonetti, 2012, p. 169). Laudan (2004) supports this proposition and cites the many top chefs and other food commentators who proclaim the virtues of food with religious undertones, denoting Slow Food movement’s offer of salvation and the sanctity of eating or its ability to teach virtues. This vision is clearly seen in the Ark of Taste, Slow Food’s effort to round up its favorite foods to be preserved should fast food culture prevail (“What We Do”). Slow Food imposes strict standards such that “only the best tasting endangered foods make it on the Ark,” with the effect of increased consumer demand (“Ark of Taste”).

The exclusivity of this catalog and the attempt to foster competitive demand logically connects with a privileged position of those able to access these rare goods. What’s more, the grim hope inherent in this project is ironic, as it is the human race that is attempting to save valued foods from extinction not from some exogenous force, but from a system created by human beings. Perhaps a familiar storyline, this would seem to indicate a tacit belief that there are some people that are enlightened to this impending tragedy, while others remain blinded and posed to fall awash when fast food culture imposes total destruction. Laudan (2004) writes, “Somewhere between a latter-day religion and a political program, this version of

gastronomy will save us from the widely recognized problems associated with modernity” (p. 135).

*Food as fear: Confusion and Anxiety*

Despite the growth of this celebration of food as culture and progress, many scholars have found evidence of an uneasy parallel phenomenon: we are becoming wary of what is on our plate. Why are we becoming more and more afraid of our food?

*Environmental: Naturalness v. unnaturalness*

Levenstein provides a useful history of American food fears. He argues that fear is rooted in the distancing of consumers and producers by the processes of industrialization and globalization, which have removed food production beyond the home and even from our local communities where we still chance knowing the producer (Levenstein, 2012). Instead, food is now the product of “large impersonal companies” which use what could be considered suspect food processing and chemicals (Levenstein, 2012, p. 2). Not knowing where or by whom food is produced could give rise to suspicions of what may have occurred to our food before arriving on the plate.

This distance could be attributed in part to the conglomeration of farming into the large-scale, industrial farming often referred to as “conventional” farming. A juxtaposition of this form of agriculture is often made with the more “natural” organic agriculture, engendering the ongoing and divisive debate on the side of agriculture production. The debate holds that conventional agriculture is not “natural” because of its reliance on chemistry (i.e. fertilizers) and, by extension, the foods produced through conventional agriculture are also “unnatural” (Simonetti, 2012, p. 174). This debate represents the constructed nature of the term “natural,” making the preservation of “natural” for Slow Food a difficult line to draw. What does seem “natural” is that uncertainty in regards to how we should farm could lead to uncertainty of how we should eat. When evidence is unclear in regards to what is, in fact, the most feasible or sustainable route for the world’s future, doubt extends to the prospect of food as progress.

*Health: The Lurking Danger and Infinite Decisions*

Similar to the dichotomy between “natural” and “unnatural,” when foods are defined as “good,” it is logical to conclude that then there must be “bad” foods as well. According to several scholars, the prevailing mode categorizing food in

this manner is through nutritional science (Scrinis, 2002; Pollan, 2008; Levenstein, 2012). Referred to as “the ideology of nutritionism” (Scrinis, 2002, p. 113), this understanding replaced taste with science as the evidence for what is “good” food (Scrinis, 2002; Pollan, 2008; Levenstein, 2012).

This dichotomy connects to an anxiety over the connection between diet and a long life (or, so we are told that one exists). Nutritionism tells us to focus on eating’s purpose as a process of calculated health maintenance. That is to say, we look to nutritional claims of disease prevention and make a practice of breaking down our conception of food into biochemical components (Pollan, 2008; Scrinis, 2002). According to Scrinis (2002), this kind of understanding implies that food is not just categorically therapeutic or toxic, but that we are in constant need of vigilant scrutiny of our food decisions to avoid nutritional disorder. And so, institutionalization of diet gives ample room for anxiety over what we can know as consumers, given our limited or unscientific training of a now scientific calculation of what to eat.

Complicating the issue, the rise of the nutritionist has not necessarily brought along a congruence of opinions on what we should eat. Rather, many scholars note the often-conflicting nutritional information received via the media (Scrinis, 2002). One reason it becomes challenging to confidently follow nutritional guidelines is the ever-changing presentation of health benefits. In his essay “Sorry, Marge” Scrinis (2002) traces how margarine’s claims to health have fluctuated along with larger food trends: first trumpeted for its low cholesterol after studies on heart disease, then appealing to the popular Mediterranean diet for its vegetable oil base. This sort of cycle can not only shed doubt on whether “real” food (butter) can be better than imitation products (margarine), but actually reinstate facts to present it as such (Scrinis, 2002). Scrinis (2002) calls products like this “functional foods,” as they serve not just to bring forth some health benefit, but they can also be continually remade in the eyes of consumers by the processor in terms of what constitutional elements are highlighted (p. 114).

Fundamentally, what makes our food decisions difficult is our inherently human condition called the “omnivore’s dilemma,” a term coined by psychologist Paul Rozin in 1976 and echoed by Michael Pollan and others in the food discourse of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Levenstein 2012). While we can eat just about everything, as Levenstein (2012) puts it, “our fears rest not on wariness about that new plant we just came across in the wild, but on fears about what has been done to our food before it reaches our tables” (p. 1). Add to this the vast options in food choices available from market capitalism and it becomes clear how we can become overwhelmed.

*Social aspect*

Food fears are not a personal problem of an individual's experience, either, for as Jackson, Watson and Piper (2013) show, our anxieties surrounding food exist within a social context. The authors suggest that food anxieties gain force as they are embedded in societal structures like routines and institutions. The authors examined a popular culinary British TV show and found that perceptions of diet and cooking habits of the class documented on the show merged with and enhanced other anxieties in terms of class, gender, and place stereotyping (Jackson, Watson, & Piper, 2013). And so, social anxieties can connect and be conflated through the vehicle of food, which can then move and localize in the social realm.

Of course, these fears invested in food are not necessarily warranted. Jackson (2010) suggests food anxieties involve "a process of Othering where people's own anxieties are displaced on to variously-defined Others, distinguished by race or nation, gender or generation" (p. 160). For example, in his interviews of both producers and consumers, Jackson (2010) uncovers a "passing of the blame" amongst producers that can be tied to anxieties over struggles against increased international competition (p. 160). Feeling penalized by strict standards in regards to food safety, one producer blames "the housewife" for inadequate preparation skills; another producer blames "foreign producers" who, allegedly, do not have to uphold the same standards expected of domestic suppliers (Jackson, 2010, p. 160). Here we see a grasping for an object to embody the cause of these anxieties, yet the targets still remain somewhat undefined with the broad terms of "the housewife" and "foreign producers" (Jackson, 2010, p. 160). Again, there is a potential to conflate more general, social fears with anxieties surrounding food.

