SHOPPING FOR WHOLENESS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WHOLE FOODS MARKET AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ALTRUISM

by

Allison Lakomski
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Cultural Studies

Committee:

_________________________________ Director

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________ Program Director

_________________________________ Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: _____________________________ Fall Semester 2015

George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
Shopping for Wholeness: The Political Economy of Whole Foods Market and the Commodification of Altruism

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Allison Lakomski
Master of Arts
Simmons College, 2008

Director: Paul Smith, Professor
Department of Cultural Studies

Fall Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
This work is licensed under a creative commons attribution-noderivs 3.0 unported license.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, who taught me how to comparison-shop, and my dad, who taught me the aesthetic principles of grocery retailing.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who have encountered on this journey and who have helped me along the way, especially my colleagues in the Cultural Studies program, coworkers at Penzeys Spices and Vida Fitness, and the staff at Whole Foods Market P St. Thanks to my closest friends and family for the emotional support and endless kindness. A million thanks to Peter Regan for everything but listening to me. A special thank you to Dan and Heather Anderson, Lisa Daily, and Ariella Horwita for inspiration, motivation, and personal and professional guidance. I owe a debt of extreme gratitude to Amy Bohler, Jeremy Moule, EL Putnam, Marti Smallidge, and Rudy Zamora for their comments and assistance proofreading. Professors Paul Smith, Alison Landberg, Denise Albanese, and Gabriella Petrick have all kept me motivated and focused to bring this work into fruition.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Foods Market: A Cause for Conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Foods by Any Other Name</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evolution of Whole Foods</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Whole Project</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Historical Intersection: Supermarkets, Natural Foods, and Consumer-Citizens</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History 1: The Consumer-Citizen</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History 2: A Super-Market</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History 3: A Natural Alternative</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholeness, Factually</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Processed, More Value</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semantics: The Origin of ‘Organic’ ................................................................. 116
Forging Higher Standards ............................................................................. 129
Relatively Organic .......................................................................................... 140
Organic Through the Eyes of the Beholder ..................................................... 146
Naturally Different .......................................................................................... 152
Chapter 3 ........................................................................................................... 164
A Shade of Green .............................................................................................. 164
A Whole Lot of Waste ...................................................................................... 167
Recognizably Green ......................................................................................... 173
Plastic is Not Elastic ........................................................................................ 180
The Cost of Freshness ...................................................................................... 194
Greenwashing or Greenwishing? .................................................................... 205
Chapter 4 ........................................................................................................... 217
The Community That Gives is the Community That Spends ....................... 217
Gentrification and Its Discontents ................................................................... 221
Of Money and Morals ....................................................................................... 233
Location is Everything ..................................................................................... 239
Creating the Creative Community ................................................................. 243
Creativity Unbound .......................................................................................... 254
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Labor of Consciousness</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is no “I” in Team</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consciousness on Top</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Un-Wholly Union</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The <em>Indirect</em> Action of Commodity Altruism</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Of Free Markets and Fairness</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What Fairness Looks Like</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Scale of Fairness</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“They are not buying a banana. They are buying a dream.”</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Hierarchy of Dependency Behind a Façade of Fairness</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Value of Values: Where Profits and Ethics Clash</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Comparison of the back panels of boxes of Annie’s Homegrown Bunny Grahams and Honey Maid’s Teddy Grahams</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>“Collaborative Composting” chart presented by Matthew Toavs of Whole Foods Market at the US Composting Council Annual Conference in 2012</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Logos of Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Whole Trade Guarantee Logo</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

SHOPPING FOR WHOLENESS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WHOLE FOODS MARKET AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ALTRUISM

Allison Lakomski, Ph.D.
George Mason University, 2015
Dissertation Director: Dr. Paul Smith

For the majority of Americans, Whole Foods Market needs no introduction. Whole Foods started as a small natural foods store in Austin, Texas, but has grown into the eighth-largest food and drug store chain in the United States, earning recognition for its higher ethics and its higher prices in the process. Despite the recent attention given to Whole Foods Market Corporation in academic and popular literature, few analyses have considered the breadth of its actions and the potential long-term impact of its corporate financial success. Working from Whole Foods’ CEO John Mackey’s theory of “Conscious Capitalism,” this dissertation is an analysis of the contradictions in the company’s attempt to produce social, economic, and ecological change through a modified form of capitalism. Situating Whole Foods within the interrelated histories of ethical consumption, the American supermarket, and the natural foods industry, this study reveals that—contrary to the popular opinion that Whole Foods is exceptional as a
business—the practices of Whole Foods are one outcome of the trajectory of capitalism. Whole Foods mobilizes ethical consumption by presenting care for people and the planet as part of its brand. The company attempts to address some of the most negative effects of capitalism by showing consumers that their choices can facilitate positive change within the market. Conclusively, this dissertation shows that what appear as admirable efforts by Whole Foods serve to mask the company’s role in the preservation of exploitative social relations and ecologically detrimental practices. Far from serving in the creation of a better world, the drive of Whole Foods to profit hinders the achievement of the company's mission by perpetuating the illusion that capitalism can be both optimally profitable and ethical.
INTRODUCTION

Whole Foods Market: A Cause for Conversation

February 11th, 12:33pm
Jason: Well, Rochester is finally getting a Whole Foods.
Allison: So is Buffalo!
Jason: Haha. Upstate is joining the rest of civilization.

February 12th, 10:36am
Allison: If all works the way I plan, I am using this convo as the introductory anecdote [in] my dissertation. Do you agree to being cited?
Jason: Haha. Anonymously, maybe. And realize I was being entirely sarcastic.
Allison: The sarcasm is the important part.

For the majority of Americans, Whole Foods Market needs no introduction. With over four hundred stores in forty-two states, Whole Foods is the eighth largest food and drug store chain in the United States and one of the few that transcends regional and even national boundaries, with locations in Canada and the United Kingdom as well.¹ However, it is not the company’s ubiquity alone that has attracted the attention of so many Americans. Culturally, Whole Foods is more than a supermarket. My friend Jason’s sarcastic excitement over the projected Whole Foods store in Rochester, New York is indicative of the cultural value granted to Whole Foods Market. There is no

shortage of supermarkets, grocery stores, or natural foods co-ops in Rochester, but Whole Foods is something different—something recognizably valuable both economically and culturally. It speaks of people, about what they value and in what kind of place they would like to live.