What's notable about many of these kinds of fears, as Levenstein (2012) points out, is that they are not merely conspiracy theories. Rather, he points out that even some of the "groundless" and "at best duly exaggerated" fears are "backed by the nation's most eminent scientific, medical and governmental authorities" (p. 1-2). In fact, Levenstein implies, a system of elites, collaborators, and "guilty bystanders" (some complicit and purposive and other oblivious or well-meaning), enabled the food scares he cites to occur (Robin, 2004, p.180). These include public health authorities, home economists, the federal government, nonprofit philanthropies, and scientific/medical researchers as well as a "receptive audience" identified here as middle-class America (Levenstein, 2012, p.3). Levenstein (2012) and Jackson (2013) show how food fears, once acted on, become very real movements percolating through society. A key element to this success is the deterioration of the social

ties that allow people to trust one another and a pluralist society (Navasky, 1980; Robin, 2004; Levenstein, 2012). According to Levenstein's narrative, this occurs from the distancing of producers and consumers and the role the media in facilitating this process (Levenstein, 2012). Finally, these fears transcend the individual to be woven within larger society. Jackson (2010) writes, "This act of translation from private to public or from individual to society can be observed directly in the life histories as personal feelings and corporate narratives are woven together without one being reduced to the other" (p. 161).

In these understandings of food both as a source of fear and, as we have seen earlier, as social change we begin to see a few clear tensions. Questions of what to eat and what we can know about our food become ever more difficult when we are now introduced to the notion of "good" food and "bad" food, especially if we are awakened to our politicized consequences of buying and eating. These are not simple matters to navigate, nor is the information that may help us answer these questions necessarily clear or readily accessible. Perhaps more frightening, it is also not necessarily a given that we will be inspired to question. So what do we do? A closer look at our foodscape may reveal that there are more than enough cues suggesting the "right" way out of this anxiety, and a look at these may show why the tension between food's modern split-personality exists.

While some may view the simultaneous fear and celebration of food as a cultural idiosyncrasy, this paper will investigate the grounds that seem to indicate a much more cohesive strategy weaving among all of these societal contexts that define our food today. Within the rhetoric of alternative food production, the motivations of marketing cues, and the underlying belief systems charging consumer perceptions, food's dual identity may have an explanation. As for where to begin this investigation, one of the key informational hubs in food's journey from production to consumption is the grocery store, a unique arena in which to explore where and how cultural politics and the market collide, and the channels of fear that may tie them together. And so, the question we need to confront is this: What messages are we receiving at the grocery store and what is the purpose of this communication? From there, how do we react and what consequences do our responses enact? And finally, what can we learn from a trip to the local grocery store?

## **Hypotheses**

I hypothesize that cues found among the grocery shelves both allude to progress and play on fear as they are constructed by corporate food interests in a process

of sustaining business in the face of changing social desires. I further hypothesize that corporate interests have an incentive to exacerbate fears only to later be the solution for assuaging those anxieties through the promotion of critical consumption. These corporate food interests thereby make their product and method of production continually relevant and necessary to relieve moral debt. This process of creating and reinforcing fear, I will assert, is catalyzed through the forms of communication present in a grocery store. So while consumer intentions to support progressive change through their purchasing power may be genuine and the potential of food to be a mechanism of food is real, the process by which this could be done, I will argue, has been co-opted into a system perhaps no different than before, yet all the while alluding to ongoing substantial change.

*Consumer Perceptions: Health Consciousness, Social Ethics, Environmental Concerns*

To begin, let us look at the ways in which consumer perception reveals a possible connection to the idea of food as “hope” through the attempt to realize Slow Food ideals. Are consumers making an effort to buy “good, clean, fair” food? Let us consider the Slow Food principles one by one.

*“Good Food”*

The dichotomy of “good” versus “bad” food creates an interesting, abstract framework for evaluating food-buying decisions. Slow Food defines “good” food as “a fresh and flavorsome seasonal diet that satisfies the senses and is part of local culture” (“Our Philosophy”). However, there appears to be a wide spectrum of consumer perceptions related to this notion of “good” food that can be at times conflicting or inconsistent. This could be indicative of an unclear understanding of what “good” food actually is. Some studies examine the role of labeling for consumer perceptions of buying “good” food and trust in certifications. Specifically, research has shown that consumers show preference for goods certified by particular sources such as the USDA (Van Loo, Caputo, Nayga, Meullenet, & Rickie, 2011; Zagata & Lostak, 2012). Zagata & Lostak (2012) also uncover a paradox in the scenario of organic certification labels. They find that once trust is established in organic products, a lack of information does not necessarily stop consumers from buying, and they follow in “faith” of the organic claim (Zagata & Lostak, 2012, p. 471). Janssen and Hamm’s (2012) recommendation to marketers to use certification labels that are well-known support this notion of building trust and assurance through frequent exposure. Interestingly, scholars have also found that this process of consumer decision-making is less based on objective fact-finding and relies

instead on subjective intuition (Janssen & Hamm, 2012; Zagata & Lostak, 2012). All the while, labels are a matter of consumers' considerations and despite what appears to be uncertain and unstable patterns of perception in regards to the authenticity and benefits of "good" food, there is evidence that shows consumers are still willing to pay a premium for local, organic products (Van Loo, Caputo, Nayga, Meullenet, & Rickie, 2011).

### *"Clean Food"*

Health benefits are a clear driver in consumer perceptions of "good" food and play an instrumental role in navigating food cues (Zagata & Lostak, 2012; Guilabert & Wood, 2012; Guion & Stanton, 2012). This dimension of "good" food is captured in the Slow Food Movement's second principle of "clean" food. Slow Food's definition of clean food is food that "does not harm the environment, animal welfare, or our health" ("Our Philosophy"). Research also shows that consumers are becoming more aware of potential health risks from nonorganic or genetically modified foods (Siegrist, 2008), which could logically inspire the idea that organic, non-altered foods would circumvent these risks. In a particularly illuminating study of the determinants of buyers' intention to buy organic food, Pino, Peluso & Guido (2012) investigated consumer considerations of ethics, food safety, and health concerns. Pino and colleagues (2012) classified participants as either "regular" or "occasional" purchasers of organic food (p. 158). The researchers found these two groups to differ significantly in motivations. The results of their analysis showed that food safety and health concerns are not influencing factors on regular consumers, who show more concern for ethical concerns. The attitudes of occasional buyers, however, were influenced by food safety concerns and health concerns. This could be an indicator that the entryway to buying organic foods as occasional buyers begins with anxieties surrounding health and food safety.