Whole Foods has gained presence physically and ideologically over the last thirty-plus years, and I believe that by asking how and why this has occurred, we can garner greater knowledge about the American consumer economy and the things people believe about their place in the world and the impact they can have on it. From day one, the company has built its business on differentiating what it does and what it offers from the operations of mainstream food retailers. It is this value through differentiation that is essential to understanding the success of Whole Foods, as well as its potential to remain successful going forward. To understand Whole Foods as a business requires more than considering sales, profits, products, marketing and corporate objectives. We must understand how Whole Foods has fit into American society and culture since its inception, and how that society and culture feeds into and is fed by what Whole Foods offers.

I would like to begin by dispelling one common misconception, or mis-assertion: Whole Foods is not selling us a lie. We, as consumers, are not being duped by the Whole Foods Market Corporation—we are not being tricked to go in its doors, forced to buy things we do not want, or brainwashed into believing totally bogus ecological and employee welfare claims. But this does not mean that Whole Foods does or could possibly live up to the full realization of its corporate vision. What sets Whole Foods
apart from the majority of grocery stores and supermarkets is its product line and its ‘mission-driven’ approach. Through the ‘higher purpose’ of “helping people to eat well, improve the quality of their lives, and increase their lifespan,” the company’s drive to succeed and expand financially is tied directly to its interest in creating broader societal change.\(^2\) Whereas other supermarkets sell food to solely to make money, Whole Foods makes money in order to make the world a better place. However, this premise plays out in the company’s enactment of a series of contradictions. The first contradiction lies at the heart of the very foundation of Whole Foods ability to better the lives of all people: as a business under capitalism, Whole Foods requires the existence of competitive markets. In competition people must be given options to choose from, and people and businesses must compete for resources. Capitalism therefore requires inequality, meaning that it necessitates a certain level of societal dissonance. Because its higher purpose of improving lives is directly related to its profitability as a capitalist firm, Whole Foods undercuts its own mission in the maintenance of inequality. The improvements Whole Foods wishes to enact do not undermine or challenge the current socio-economic hierarchy.

Whole Foods makes money, because its stores are competitive and because there is a market for the products it sells. The company’s ability to profit is based on the sale of tangible things that consumers find use in and for which they are willing to pay. And yet, the products sold by Whole Foods are directly linked to its mission of positive

societal change. Whole Foods is a natural and organic foods supermarket chain. It sources its offerings—food, health and beauty, and common household products, basically the full range of goods one would find in a conventional supermarket—from producers and manufacturers across the globe who meet its corporate standards of health, sustainability, and ethics. Individual Whole Foods stores carry a variety of products that cater to the specific interests of local consumers within the parameters set by the national corporate headquarters. All stores sell only products that meet the ingredient and production standards of Whole Foods, which, though created by the company and in many cases independently or self-regulated, are more stringent than those of mainstream supermarkets. These ‘higher standards’ offer consumers assurance about the safety and healthfulness products they are purchasing. As I will show, this assurance is something consumers value because throughout the history of the industrialized food system there have been, and continue to be, occasions in which that system has been exposed as inadequately regulated, at times causing grave results for humans and the ecosystem.

The faith shoppers have in the company’s standards is based on the positive reputation of Whole Foods as a natural foods purveyor that supports transparency about food and is responsive to consumer concerns and demands. By working to offer the ‘best’ products, Whole Foods maintains its image as trustworthy and genuinely concerned about the health and wellbeing of its customers as well as people and the planet more generally. But here we find the second contradiction: the products offered by Whole Foods must be seen as ‘better’ in order for its stores to be understood as different. Additional standards for food production and distribution are valuable to consumers because they feel that the
existing standards are either insufficient or, in the very least, could be better. But, in that Whole Foods standards exceed base-level industry practices, it can be seen as more valuable. These extra measures are reflected in extra costs of production that are then passed on to customers at the checkout—costs that some consumers are willing to pay because of the meaning they hold. If all companies shared the same standards as Whole Foods, or if the United States government regulated food production and distribution according to Whole Foods standards, Whole Foods itself would have no competitive advantage—it would be just a supermarket. Whole Foods wants to “teach people that what they put into their bodies makes a difference” but, in this, its stores remain part of that difference. The company ensures its advantage by aiming to “set the standards of excellence for food retailers,” not by enabling others to parallel its standards.

What Whole Foods offers for sale cannot be reduced to a false promise created by some evil genius or clever marketing wiz. The company’s value must be seen in that it offers something that bears material and ideological importance to growing demographics of Americans—the health conscious and those who want to be healthy, practitioners of mindfulness and neo-spiritualists, ecological advocates and ethical consumers, to name a few. Whole Foods, I argue, has been successful because of its ability to mediate a foundational contradiction of capitalism: that consumer choice and freedom is based on inequality and exploitation, both of people and natural resources. Moreover, the company’s success has only been made possible by the fact that American consumers

3 Ibid., 48.
want to believe that there are no negative consequences to their ‘freedom to choose,’ which is evidenced by the development and expansion of Whole Foods as a chain of stores that allows shoppers to choose ‘better.’

But, clearly, the ability to choose ‘better’ at Whole Foods is not without flaw. There are plenty of academics, journalists, bloggers, and witty friends who point out that Whole Foods does not meet its own mark when it comes to effecting positive changes in the American diet, remedying environmental degradation, supporting communities, or even creating a fair and collective work culture. I will discuss many of these critiques in detail throughout this project. However, dismissing Whole Foods for the inefficiency or ineffectiveness of its initiatives results in the failure to address the larger, more detrimental effects of the small, even superficial, changes that Whole Foods has effected within the food system and through the company’s promotion of more ethical and eco-friendly business practices. Whereas other critiques of Whole Foods claim the company is not doing enough, my claim is it cannot do enough because its very existence requires the continuation of the detriments perpetrated by capitalism.

My argument is that, because Whole Foods has built its brand on its stated mission on creating a balance between contradictory consumer demands—for luxury, on one hand, and ethics, on the other—the company’s financial success is contingent upon the reproduction of this contradiction in the sale of, not things but, an ideological vision of ‘better’ consumption and production. This ideology serves to ultimately mask the continuity of inequality and exploitation. Unveiling the inability of Whole Foods to fulfill its mission requires an in depth consideration of its vision of ‘better’ and the material
practices that have taken place in the enactment of that vision. As I will show throughout this project, as a comparative term, ‘better’ not only implies that there is a ‘worse’ but is, moreover, immeasurable and constantly deferred to the future. *We can always do better.* Whole Foods profits because many consumers take ‘better’ at face value instead of asking what would be best. By pushing the company forward with claims to continuous improvement, Whole Foods needs something to make better, which means the continuous deferment of meeting its ‘higher purpose.’

**Whole Foods by Any Other Name**

To be a successful business, Whole Foods must provide consumers with something they find *useful,* something they *need.* Though frequently criticized for catering to the frivolous upscale desires of affluent shoppers, Whole Foods should not be seen as providing something resolutely *unnecessary.* Instead, we need to think of the cultural and economic practices that have made what Whole Foods sells valuable and, indeed, useful. To understand the value of Whole Foods, we must understand that needs, and thereby what is considered ‘useful’, evolve over time.

The foundational concept in establishing value is the commodity. As defined by Karl Marx the commodity is a useful thing—it is a use-value, as its value to humans is defined in its utility, which Marx saw as the human labor embedded in it. The commodity fills a need for its consumer. In this rudimentary definition, use-value is directly equated to the labor the commodity saves its consumer, and therefore use-value is realized in the
consumption of the commodity. However, Marx is quick to assert that, under capitalism, use-value is abstracted to allow for the primacy of exchange-value. Based on a general equivalent, the monetary system, capitalism requires that all commodities be understood according to their exchange-value. The external criteria of exchange-value overwrite the embedded use-value, making the presence of human labor invisible; things now differ in quantity or cost where they once differed in quality or use. This change in the attribution of value is increasingly important with the development of the modes of production, which have allowed for the proliferation of relatively cheap, mass-produced goods.

Marx had limited interest in the creation of need, but did see human needs as historically specific and thus malleable to some extent, stating:

The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference… Every useful thing is composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways. The discovery of the ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history.

The fact that a commodity can be useful in a variety of ways and that needs can arise from different historically specific conditions opens the possibility that new commodities can become needed overtime. The evolution of needs and the attachment of needs to novel commodities render consumption and production flexible, allowing for the continuity of capital through the manufacture and sale of goods. With the expansion of mass-produced commodities and shopping as leisure, scholars have since attempted to

---

6 Ibid., 125.
better assess the formation of need as it has become clear that commodities play an
integral role in both individuals’ interpretations of their social positions and the
reproduction of socio-economic hierarchy.

In *The Mirror of Production* Jean Baudrillard argues that capitalism must
constantly create and recreate needs. The concepts of scarcity, subsistence, and surplus
are all understood relative to the historically situated conceptualization of needs, and all
of these terms find their materiality in the ownership of commodities (or the inability to
obtain commodities). Capitalism has enabled man to move well beyond concern for his
basic human needs, now easily met through the marketplace, and has resulted in a
proliferation of needs. With the objectification of nature through industrial progress as a
means for bettering human life, there seems to be no rational way to undo the needs that
have been produced—socially constructed needs become naturalized into the lives of
humans, who have learned to fulfill those needs as consumers within the capitalist
marketplace. And yet, because capitalism is not satisfied to maintain but must constantly
grow, the need for its product—the commodity or useful thing—must also grow, meaning
that humans *must need more* things. The boundary between desire and need becomes
tenuous as novel commodities become “must haves.” While consumers understand these
commodities as ‘useful’, this is not the same use-value as defined by Marx. The
consumer of mass-produced commodities is not finding use-value in the labor embedded
in the commodity, but instead finds use in the object itself. The commodity becomes

---

fetishized as having inherent value as it is that final product, not the labor that produced it, that the purchaser feels he is paying for in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{8}

The fetishized consumer good is \textit{more than} an object. It is inscribed with \textit{meaning}, which I define as its social use-value. This secondary use-value is comes about in advanced capitalism with increasing efforts at product differentiation, mainly through branding. In the process of branding, producers attempt to distinguish, stylistically and ideologically, the commodities they produce from other products that are functionally similar. The brand is fully realized in advertising campaigns that contextualize the branded commodity within a specific lifestyle making the commodity a fetish object. Sut Jhally explains how this process takes place, stating:

\textit{The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labour, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolic social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level… The social significance of the marketplace is only possible after the social significance of production disappears beneath the structure of capitalist property relations… [Advertising] does not give false meaning \textit{per se} to commodities, but provides meaning to a domain which has been emptied of meaning.}\textsuperscript{9}

It is the secondary level of meaning, whether inscribed in an actual advertisement or in the branding of a product, which compels the consumer to buy a given commodity. While

\textsuperscript{8} Marx, 163-77.
the ability to ensure consumers will buy specific things is essential to the survival of a business within capitalism, people will not seek things they find useless. The commodity being sold must be, at some level, needed. It is the variety of product that is open to suggestion. For instance, I am hungry, so I decide I need to buy a box of cereal. Branding, marketing, and advertising come in to ensure that a specific type of cereal is understood as meeting that need exclusively, or at least better than, others. It is the thing in its multifarious material-conceptual presence that is needed. And it is through this symbolic relationship between the product and my needs that I come to understand that I need to buy my cereal at Whole Foods because of what that brand tells me about the commodity and why it is the ‘best’. It is the brand that meets the need and therefore it cannot be substituted with a similar product. In this case, a rose cannot be called by any other name because its name is a constitutive element of what it is.