Also notable, Pino and colleagues (2012) found that ethical and health concerns influenced buying intentions acting through attitudes towards those foods. This additional, mediating step may prove significant in this research, as it represents an opportunity for distortions of those attitudes by other mediating factors. Pino, Peluso and Guido (2012) cited an unpublished study by Richter that people who do not regularly buy organic food may be prompted to by health episodes like pregnancy, illness, or the prevalence food-borne diseases. However, ironically, and as Guilabert & Wood (2012) show, while consumers infer that a USDA certified organic are healthier, the USDA itself has stated that label requirements do not imply

that organic foods are healthier.

*“Fair Food”*

With an understanding that some food is “good” and other products are “bad,” it is not a far leap to an ethical debate. Slow Food defines “fair” foods as those with “accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for small-scale producers” (“Our Philosophy”). However, in practice, it seems “fair” encompasses much more and takes both environmental and social justice considerations. A concern for environmentally sound production methods is one of the most prominent of these. Magkos, Arvaniti, & Zampelas (2006) showed organic agriculture is perceived to be a more ecologically sound production system and better addresses biodiversity and pollution. Beyond health and environmental concerns of “good” and “bad” foods, the classification can also denote moral decisions. Are you buying “good” food that supports the wellbeing of the greater public? Or, if you continue to buy traditional (nonorganic) food products perhaps previously conceived as “neutral” before “good” was explicitly labeled, are you now choosing the “bad” foods by default? These collectively-bound environmental concerns hinge on “perceived ethical obligation” which, according to Pino and colleagues (2012) “is connected with their endorsement of a set of internalized rules (or norms) and acts as a trait-like dimension because it represents an essential part of these persons self-identity” (p. 159). In this light, the action of buying food is not only vested with a sense of collectivism and duty, but becomes deeply intertwined with our sense of self. When this idea was tested, Pino, Peluso and Guido (2012) found regular buyers were more likely to buy based on “ethical self-identity” or the “perceived ethical obligation” acted on through consumerism (p. 159). Further, ethical self-identity did not influence buying intentions of occasional shoppers. This shows the moral awareness of consumers and their willingness to express this sentiment through purchases. These findings support previous evidence from a study by Barrena & Sanchez (2010), which found that regular purchasers of organic food have strong claims to ethical consumerism feeling a sense of fulfillment after a purchase, while occasional buyers view environmental protection as a beneficial side effect.

From this previous research on “Good,” “Clean,” and “Fair” foods, we can conclude that people are not only paying attention to the notions promoted by Slow Food, but also value these concerns in their own decision-making processes as consumers. While they may connect to different motivations such as health, environmentalism, or social justice, people are, in fact, awakening to the political signifi-

cance of food. However, from the studies referenced above, it seems that there is not necessarily a common understanding of the terms “good,” “fair,” and “clean.” In fact, it seems like the line between these concepts are more interpretive and connected with personal preference ordering, rather than adhering to definitive guidelines or distinct concepts. It seems that the term that is most opted for to encompass all driving sentiments for conscientious food buying is “good.” For some, “good” could be strictly in an environmental sense or for others “good” may be providing healthy food for one’s family. This could make sense as “good” is a much more readily accessible in our vocabularies than the movement-specific terms of “clean” and “fair.”

### **A Local Illustration**

I have chosen to look at a local example to identify some examples of cues attempting to inform our buying decisions. The method of this localized research is informal and unscientific in the sense that the sample of products was not chosen in any purposive way. Rather, in an effort to emulate the reality of a grocery trip, the approach taken here was more documentarian in style, something that could be called “critical browsing.” In other words, this method sought to uncover what cues we may encounter if we were to browse the aisles with a more critical eye for the meaning and intent of the claims before us. These methods are of course subjective, but the purpose of this section is to illustrate what may be somewhat safely assumed to be a typical grocery trip for many Americans. This grocery store, Harris Teeter, probably features many of the same characteristics that grocery stores across the country hold. The chain operates 208 stores with locations serving eight states as well as the District of Columbia (“2012 Annual Report”). In the 2012 Annual Report, the company states that Harris Teeter competes with local, regional, and national food chains, and “No one customer or group of related customers has a material effect upon the Company’s business,” which implies that the store aims to provide for a diverse spread of consumers. The slogan for these stores is “Your Neighborhood Food Market” (“Harris Teeter Brands”). Like many supermarkets, Harris Teeter offers a variety of departments including meat and seafood, produce, dairy, prepared foods, a bakery, and an array of dry stock (“Departments” 2013).

### *Cases and Discussion*

Living in our current age, we are often told that we are bombarded with information at a steady, persistent rate and that the flow of information is nearly incapable. With this kind of view, we would expect to be overwhelmed with flashy signals and assertive messages jumping from the shelves. However, the cues at the

grocery store are much more subtle, acting through subliminal forms of communication like juxtaposition, imagery, and semantic allusions. The twenty-two cues identified in this informal survey can be categorized into three thematic categories, each with a subset of common operating descriptors.

### *Theme 1: Naturalness*

The concept of naturalness is apparent in a large number of the products examined. The term is applied in a variety of ways. First, “natural” is used in ways that are redundant or nonsensical in their use or placement. In this light, naturalness appears to be a loosely defined, yet liberally applied term. Examples include: “Naturally Fresh” (Figure 1) or “Naturally Made with 100% Olive Oil” (Figure 2). What natural process achieves these claims is never clarified. Other times “natural” is used in a sense that makes little logical sense, such as one product’s claim of “satisfying everyone’s tastes naturally” (Figure 3) or “All Natural, Naturally” (Figure 4a). Sargento’s “Off the Block” series is an interesting case of applying “natural” to something that may be considered self-evident (Figure 5). “Off the Block” refers to how the cheese shreds were grated “from blocks of 100% natural cheese” (no explanation of “natural,” either). It seems Sargento is taking what appears to be a given (shredding cheese from a block) and making it more profound and unique by aligning it with the concept on many people’s mind (“natural”).

Second, products often seem to qualify as “natural” due to their lack of something. This is an interesting logic that equates the absence of something as a definitive factor of the product itself. Generally in this sample, what these products lack were items that are the result of man-made, industrial processes such as trans fats, preservatives, antibiotics, added water, artificial colors, or artificial flavors (Figures 6, 7).