This is a distinct change from Marx’s theory of production-centered capitalism based on tangible things. Here, my contention is based on two factors central in the theory laid out by Baudrillard and Jhally: first, all value is realized in consumption. The relative value of exchange is only important in that it serves as a factor in the consumer’s decision to buy or not buy. Secondly, all value is formed with reference to the social world and, as such, use-value is laden with sign-value. Because of this, the consumer comes to see the meaning of the commodity as useful in itself. With signification taking the primary role in defining a commodity’s utility, the focus of manufacturers and retailers has shifted from the production of commodities to the production of consumers, or, as Naomi Klein has put it, “successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as
opposed to products.”

Taking Klein’s words as indicative of the present state of capitalist business, my claim is that what Whole Foods is selling consumers is its brand. This is to say, Whole Foods simply sells “Whole Foods.”

Since the late nineteenth century, when developments in mass-production resulted in an increasing number of similar goods with the same practical functions, brands have been used to communicate information about the product and its producer to consumers to guide their purchases. With production becoming a distant process, moving away from homes and into factories, at the turn of the twentieth century, consumers needed to feel that manufacturers were held accountable to standards of safety, purity, and honesty. Through advertising, commodities and their manufacturers represented by brands could share values with consumers, become knowable and, thereby, re-create the relationship of trust that was lost in the move away from the personalized attention offered by local artisans and shopkeepers. The brand name served one purpose: easy recognition of the trusted or preferred product. The brand’s utility is in the distinction it provides.

Klein argues that by the 1980s it had become common industry knowledge that, because the brand has an existence that precedes or supersedes the product it is placed upon, it does not matter what is sold but the brand it is sold under—the brand identity is what is being consumed. As a result, companies began producing more varieties of only superficially different things. By repackaging and branding commodities in a seemingly endless number of ways, capitalist firms could create long-term customers by speaking to

---

11 Ibid., 4.
different lifestyles, interests, and value-systems, treating consumers as differentiated rather than a homogeneous consuming mass. Coinciding with the rise of neoliberal economic practices and the fragmentation of the consumer market from a ‘mass’ to ‘demographics’ and ‘niches’, the success of Whole Foods Market in the retail grocery industry should come as no surprise at the level of business: the company saw a lucrative demographic and created a brand that encapsulated its ideals, providing it products that filled its needs. The success of Whole Foods has been a cause of dismay for some because of the moral imperative behind the company’s mission: the fact that Whole Foods took something that was intended to be anti-establishment—the countercultural opposition to the degradation of human health and environment as a result of the profit-seeking industrialized food system—and made it profitable by mirroring the establishment that was to be refuted. The company’s ability to make ‘Whole Foods’ the brand of natural and organic food is in its fusion of the ideology of the counterculture with the business savvy of the capitalist. It is with the combination of the socio-cultural and the economic within its corporate ideology that Whole Foods Market has been able to surpass the sales of natural foods co-operatives and other natural foods grocers in order to expand its operations to become a corporation with a national presence.

Under this logic, it follows that the branded as commodity is a manifestation of the economic within the socio-political sphere. And yet, brands are only valuable in the marketplace in that they are part of a physical object—whether this is a product or place of consumption. The idea of ‘Whole Foods’ has to be attached to something the consumer can obtain—an actual thing that is put into use and through that use reflects the
meaning imbued in it. For Whole Foods, this material thing is the natural, organic, and/or premium product that serves as concrete proof of the brand’s ideology in action. The authenticity of Whole Foods is given material evidence with the physical commodity, which serves as part and parcel for the company’s understanding of and care for its shoppers and the world around them. Because Whole Foods sells products that are not mainstream, or at least less mainstream, than those that line the aisles of conventional supermarkets, what it does sell seems more real—more wholesome, more honest, even though these things are often produced using similar large-scale methods and under the same corporate umbrellas as its inauthentic counterparts.

And yet, authenticity is crucial for brand viability, especially in the case of Whole Foods whose brand mission hinges on going against the grain, despite its participation in the maintenance of the status quo. As Sarah Banet-Wiser explains in her book Authentic™: “What is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as not commercial. Even when history bears out the fallacy of this binary, as it inevitably does, individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces exist.”12 It is Whole Foods’ authenticity as evidenced by its roots in the anti-industrial, anti-Big Business, natural foods movement that offers consumers the assurance of the sincerity of the company’s values and ethics over and above the accumulation of profit. Shoppers know they can trust Whole Foods because the company authentically cares about the people and the planet, and illustrates this care by selling

only things that reflect these values. Further, in claiming the company’s continued participation in (if not leadership of) the natural foods movement, Whole Foods aims to create change beyond its walls and the lives of those who shop its stores. Because of this, shopping at Whole Foods is to having social and political implications. The authenticity of Whole Foods, in effect, ties to its ability to facilitate consumer-citizenship, by which a purchase made in a Whole Foods store becomes representative of a ‘vote’ for the world the company hopes to achieve through its mission. The physical commodity plays an important part in enactment of citizenship via consumption at Whole Foods, as it is the physical thing that serves as evidence of the socio-political values of its beholder—a trinket of authenticity and the care embedded therein that consumers can carry with them.

According to my analysis, the brand and the commodity cannot be separated, as the brand is an integral part of use-value. Commodification therefore takes place inherently in branding when abstract ideas are rendered into the materiality of objects, increasing their social value. My claim here is contrary to Banet-Weiser, who detaches the brand from commodification in explaining,

Because the brand’s value extends beyond a tangible product, the process of branding—if successful—is different from commodification: it is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy. Commodification implies the literal transformation of things into commodities; branding is a much more deeply interrelated and diffused set of dynamics…Commodification is a marketing strategy, a monetization of different spheres of life, a transformation of social and cultural life into something that can be bought and sold…While commodities are
certainly part of branding—indeed, commodities are a crucial part of these stories we tell ourselves—the process of branding is broader, situated within culture.\textsuperscript{13} By understanding the brand as \textit{separate from} or \textit{in addition to} the actual commodity, instead of as a facet of the commodity’s existence, Banet-Weiser paradoxically attempts to set apart the cultural and the economic while arguing that these two spheres influence each other. What I am asserting is that because the practice of branding uses cultural cues to \textit{sell the commodity} and because brands have played a defining role in Americans’ identities for over 100 years, there is no way to understand the brand as anything less than the thorough intermeshing of the economic and the cultural. When we buy the brand we are illustrating our alliance with or participation in those ideals the brand re-presents. Our purchase is a cultural practice; shopping is a socially recognizable means for articulating oneself. The purchase in the brand states what we believe in and the world we would like to live in—a world that, if we choose the brand of Whole Foods, will be at least a little bit ‘better’.

The case of Whole Foods Market is indicative of the power of branding in rendering difference in the sea of retail homogeneity. It is the successful sale of the Whole Foods brand that has facilitated the success of the corporation. By this I do not mean that it is the Whole Foods brand product lines (including 365 Every Day Value, Whole Trade, and Whole Body) that are driving the popularity or profits of its stores. I mean that the ideology of Whole Foods and its appearance within the cultural landscape has value because it fulfills a consumer need. Whole Foods quells growing consumer

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 5.
dismay about the state of the food industry and our planet by offering an ethical ideology that is supported by aesthetic distinction with its stores evoking a feeling of agrarian utopias that highlight the organic relationship between humans and their food. Whole Foods offers something that is unlike other stores and, in this, its goodness is ultimately based on the fact that the company is unquestionably ‘better’ in this difference. This is to say, what Whole Foods stores are selling is the idea of Whole Foods: what is consumed and what is being paid for is shopping at Whole Foods and the cultural and social significance attached to that shopping. However, when looking at the promises and practices of Whole Foods, it becomes clear that what is being sold is a contradiction: an ‘authentic’ shopping experience that presumes to rectify the alienation, deception, and damage done by consumer capitalism and the industrialized food system while adding in the intensification and expansion of that same system.

What Whole Foods does is not new; it exhibits a fundamental feature of the economics of capitalism. Able to transform and adapt to new social dynamics in order to appear as resolving its misgivings by addressing its detriments, capitalism remains the same structurally and, thus, predisposed to the same effects. According to Mackey’s vision of Conscious Capitalism, to save society, we must save capitalism, as our society is always-already a capitalist one. The problem, Mackey and Sisodia explain in their book Conscious Capitalism, is not capitalism but bad, greedy capitalists who have taken advantage of this ‘good’ system. It is through the enactment of ‘consciousness’—ethics, mindfulness, altruism, other-orientedness—that we can achieve the true potential of capitalism to produce great things for all people. The ability of Whole Foods to address
the aforementioned consumer concerns—which importantly are the results of capitalism, though often not recognized as such—takes place with the sale of its brand as the commodity through which a ‘better’ capitalism is enacted. Instead of changing society, in its success Whole Foods naturalizes capitalism as the sole means to structure a society as social and civic participation is equated with making the right consumer choices by shopping in its stores, acting as consumer-citizens.

However, as indicated by the political divisions amongst the American population, there is not a single unified vision for the future. And like citizens in a democracy, consumers need to be able to vote as they see fit. Citizens as consumers need to be able to choose from variety of things that re-present a variety of ideological perspectives. Conscious Capitalism is but one party in the American political-economic spectrum, and Whole Foods is but one candidate within the electorate. The goal of Whole Foods is, however, to draw citizen-consumers to its party, not to reach full integration. We must understand that Whole Foods as a company cannot produce significant societal or ecological change that would result in an egalitarian world. Whole Foods needs capitalism and, therefore, requires the continuation of structural inequality and other negative externalities of that system. It is because of the inherent detriments of capitalism that Whole Foods is able to act in the interest of ‘good’ as this ‘good’ exists only in contrast to the actions of firms that exacerbate or ignore the most crippling effects of capitalism. Both Conscious Capitalism and Whole Foods are referential to things that are ‘less than’ or ‘worse’, which must remain in order to validate their presence.
Expressing one’s support of Whole Foods (regardless if this is ideological or simply because one likes the products being sold) is a choice that carries a cost—a cost that is not valued equally by all Americans. And yet, this cost is legitimated in the fact that there are people willing to pay it. Because there are those who find value in Whole Foods brand, its ethics, politics, and economic practices are given the power to thrive. As long as Whole Foods, as imperfect as it may be, is allowed to define itself in opposition to a system that its customers find more flawed, its success is ensured. The ideological significance of the brand—the mission and the care it represents—means that some consumers will accept that they must pay more for groceries at Whole Foods and, in turn, why Whole Foods is able to charge higher prices for goods that are similar to those that can be found elsewhere.\(^4\)

**The Evolution of Whole Foods**

The continued growth and evolution of Whole Foods is illustrative of the flexibility and adaptability of capitalism. Though Whole Foods requires the maintenance of distinction for its commodity to retain value, the company has influenced some notable changes in the food industry, in both the production and retail sectors. From the increasing ubiquity of natural and organic products in mainstream supermarkets and big box stores to the reevaluation of animal welfare practices by major meat producers to the banning of transfats at the national level, we can see the reverberations of the ideologies that Whole Foods extols throughout the nation’s marketplace. Financially, these changes

---

have the potential to hinder the ability of Whole Foods to profit off its ethical mission. To remain valuable, the Whole Foods brand must constantly evolve, finding a new ‘better’ to offer its customer.

Though the company has historically been criticized for its premium prices, it was the 2008 recession that prompted Whole Foods to first reevaluate its pricing of staple foods—an effort that continues into the present as the company tries to prove that healthy natural food doesn’t have to cost an arm and a leg.\(^\text{15}\) But the company’s profits lie in the sale of ‘indulgent’ items—like meat, beer, and wine, as well as packaged and freshly-prepared convenience foods—that meet its ethical and ecological standards, not the bulk and organic whole foods associated with natural foods co-ops of the counterculture (which it also sells and promote as its most cost-friendly options). Whole Foods finds itself in a dubious position as it attempts to draw as broad of a customer base as possible; on the one hand, assuring shoppers that the Whole Foods brand can be affordable while, on the other, offering the highest quality and esoteric products that carry price tags that correspond with their luxury status. But the competition Whole Foods faces is not solely at the level of cost. As other companies incorporate greater ethical consideration into their practices, Whole Foods must evolve its own ethics to keep its brand ahead of the curve and, more importantly, the company must make sure these ethics are known.