Third, there are some that qualify for this category because of the lack of explanation altogether as to why this product is natural or not. One example of this is Rothbury Farms All Natural Rustic French Bread Croutons (Figure 8). The only other reference to natural on the package states, “these croutons are all natural.” Sargento’s Natural Deli-Style Sliced Muenster Cheese is another example in which there is no explanation or further reference to the word “natural” other than its title (Figure 9). Lastly, there is the side-by-side juxtaposition of “Natural” with “Organic” seen in products like Harris Teeter Natural’s Organic Crushed Tomatoes with Basil and Imagine Natural Creations Organic Loaded Baked Potato Soup (Figures 10, 11). This seems to indicate that the terms do in fact have two different mean-

ings, but that distinction and/or their relationship is not readily evident.

*Theme 2: A Journey*

The idea of a product's journey to your plate frequently plays upon a sense of beginnings, both directly and indirectly. Often, products refer to family history or a family farm. Examples of this include Rothbury Farms all Natural Rustic French Bread Croutons, GH Cretors popcorn, and all Sargento products (Figures 8, 4b, 12a, respectively). A reference to history and tradition is another way to draw attention to origins. Sargento's Artisan Blend's Shredded Cheese series recalls on the back of its packaging, "The art of cheesemaking began over 5000 years ago, with skilled artisans handcrafting cheese in small batches. Their time-honored practices are still followed by today's Artisan Cheesemakers, inspiring us to bring you Sargento Artisan Blends" (Figure 12a). Here, the temporal framework uses words like "time-honored" and dates like "5000 years ago" to equate a sense of establishment and tradition with quality and a human touch. However, a critical look shows that this surrounding framework only relates to the product company's through inspiration by the nondescript Artisan Cheesemakers. The idea of a journey and origins also appears in reference to the process of making the food itself. H.T. Traders' Artisan Bread Multigrain Caesar Croutons offer an embellished and thematic tale of the birth of the croutons: "our croutons were born a celebrity, nonetheless they began their career baked as pane Calabrese, with a tight crumb and mildly sour dough. These beautiful loaves were then cubed, tastefully seasoned, and dried into wonderful croutons" (Figure 13). Here, it is clear that the process is important, but not in an industrial sense. Rather, the kinds of processes that place other people and quality at the center are what matter.

Moving beyond origins, the journey rhetoric brings in two distinct spaces: the idea of the local and the idea of the distant exotic. The distant exotic combines ideas of a journey with allusions to foreign artisans and cultural traditions. This is most clearly seen in the Harris Teeter's product line brand "H.T. Traders." The tagline of the HT Traders brand is "Inspire. Discover. Enjoy." The appeal here is clearly one linked to the gourmet, invoking the sense that food should be stimulating in both an intellectual and gastronomic sense ("Inspire"). This catchphrase also evokes a sense of a spontaneous journey ("Discover"), available to those who "think food should be fun, exciting, adventurous, oh yes, and delicious" ("Harris Teeter Brands" 2013). This journey is then presented in the sense of finding some pleasurable reward at the end ("Enjoy"). Interestingly, this use of "discover" seems to be used in a

sense that places the consumer as a more passive actor, perhaps deserving of what is discovered and ready to be enjoyed. This may seem contrary to the idea that food is a form of proactive change, as discussed above. Instead, it could be viewed as the idea of the passively cosmopolitan, a sign of prestige and exclusivity without much effort. This would make sense, as the products are described as “high in quality” and “exceptional in taste” (denoting a uniqueness). The H.T. Traders brand description appeals to the idea of a bazaar, where a customer can “find everything from the wildly unique to the finest gourmet foods” fit to “inspire your weekly shopping lists” (“Harris Teeter Brands” 2013). Here we see the linking of the two spaces: bringing the exotic distance into the daily shopping routine rooted in the local. In other words, these cues recreate Harris Teeter as a “global village” of sorts, where a network of concerned traders are working to ensure the products availability in this one store.

The idea of the local, on the other hand, often refers not to a specific locale, but the idea of a specific locale that could be anywhere. The Ritz Toasted Chips series is a great example of this. The chips come in several flavors including: Main Street Original, Dairyland Cheddar, Sweet Home Sour Cream & Onion, Garden Valley Veggie, Western Ridge Peppercorn Ranch (Figure 14a, 15). The packaging is identical in format, yet each flavor has its own color scheme and different representative photos inserted on the front. These images show the ideals conjured by these flavor titles: a small town main street shop, an old ranch house with a white fence, a rocking chair on a porch, a worn saddle resting in front of a ranch, and outdoor dining on a piazza. In the descriptive product narratives, each flavor pulls inspiration from these respective landscapes and ties it to the product. What is being extracted from this landscape imagery includes the specialness of small town life, dedication and folklife, hospitality, community gardens and urban regeneration, and rugged pioneerism and adventure. Meanwhile, these narratives use stereotypes of these landscapes to make these connections. For example, the Sweet Home Sour Cream and Onion uses language like “sit a spell – stay a while” and describes the locality as one where “you’re always welcomed home, the weather is warm, folks are friendly, and visitors are treated at the table like old friends” (Figure 14b).

### *Theme 3: A Connection to People and Places*

The connection to people and places is first seen in the produce section. The “Meet Our Farmers” series serves to support the overarching framework of the produce section re-entitled as the “Farmers Market” (Figure 16). This label for the

department alludes to the coming together of farmers in a more traditional sense. Along the tops of the produce stands are large plaques titled “Meet Your Farmer” (Figure 17). These plaques picture the farmers of the fruit or vegetable being displayed, alongside a short narrative describing how the product arrived at the store. These narratives play on ideas of family values through heritage farming, quality through time investment, and simplicity through small farmers. These narratives are often tied to Harris Teeter’s standards for quality and freshness, which are promoted throughout this department with the logo: “Freshness Verified.”

Sometimes products connect to the idea of people or another land at a more macro level. For example, H.T. Traders Orzo (Figure 18a) describes its pasta with, “Our Traders brought this superb pasta back from Molise, an Italian region known for simple, satisfying, and traditional foods....the ease of creating a memorable pasta meal will leave you thanking the people of Molise” (Figure 18b). Other times values tied to families or individuals are used to personalize products with claims like “Our Family’s Passion is Cheese” (Figure 19) or “Proud Products” (Figure 1). Often, these values connote rustic, pastoral qualities or seem to play on a sense of nostalgia for “simpler times.” The notion of the artisan is one of the most dynamic cues that connects consumers to the idea of other people and places. First, it plays a significant role in this idea of the local space. Artisans, creating unique products by hand, give a sense of both a connection to real people, who could be our neighbors. This plays on what can be seen as almost nostalgia for times where local, specialized artisans produced unique goods for the community. Second, artisan appears to be a certification of quality or investment of time and care into the product production. The idea of something being made by hand and, therefore, individually unique distances the production of food from the image of industrial farming and mass production. A testament to the effectiveness of this cue would be the seeming disregard of the rows of identically packaged products labeled “artisan.”