Based in the grassroots ideology of the 1970s counterculture, Whole Foods has built its reputation and brand organically by relying primarily on the enthusiastic word-

of-mouth advertising from its shoppers instead of advertising through mass media. The first Whole Foods store opened in 1980 in Austin, Texas when Mackey closed his original venture Safer Way, a small natural foods store located on the first floor of the Victorian house he resided in with his then-girlfriend, to combine forces with the owners of another local natural foods store in creating a larger scale operation to meet growing consumer demand. As a steady stream of customers moved through Whole Foods, Mackey knew there was mounting interest in what the store offered but he also knew that to retain and enlarge his customer base he would have to provide a wide variety of the ‘right’ products, excellent customer service, and the resources that would educate shoppers and encourage them to make ‘good’ choices.

Though supermarkets have always worked to appeal to customers’ senses, Whole Foods stores have gained recognition as the gold standard for layout, décor, and merchandizing. By presenting aesthetically perfect fruits and vegetables, freshly caught fish, and vibrant red cuts of meat in abundant, sumptuous displays, Whole Foods has been able to sway skeptics to natural foods by showing that ‘better’ methods of production can result in optimal product quality. The company also focuses on community giving and ecological sustainability, both locally and globally, and the reestablishment of the connection between producers and consumers that has been lost in the creation of the aseptic confines of the American supermarket. While store walls are lined with images and text that serve to connect shoppers to the company’s values, thereby adding to the total experience of shopping at Whole Foods, the abundance and
beauty of the food being offered is what leaves the greatest impression.\textsuperscript{16} In creating a unique shopping experience, the company has not shied away from testing new products, specifically those from smaller local producers, who often find it hard to establish accounts with major chains that focus on large-scale purchasing. And though not all the products that make it onto the stores’ shelves remain in the long term, Whole Foods’ willingness to try new things in order to appeal to local shoppers is unparalleled by a national chain and something that has made it a greater part of the communities it occupies, as its stores are even visited by some of the most ardent localvores.

The reputation of Whole Foods precedes it—and perhaps even supersedes it—and this is largely based upon the discussions that people have about its stores, which transcend the geographic limitations of consumer engagement with those stores. And yet, even as more people come to know Whole Foods, its stores have retained a very specific image of health, ecological welfare, and, most importantly, affluence. What becomes apparent is that as Whole Foods continues to enlarge its operations (capitalism must constantly reproduce itself through expansion), the once heralded word-of-mouth testimony—the narrative of Whole Foods as created by Whole Foods customers—has to be reined in, tidied up, and formally re-presented, especially for those who may have heard \textit{about} Whole Foods, but have yet to experience its stores first hand.

In the fall of 2014, confronted with difficult circumstances, including declining stock as a result of modest profit growth, persistent criticisms about its higher-than-

average prices, and the risky decision to open stores in less affluent “second-tier” cities and even lower-income neighborhoods that have been classified as “food deserts,” Whole Foods embarked on its first ever national brand advertising campaign titled “Values Matter.” Claiming the title of “America’s Healthiest Grocery Store” and calling attention to it’s the company’s stringent product standards and Core Values, this multi-platform campaign serves as a means for Whole Foods to reclaim its place at the forefront of ‘authentic’ food production by asserting the mission that has driven them from day one.

Under the guidance of the company’s new global vice president of communications, “seasoned marketing leader” Jeannine D’Addario, the campaign serves to clearly present how the company’s mission is enacted on the ground. In her words:

Whole Foods Market has been subtly telling our story for decades, and now is the time to overtly communicate what we’ve spent more than 35 years creating as change agents in the food world…We are excited to share our stories, and to have deeper conversations with our customers so they can make meaningful choices about what they decide to buy and support.17

Here D’Addario asserts the key role of Whole Foods in educating consumers about food and the way it should be produced as well as facilitating consumers’ positive engagement with the food system. But in her statement she also suggests the responsibility of consumers in moving the market, food industry, and society in a positive direction. Implicitly, with this national ad campaign all Americans are asked to accept

responsibility for their shopping and dietary choices—a responsibility that, she indicates, can be uniquely fulfilled by shopping at Whole Foods. This implication is crucial for Whole Foods to gain footing in new markets where the reputation that precedes its stores is one of exclusivity and expense.

By presenting a clear image of the care and compassion that goes into the production of food for Whole Foods, shoppers are given the means to see why things at Whole Foods might cost ‘a bit’ more. Here, Whole Foods breaks with the notion that it is simply a nice but expensive place to shop by calling on contemporary ideologies that have come to transcend class boundaries, such as the importance of personal health, fair labor standards, animal welfare, and preservation of the environment. By linking these values, not to Whole Foods stores but to the land on which food is produced, the emphasis is taken off of who the imagined Whole Foods shopper is. Instead, we think about what we value, and how shopping according to our values can contribute to a better world. The customer is viscerally drawn into the world of Whole Foods, which is enacted on farms, fisheries, and ranches across the US and the globe, with the Whole Foods brand positively impacting the totality. In this representation the consumer-viewer sees how working with and for Whole Foods effects the lives of many more people than those employed in the stores. The “Values Matter” campaign makes these people real and, in turn, shows that purchases made at Whole Foods matter.

To be clear, “Values Matter” does not change the foundation of the Whole Foods brand; it just articulates it through a new aesthetic for a new audience. With this representation, the brand is given new life in the attempt to connect affectively with
consumers across the nation who may not be familiar with the company’s accomplishments and Core Values. The ethics of care and concern that permeate the entire company are what distinguishes Whole Foods from other mainstream retailers, while its national presence and influence throughout the food industry sets it apart from smaller and independent natural and organic grocers. And while Whole Foods must retain this dual distinction to define its brand, it must, at the same, time appeal to the interests of diverse consumers to enlarge its business. Whole Foods is thus trapped in a self-imposed contradiction as it tries to ‘do good’ by making money, because sharing the wealth can never be egalitarian. There must be a philanthropist and a recipient: one who acts and one who is acted upon.

There are few who would deny that any contribution to goodwill is better than completely self-interested accumulation, but this stance illustrates our embeddedness within capitalism and our dependency on our consumer habits. Therefore, what I am asking is that we consider what Whole Foods aspires to do in light of what it has actually done and what it can do as a business within capitalism: in practice, Whole Foods facilitates small changes in the food system that appear as the enactment of ‘better’—relatively more just and sustainable conditions—while these actions are first and foremost in the interest of the corporation’s profitability. What Whole Foods presents as altruism is not purely other-oriented giving but, instead, the harnessing of a social ideology of goodwill as a corporate initiative that adds to the value of its brand. In this, Whole Foods must always reproduce its brand through the accumulation of profit before serving others. Because consumers are necessary in the success of business and the
reproduction of capitalism, I am additionally interested in as American consumers’
ambivalent relationship to Whole Foods in their simultaneous acceptance and refusal of
Whole Foods as they continue to shop the company’s stores. In addressing the success of
Whole Foods, I will show how the contradictory demands of consumers manifest
themselves in the company’s nuanced yet vague Core Values, as it serves to integrate and
balance the needs of all of its constituencies or “stakeholders.”

To fully understand what Whole Foods refers to as the “interdependence” of its
stakeholders, as well as its dependence upon that web of stakeholders, I will analyze the
ideological roots of Whole Foods Core Values and their practical application, including
the influence these ideologies and practices have had beyond the walls of Whole Foods.
Presented on the company’s website, Whole Foods eight Core Values are as follows:

1. We Sell the Highest Quality Natural and Organic Products Available
2. We Satisfy, Delight and Nourish Our Customers
3. We Support Team Member Excellence and Happiness
4. We Create Wealth Through Profits & Growth
5. We Serve and Support Our Local and Global Communities
6. We Practice and Advance Environmental Stewardship
7. We Create Ongoing Win-Win Partnerships with Our Suppliers
8. We Promote the Health of Our Stakeholders Through Healthy Eating

Education

As I have explained, adaptability and flexibility are keys to producing a successful brand
and, therefore, I find it necessary to take Whole Foods Core Values as framing its long-
term success. These values are at the core of the company and, thus, to some extent, static, or in the words of Whole Foods: “These are not values that change from time to time, situation to situation or person to person, but rather they are the underpinning of our company culture.”

18 Tying the company to its origins in the counterculture and the notion of mission-driven work, the Core Values express an authentic purpose that is above and beyond capitalist accumulation.

Yet, in interrogating the material practices and outcomes related to the achievement of its corporate mission and the maintenance of its Core Values, my project reveals that the mission and values of Whole Foods can remain the same because we change. This is to say, that because values are interpreted and enacted within historically specific conditions, the same idea can mean something very different at different times, in different places, and by different human subjects. If Whole Foods’ values are founded on rectifying the inadequacies of the mainstream food system and its corresponding form of capitalism, what it does will necessarily change over time—not matter how much the market and the world changes, that there will always be room for improvement. In asserting its exceptional values, the company constantly adapts to meet ever-increasing consumer demands for ‘better’ (in the individualistic and altruistic sense). Because Whole Foods’ mission appears to continuously move forward and increase in scope as it meets new consumer needs, the company’s authenticity is ensured as it is always-already more caring, more responsive, and more responsible than the competition. Therefore, it is

in ‘better’ as consumer choice that we find the creation of monetary value through ethical values.

In attaching ethics to consumer capitalism, I will show that the promise of Whole Foods—to constantly strive for ‘better’—ultimately places the attainment of the best out of reach in a perpetually deferred future moment. We can see this optimistic deferment in the closing of the Whole Foods Declaration of Interdependence, which states:

Our Vision Statement reflects the hopes and intentions of many people. We do not believe it always accurately portrays the way things currently are at Whole Foods Market so much as the way we would like things to be. It is our dissatisfaction with the current reality, when compared with what is possible, that spurs us toward excellence and toward creating a better person, company, and world.

When Whole Foods Market fails to measure up to its stated vision, as it inevitably will at times, we should not despair. Rather let us take up the challenge together to bring our reality closer to our vision. The future we will experience tomorrow is created one step at a time today.19

Whole Foods, and capitalism in general, can only offer people the potential for ‘better’. It cannot ensure that everyone is equally bettered. Whole Foods and its structuring economic ideal of Conscious Capitalism serve as a creative re-envisioning of capitalism that appeases consumers who have become both overwhelmed by and blasé about the prevalence of capitalism in daily life and the resulting socio-economic inequalities and ecological detriments. And yet, capitalism, even in its most conscious form, is more

19 “Declaration of Interdependence.”
insidious than a promise deferred. It functions from a fundamental untruth, which is that it is the best system to meet the needs of all people. At best, however, it is a system that provides for some people very well at the expense others who are, through their labor, able to meet their more basic needs. In effect, Whole Foods works to aid in the construction and maintenance of class-based needs on the global scale through its position as a mission-driven premium retailer of natural and organic foods. Because Whole Foods purports to be more than a business, while using its status as a business to affect social and environmental changes, it is trapped in a contradiction. Its vision for the future must always be for the future, while American consumers must remain focused on the now, thinking about what we need today and the small changes we can make that will have immediate positive effects—effects that can be textualized and aestheticized on posters and packages where its value can be realized in the purchase of commodities.