We now know from previous research studies that appeals to the ideas of organic, ethical, environmentally conscious foods are effective, though through diverse mechanisms and personal attachments. With these illustrations, we can begin to see how those ideas manifest in more specific ways and the connections that are attempted to be made. What is clear in many, if not all of the examples is a call to sustainability and conscience. Without these two feelings that encompass responsibility, duty, and debt, these product cues would hold not water for consumers. There also appears to be scientific verification of this. As noted above, Pino, Peluso, & Guido (2012) find that a favorable attitude toward organic food can lead to a

positive intention to buy those products. In light of this, they write, “Operationally, this finding implies that organic food producers and regulatory bodies interested in supporting organic farming should allow these consumers to express their ethical concerns and contribute to the welfare of nature and other people by simply choosing to consume organic products” (Pino et al., 2012, p. 167). They give the example of a program that would connect ethical issues like reforestation to the act of purchasing organic food in an effort to “achieve a sense of self-actualization as ethically oriented individuals” (Pino et al., 2012, p. 167).

What we are beginning to see from these examples is that those connections are not necessarily genuine or direct. In fact, it seems there is often an intervening step that serves to justify how the product is local, exotic, natural, or even organic. Consider the example of the Ritz crackers again (Figures 14a, 14b, and 15). In order to connect the values promoted in the marketing to the actual food product, Nabisco closes the gap with various turns of phrase. These crackers have “captured the spirit” of the locality they promote and are the “inspiration behind” the product. Nabisco strives “to honor [the farmers] dedication” and to “celebrate the beat of this wild, western frontier and the pioneer’s bold taste of adventure” with their chips. This lack of a clear connection between the bases of these terms is hugely significant. The fact that a transitory bridge is necessary indicates that the product (and those promoting it) cannot actually realize their claims without additional reasoning that retroactively reinterprets the connection. The marketing thereby redefines the products actual origins so it will fit within the desired origins narrative, just as food marketing has long done before to fit nutritional claims (Scrinius, 2002). The looseness of abstract and indirect terms lends itself to strategies that can play on concepts of hope and fear. Back to our example at hand, by introducing values of community, pioneerism, and adventure,” these companies may introduce the anxiety that, if not pursued, consumers will be lacking these notions in their lives. And so, what consumers are asked to “buy” is not simply food; they are asked to buy into nationalistic values, greater food democracy, consumer identity, or the prevention of injury inflicted upon self, community, and environment.

Another interesting phenomenon apparent from these themes is the promotion of “good” food as equally affordable. From previous research, have we not established that consumers often feel they must pay more for “good” food and are willing to do so? Meanwhile, Harris Teeter describes its organic line as “Down to earth good, at down to earth prices” (“Harris Teeter Brands,” 2013). The same applies for the H.T. Traders brand, where once again, the rhetoric states that these

exceptional, quality products will not be expensive, as one might expect. Instead, the final descriptor of the HT Traders brand is “priced to save you more” (“Harris Teeter Brands,” 2013). There appears to be a tension between the claims these products make—made by artisans, fine imported ingredients and so on—and the prices and availability of these products. Shouldn’t we expect these to be commodities? What could explain the necessity of this intermediating step to the definition of “good” food? And, furthermore, how can “good” be as affordable as they say?

This calls for an introduction to the idea of the corporatization of “good” food. Michael Pollan (2001) calls it “Industrial Organic.” The growth of the organic sector has been tremendous, at one time sustaining a 20% rate for more than ten years, (Pollan, 2001). The New York Times reports that, according to the Organic Trade Association, organic sales totaled nearly \$27 billion in the United States alone, amounting to 4% of the market (Cohen 2012). Not surprisingly, corporate food producers did not overlook this burgeoning sector or the potential threat that a growing interest in organic, as well as increasing distrust of conventional agriculture may pose to agribusiness. According to Pollan (2001), agribusiness “decided that the best way to deal with that alternative is simply to own it.”

And so, they did. Now, as Sligh & Christman (2003) report, 80% of sales of organic food are tied to corporate conglomerates like ConAgra, H.J. Heinz, Kellogg, General Mills, Unilever, Mars, and Kraft. These authors note how small brands, such as Ben and Jerry’s, that seem to hold the ideas of “good” food on high are bought out by these large multinational corporations, thereby adding small family farms and democratic values to their commercial artillery (Sligh and Chrisman 2003). Pollan (2001) calls these “P.R.” farms. Johnston, Biron & MacKendrick (2009) find that these corporations use marketing strategies that play on food democracy themes such as an emphasis on the values and narratives of a local community and rural life. According to these authors, we often see this emerge as specific geographic citations, personal stories of employees, and reference to small, humble beginnings, which is consistent with the cues presented in this paper (Johnston, Biron & MacKendrick, 2009). These democracy themes are central and frequent factors in the online presence of these companies, yet interestingly, the authors found that 91% of these brands did not fully acknowledge their corporate parents (Johnston, Biron & MacKendrick, 2009).

What’s more, what can be considered an organic farm has leaned in the favor of the corporate keen interest to enter the sector, now successfully inscribed into our public policy. Pollan recounts the legislative debates—influenced by lobbyists

of all kinds—in the struggle to define organic. The outcome, according to Pollan (2001), was that “many of the philosophical values embedded in the word ‘organic’ did not survive federal rule making process,” and instead, a loose definition that allowed for easier entry of corporate companies into the world of organic prevailed. There has been a divide in the organic community over this trend, with many of the “purists” viewing former small-scale farmers, now corporate vice presidents, as sell-outs abandoning counterculture determination (Pollan, 2001). The response of this group is a slam to an overly nostalgic, unreasonably anti-business, 1960s outgrowth that does not recognize change from the “inside” is still change (Pollan, 2001). This rupture is what can be called “old movement” versus “new industry,” a battle in which the latter apparently came out victorious (Pollan, 2001). Ultimately, this outcome has shaped the direction of organic on the large scale and is how we see some of the beguiling cues illustrated here, most notably in the intervening steps corporate organics take to make traditionally organic claims and the relatively cheap price of organics due to economies of scale.

In light of this phenomenon, we are left with a normative debate: Is the apparent corporatization of the ideals of the Slow Food movement such a bad thing? If so, what should we do about it? There are several contending perspectives on this matter.

**Perspective 1:** *This calls for a noble, ethical fight, and “critical consumption” is the mode of pursuing this cause. But, does it work?*

What is the true power of consumers to create systemic change? It’s a popular idea and when applied to the organic food cause, it seems to take on a level of profundity. Pollan (2001) writes about this sort of attitude, “Much more than just lunch, organic food was ‘an edible dynamic’ that promised to raise consciousness about the economic order, draw critical lines of connection between the personal and the political.” An extension of that view would be to say that purchasing those foods would be a signal of recognizing this challenge to convention. Simonetti (2012) translates a passage from Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini’s 2005 Italian book *Buono, Pulito et Giusto* that not only suggests critical consumption as a valid form of political action, but one led by an elite group enlightened to the challenge of our food system. Her translation states:

“In a world where the ‘sensorial deprivation produces a dulling of our faculties of hearing, seeing, touching, tasting and sniffing,’ the training of the senses becomes an ‘act of resistance against the destruction of taste and against the annihilation of

knowledge. It becomes a true political act.... The gourmet, from this viewpoint, may see himself as a privileged person who can distinguish and who, guided by a sensitivity which does not respond to the distractions of industrial civilization, can direct the future.” (p. 171)

Along these lines, Simonetti (2012) describes how the narrative of Slow Food ultimately succeeds, “The masterstroke of SF lies exactly in having found a synthesis between the genuine desire to eat well and the need to be ‘on the right side’: in other words, in having reconciled food and engagement” (p. 172). What we are concerned with in the context of the grocery store, however, is what happens when this approach is applied to foods that are not necessarily up to par with Slow Food’s conception of “good” (read: gourmet). What are these initiatives really satisfying?

In her article on the citizen-consumer hybrid, Josee Johnston (2008) presents the tensions individuals feel when trying to utilize this dollar-as-vote mentality. Johnston argues that voting with one’s dollars can “satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an idea rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons)” (p. 229). Simonetti (2012) elaborates, “The anti-consumerist, critical consumerist and ‘fair trade’ movements and the like are divided between a will to change existing economic behavior, and therefore obtain effectiveness, and a desire to show their identity publicly” (p. 171-2). In other words, the first tendency seeks to work within an established system for change, while the latter seeks to avoid “selling out” by seeking distinction above mass consumerism (Simonetti 2012). What Johnston (2008) finds, though, is that the framing of the citizen consumer hybrid by a corporate store (her example is Whole Foods Market) engenders several contradictions. These are: “a cultural ideology of consumerism, a political economic denial of class inequality, and a political-ecological message of conservation through consumption” (Johnston, 2008, p. 260). In this way then, corporate organics and the idea of critical consumption do not hold up to the ideas of “good” food.

Furthermore, a new space for capitalization on the desire to address these consumer sentiments represents an opportunity for corporate profit. While advocates of the Slow Food movement like Alice Waters argue that if people are fed “good” food, they will demand “good” food, which, in the logic of the market, calls out to suppliers to fill the shelves with these products. Hirsch (2008) views this philosophy as “trickle down theory” applied to food systems. Explaining this logic, he writes, “If enough wealthy people ask for fair trade coffee, organic breads and local produce, mainstream grocers will carry them. Thus we have organics at Wal-Mart.

But, the trickle is drying up, a process sped by a global food crisis has sparked riots and spiked costs” (Hirsch 2008). But, not only is the trickle down theory not necessarily sustainable, Johnston (2008) says the assumption that it could also have real effects in the maintenance of our current food system construction. She writes, “As such, the rise of ethical corporations and ethical consumption opportunities represents the privatization of social and ecological concerns, as the neo-liberal state distances itself from responsibility to ensure equitable and ecologically sustainable means of social reproduction” (Johnston, 2008, p. 262). In other words, good consumer intentions can be limited when their means of action, in fact, support the sort of corporate system many consumers intended to avoid.

**Perspective 2:** *Are corporate “good” foods any different than the ideal “good” foods as proclaimed by the Slow Food movement?*

It must be noted that the corporatization of organic could represent a democratization of “good” food by utilizing existing economies of scale to produce better foods at a higher production level. But, after going through this industrial process, is it still truly “good” food? Or, do corporate “good” foods deviate in such a way to render the attempt meaningless as far as the originating ideals of “good” food go? After a review of the laws governing organic food production, Green (2008) sheds some light on these questions. She shows how changes in this process have led to weaker organic standards and how these changes are rooted in the tension between large producers of corporate organic and the small organic farmers. Green’s account is one of good intentions going awry in the political process. For example, she cites a court order that prohibited the use of synthetics among other measures that held a stricter definition of organic (Green, 2008, p. 818). This victory was short lived, she notes, as congressional amendments now allow the use of synthetics in production and handling (Green, 2008, p. 819). Giving the benefit of the doubt, Green (2008) writes, “While these new rules do in fact relax the organic production standards, they are intended to lower costs to farms transitioning to organic production and to make production easier through the use of some synthetics” (p. 819). This does seem like a reasonable, realistic measure, but this goal of transition to more organic farming production has not kept corporate organics from utilizing this flexibility to their own advantage. According to Green (2008), this flexibility in the conception of organic has enabled corporate organic retailers to get in on the action when demand is high and supply is short. The immediate result is a “widening disparity between what consumers believe is ‘organic’ and

what they are actually getting” (Green, 2008, p. 819). Perhaps more risky, this willingness of policymakers to concede to agribusiness interests does not bode well for the strength or longevity of this attempt to transition to more organic forms of agriculture or even the future of the term itself.

There are other risks to this widening of what is “good” food. The entry of giants like Walmart, Kraft, General Mills and others into the world of organic foods introduces small-scale organic farmers to a massive contender. According to a paper released by The Cornucopia Institute, Walmart meets its commitment to low-prices for organic items just as it would when sourcing any of its other products, that is, buying from major agribusiness suppliers and/or importing products from cheap suppliers overseas (Green 2008). While providing cheap organics may be laudable in one dimension, it forgoes addressing the other elements of “good” food. Specifically, using foreign suppliers can take capital away from smaller producers, crowding out those that may actually be making substantive change domestically.

Michael Pollan notes that even while the corporate organics may indeed be organic, this may serve as false hope of getting more wholesome foods in another way, too. When describing the state of the American industrial food system, he recalls a trip to the grocery store:

One of them in the frozen-food case caught my eye: an organic TV dinner (now there are three words I never expected to string together) from Cascadian Farm called Country Herb: “rice, vegetables and grilled chicken breast strips with a savory herb sauce.” But when I got to the ingredients list, I felt a small jolt of cognitive dissonance. For one thing, the list of ingredients went on forever (31 ingredients in all) and included such enigmas of modern food technology as natural chicken flavor, high-oleic safflower oil, guar and xanthan gum, soy lecithin, carrageenan and natural grill flavor, this last culinary breakthrough achieved with something called “tapioca maltodextrin.” (Pollan 2001)

Is this “good” food? Slow Food’s Petrini is sure to say no. That’s because this idea of “good” food only stacks up to one measure of the Slow Food movement, that is, (however weakly) “clean” food. This food offering circumvents other values by very nearly precluding the human exchanges either ideally with a the producer or minimally by sitting at a dinner table with others as opposed to dining in front of a television, which makes food “good” in a more holistic sense. It seems from these examples the expansion of “organic,” if not monitored, could lead to a weakening to the challenge of convention, which allows for corporate interests to jump on board and undermine the change-seeking process, our idea of “good” food altogether.

**Perspective 3:** *But, really, maybe the corporatization of “good” food isn’t so bad after all.*

We have to consider whether these risks are rooted in a biased desire to see alternative food systems retain their strength in the face of convention. After all, it seems like a resentment of big business is a popular expression of rebellion or perhaps enlightenment in our society today. Maybe a truly “organic” food system is a pipe dream and corporate organic is the only feasible way. Cynicism in the media is far from uncommon, and one biting *New York Times* commentary is quick to point out the realist challenges of the organic vision. In his 2012 op-ed Roger Cohen writes, “Organic has long since become an ideology, the romantic back-to-nature obsession of an upper middle class able to afford it and oblivious, in their affluent narcissism, to the challenge of feeding a planet whose population will surge to 9 billion before the middle of the century and whose poor will get a lot more nutrients from the two regular carrots they can buy for the price of one organic carrot.” He continues, “There is a niche for it, if you can afford to shop at Whole Foods, but the future is non-organic” (Cohen, 2012). It is hard to argue against alternative food production’s struggle to answer how it will feed a world of billions, and for that reason, corporate organic could represent a way of achieving perhaps not “good, clean fair” food, but at least better, cleaner, and fairer food on a mass scale.

Another show of weakness of organic ideals in the face of corporatization, a first-hand account in Pollan’s article from one of the “sell out” organic-turned-corporate farmers shows the growing doubt over how much systemic change is actually possible and the resulting willingness to compromise within the current system.

Gene Kahn, originator of Cascadian Farm (acquired by General Mills in 1999):

You have a choice of getting sad about all that or moving on. We tried hard to build a cooperative community and a local food system, but at the end of the day it wasn’t successful. This is just lunch for most people. Just lunch. We can call it sacred, we can talk about communion, but it’s just lunch. (Pollan 2001)

This is indeed a sobering thought for the idealism of the food-as-change movement: what happens if people are just not interested in organic food, let alone the bold endeavor of changing the food system? This is not a new problem. In fact, Laudan (2004) recalls the problems initiatives in the 1970s encountered when trying to create a more sustainable and egalitarian diet. When advocates of Diet for a Small Planet proposed giving up agro-industrial foods and adopting dishes from the developing world, the initiative found that “[Westerners] liked the cheap food

of Culinary Modernism, problems and all. They did not want to eat the beans they still associated with poverty” (Laudan, 2004, p. 137). In that case, maybe it is best if organic is adopted into the conventional system, as it could likely be done more efficiently (although more sustainably and ethically, the roots of the endeavor, are still questionable). Let it be a niche, they say, the magic of supply and demand will let it grow if it is destined to do so.

There may, in fact, be benefits to this approach. In their paper on the corporate co-optation of the organic food movement, Thompson & Coskuner-Balli (2007) use “co-optation theory” to present an alternative argument stating that corporate organics can still actively advance the countercultural values of organic through commercial channels by providing a space for “countervailing” trends to arise (p. 136). As they note, this theory supposes a capitalist marketplace “transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into a constellation of trendy commodities and depoliticized fashion styles that are readily assimilated into the societal mainstream” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 136). However, and as they would like to point out, co-optation theory does not allow for the possible reclamation of those symbols and practices in a productive way, which they present as not only possible, but indeed happening as evidenced by the rise of community-supported agriculture (CSA). These two authors recognize the weaknesses of the use of purchasing power as a means to social justice in a global capitalist system, most notably recognizing that this process is “divorced from any specific connections to place or local interests” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 149). That is to say, buying corporate organics facilitates a fraying of direct links between people and their communities, resulting in “disembedded” relationships that are “redistributed across space and time via complex institutional networks and abstract symbolic systems” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 149). In this way, purchasing corporate organics could possibly be considered as not necessarily avoiding the anxieties that come from the distance engendered by a industrial food system as noted in Levenstein’s argument previously.

Nonetheless, Thompson & Coskuner-Balli (2007) show how CSAs capitalize on this inherent void in corporate organics because of their ties to specific localities and interests, which can assuage the fears of distance in a more genuine way than the claims of their corporate counterparts. However, while this perspective represents an alternative argument, this sort of “ideological allure” requires an opposite in order to be meaningful (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 149). In other words, the value placed on participating in a CSA and those programs’ suc-

cess only exists because of the existence of corporate organics. Importantly, even Thompson & Coskuner-Balli seem to admit that this countervailing market opportunity is not an “end all” solution. They write, “CSA consumption communities provide their members with a reassuring feeling of participating in an intimate and human-scaled market structure, whose benefits and consequences can be directly gauged and which does [sic] not seem destined to engender a vast series of unintended consequences. This ideological view, shared by CSA farmers and consumers alike, of course, does not mean that this countervailing market is structurally independent from the global economic system” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 150). In other words, individuals who are in the financial position to engage in CSAs and reject the WalMart organics, by the nature of community sustained agriculture’s necessary coexistence with industrial channels as a marketable something to reject, are still engaging in the industrial system that could be threatening these values again in other corners. Perhaps, if only to be still hopeful, the corporatization of organic represents a realistic transition rooted in our current system, although as presented in Thompson & Coskuner-Balli’s paper it is not really useful to this end in itself.

## **Conclusion**

It seems to me the ultimate connection between food as fear and food as progress lies in the example of Slow Food’s Ark of Taste—the project of collecting “good” foods to be preserved should fast food culture prevail (“What We Do”). Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini, in a speech at one of the organization’s international conferences, reportedly admitted that “he was expressing a somewhat wild and improbable hope. On such ‘beautiful lies,’ he said, are dreams built” (Kummer, 2008, p. 142). Jonathan Lear’s (2008) notion of radical hope would support this claim from the audacious Slow Food leader, asserting the idea that sometimes dreams are necessary to look beyond what we currently think as possible. For the Crow nation, an audacious leader, Plenty Coups, used this notion of radical hope to lead the Crow nation through survival in the face of cultural devastation (Lear, 2008). But, is this necessarily the situation in which we want to apply imaginative visions as the basis for change? To what extent is this view dangerous?

The master narrative that the Ark of Taste represents may be one of the biggest barriers in determining the future of our food system. That is because it is missing an important requisite of Lear’s radical hope: a sober and constant connection to reality (Lear, 2008). In Lear’s (2008) example, the Crow survived not just because

they thought imaginatively on how to reconfigure their ideas of what is “good,” but because they did so with a honest, direct look towards what is, not what should be or had been. Without this, a narrative of salvation is not representative of a concerted effort forward in the world, but remains an escape. We worry and fear that we might let the food system we created beat us out, so we create a glorious narrative of salvation in the Slow Food story as a way out. In that way, Slow Food’s current approach to “good” food can be seen as distancing ourselves from systemic change with a nostalgia for “tradition,” and rejection of technology that keeps us looking backward for solutions, while, as Levenstein notes, we are fearful precisely because we have been distanced from our food system. In his New York Times article, Michal Pollan (2001) describes this narrative: “‘Organic’ on the label conjures a whole story, even if it is the consumer who fills in most of the details, supplying the hero (American Family Farmer), the villain (Agribusinessman) and the literary genre, which I think of as ‘supermarket pastoral.’” This master narrative connects with corporate organics, too. In order to stay in the game, corporate businesses rewrite the claims of organic ideals so they can reasonably and certifiably make the same ones. Pollan’s (2001) illustrative example is helpful:

Look a little closer, though, and you begin to see cracks in the pastoral narrative. It took me more than a year to notice, but the label on that carton of Organic Cow has been rewritten recently. It doesn't talk about happy cows and Vermont family farmers quite so much anymore, probably because the Organic Cow has been bought out by Horizon, a Colorado company (referred to here, in proper pastoral style, as "the Horizon family of companies"). Horizon is a \$127 million public corporation that has become the Microsoft of organic milk, controlling 70 percent of the retail market. Notice, too, that the milk is now "ultrapasteurized," a process the carton presents as a boon to the consumer (it pushes the freshness date into the next millennium), but which of course also allows the company to ferry its milk all over the country.

As a way to mitigate guilt, doubt, and fear, constructing a narrative is an easy way out. But, for that very same reason, this approach becomes an evasive retreat from addressing the issues affecting our food system today. And, that is something we may only be just now recognizing. We are in the process of thinking of new possibilities, no small task. All the while, we cannot continue to distance ourselves from the task at hand if it is indeed something we value.

At the end of the day, we could ask ourselves this: Have we reached the pinnacle

of what we expect our food system to be? I suspect the answer is probably a “no.” Both food-as-fear and food-as-progress give reason to think that we desire change, either to avoid the dangers we currently see in terms of health, environment, and social concerns, or to use food as a means to recover values perceived to be threatened or on the verge of loss, values like a sense of community. The difficulty of the issue, I believe, comes from the massive scope and scale of the problem itself, as well as the seeming difficulty of addressing all three principles, “good, clean, fair” at once. Taking note of the complex arrangement we already have in place that has inscribed our current food system in the landscape through industrial structures, federal policy, and even common culture, it will be a great challenge to look outside of this well-established system—something readily evident in the empirical work presented here.

We will have to decide how much we want to fight and through which pathway we want to wage that battle. That, of course, requires taking an active, conscious look at the reality of the two pathways. Corporate organics might not be all that they are cracked up to be, and on the flip side, truly organic foods may currently enable exclusivity by maintaining a position of privilege, capitalized on by large corporations. Only when we recognize the relative weaknesses of both can we then begin to seek innovative alternatives. This will require a shortening of distance in both fields. Critics of the movement say the principles of Slow Food aim to put distance between the idea of pleasure as social change and pleasure as indulgence (Schlosser, 2008). This may be true, but perhaps if the intentions are honorable, is it possible to realize the Slow Food goals in their simplest and noblest conceptions and find ways in which this accessibility is inclusive rather than exclusive? Is that possible within our current system where we are told critical consumption is our most powerful tool as consumers?

I would argue that many of the answers to these questions will require us to consider our willingness to yield. I would hesitate to use the word “sacrifice” since the connotations of that word are not likely to lead us as a society to want to carry through with change despite potential long-term benefits. Maybe a better way of thinking of this yielding is as a positioning of ourselves to see forth the change we supposedly want in our food system through a willingness to concede and an availability to offer up what we know for something potentially better. Yielding is only half of the answer, the other part is acting: seeking new ways to hold corporate interests and the policymakers they hold hostage more accountable. We could take Green’s (2008) advice of being more skeptical of corporate organics until assured

of their quality, and by doing so, perhaps keep our ideal of organic a little further from the risks of manipulation. We could take Pollan's advice and plant a garden, "Because then you will need to cook. And if you need to cook, you will want people around you, and all sorts of wonderful things will flow from that" (as cited in Hirsch, 2008). More radically, we could take Schlosser's advice to invite people, those without a "seat at the Slow Food table," for dinner, implying a more inclusive conversation around food (Hirsch 2008). Or, more fundamentally, we could start change by addressing the paradigms with which we approach food in the first place. As noted before, Pino and colleagues (2012) saw buying intentions acting through attitudes towards foods. This would mean we must recognize the paradigms with which we approach food and the possible ways they are manipulated before taking information at face value.

One thing is certain, we must look at the grocery store not as simply a purveyor of food. Rather, once we begin to look at the space as an arena for cultural politics, we may begin to see the true status of our food-as-progress movement. If, as a society, we do indeed see a potential in food as a mechanism of progressive change and if we do, in fact, want to see this change occur, we need to pay closer attention to assure we are truly doing so and making conscious, engaged efforts towards this promise.

### **Notes**

Libby Conwell of Greer, SC graduated cum laude from the Honors College of the College of Charleston in 2013 with a degree in Political Science. "Food as Fear, Food as Social Change: A Split-Personality or a Dynamic System?," was her semester-long research project completed for the Political Science capstone course, Hope and Fear, with Dr. John Creed. The capstone connected with her interests in food politics and food systems, providing a new research angle through the abstract concepts of political hope and political fear and their movement through spaces of power.

Figures



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4b



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14a



14b



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18a



18b



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