A Whole Project

Whole Foods Market’s narrative and vision are presented in verbose detail on its website. The sheer abundance of textual information given on its website appears as a concrete attempt at transparency, which its leadership believes is essential in the creation and maintenance of positive stakeholder relationships. In what might be read as a vain mimicry of the democratic model of grocery cooperatives of the counterculture, Whole Foods presents as much detail as possible to give all stakeholders access to the same knowledge, leaving it up to individuals to engage with that information in order to make the best choices for themselves and, hopefully, push the Whole Foods brand in new and better directions. While it is inarguably difficult and overwhelming for even the most
interested reader to wade through the facts, figures, and stories offered on the website, the company’s willingness to share so much implies that it has nothing to hide. With this earnestness, shoppers should feel confident in putting their faith into the brand as a signifier of the highest level of quality available. But the glut of information presented is largely self-referential and frequently self-aggrandizing, meaning consumers are still left to determine what is fact and what has been embellished to the point of fiction. And though this information should not be taken at face value, we must ask how and why these claims have become valuable.

My project begins by situating the company historically as a product of a specific course of evolution that has taken place within capitalist consumerism. To do so, I have focused on key aspects of the Core Values of Whole Foods as attempts to enact the form of ethically guided, mission-driven capitalism outlined in the book Conscious Capitalism. This work considers the type of social and economic change that can take place through Whole Foods as a for-profit business, which it undeniably has been since its inception. Unlike many critiques of Whole Foods that overlook (or even deny) this fact in criticizing the type of goodwill and altruism practiced by the company, Whole Foods status as a business will remain central to my analysis.

By rooting Whole Foods Market in the historical evolution of the American supermarket—an institution that has been granted little academic or popular attention—my research indicates that the practices of Whole Foods are, for the most part, typical of  

---

20 As stated in Whole Foods Market 2013 Annual Report: “We believe our initiatives to improve our value assortment and increase the level of transparency about the products we sell are aligned with our core customer base, reinforce our position as the authentic retailer of natural and organic foods, and continue to make us the preferred choice for customers aspiring to a healthier lifestyle.”
this type of business. Supermarkets, and grocery stores and food vendors before them, are places where Americans look to receive fair prices on needed items, but these are businesses that must increase their profit margins by increasing the amount consumers spend. It is, in my opinion, by avoiding a discussion about the ubiquity of supermarkets and the everyday nature of our grocery shopping, including the choices we make about where to shop and what to buy, that Whole Foods is made to appear special because of its businesses practices. Whole Foods Core Value to “Create Wealth Through Profits & Growth” is completely ordinary. The difference is the means by which wealth is created and how that wealth is allocated, which is where the histories more commonly associated with Whole Foods—that of the organic and natural foods movements and consumer-citizenship—come in. In building a theory of the Whole Foods brand, I employ these histories to shed new light on what Whole Foods does and how it is interpreted. Through these three histories, it will become clear how the Whole Foods customer came to be and how the company achieves its Core Value to “Satisfy, Delight and Nourish Our Customers.”

I then move to look at how, in executing its other Core Values, Whole Foods has evolved its brand to ensure the maintenance and growth of its customer base and how this evolution has had effects beyond Whole Foods stores, across the supermarket industry and global food system. In my second chapter I look at what I see as the central aspect in marketing Whole Foods as “American’s Healthiest Grocery Store,” its Core Value to “Sell the Highest Quality Natural and Organic Products Available.” Here, I detail the role of Whole Foods in the creation of a natural and organic food industry from the
counterculture’s anti-corporate foundation, as well as its role in the formation of the United States’ National Organics Program and the codification of “USDA Organic.” In light of these institutional changes, I also discuss the adaptability of the organic standards according to both the needs of consumers and the industry—needs that can be, and often are, incompatible. The malleability and complexity of these standards have led to ambiguities for consumers, who are often missing out on some important facts about their food. In effect, popular interpretations of ‘organic’ are often overly simplistic and sometimes completely incorrect. The food industry is then able to take advantage of these ambiguities for their financial gain—a problem that I show extends beyond ‘organic’ to other culturally valued and thus economically valuable labels like ‘natural’ and ‘non-GMO’.

The interest Whole Foods has in organic production is not just in what it offers humans but also in the kinder treatment of the earth in connection with the company’s Core Value to “Practice and Advance Environmental Stewardship.” In the third chapter I consider what exactly the company sells in its ideology of ecological sustainability and how these efforts impact the land its stores occupy and the health of the planet overall. By focusing on select initiatives and their outcomes, I show the conflicting nature of the drive to profit and the desire to ‘do good’ for the earth. While asserting its customers should “do the green thing,” Whole Foods engages in many covertly and overtly ungreen practices as the result of a consumer-centric cost-benefit analysis that includes factors like Americans’ dependency on products that are wasteful, be it in their production, processing, packaging, and/or transport.
The contradictory practice of care extends from the environment to the people who occupy the land with the company’s Core Value to “Serve and Support Our Local and Global Communities.” It is true that Whole Foods donates money and goods to community partners, supports team member volunteerism, and works to engage community members in a dialogue about healthy eating, as connected to its Core Value to “Promote the Health of Our Stakeholders Through Healthy Eating Education,” but, as chapter four reveals, these altruistic acts are contingent upon the maintenance of inequality within the communities that Whole Foods stores inhabit. Explicating Whole Foods ideological and material role in gentrification, I illustrate how the ‘community’ that Whole Foods supports is one of exclusivity that places knowledgeable, philanthropic citizens on one side, and the poor, in need of education, moral guidance, and financial support, on the other.

The maintenance of class hierarchy also exists within Whole Foods’ corporate ‘team’ structure, which I address in the fifth chapter with my discussion of its Core Value to “Support Team Member Excellence and Happiness.” Here, I explain how the company’s promotion of egalitarian ‘teamwork’ is exceptional only in comparison to the radically unequal labor hierarchy of traditional capitalist firms. Underneath the rhetoric of compassion and cooperation, Whole Foods uses the same divisive ideologies of competition and personal betterment to extract more value from employees by getting them to work harder. In my analysis of two of the most discussed aspects of the human resources practices of Whole Foods—its benefits structure and anti-union stance—I reveal how these tactics work together to in the production of employee complacency. By
offering marginally ‘better’ terms of employment than other supermarkets, Whole Foods is able to keep its team members focused on their personal potential for career growth within this ‘good’ company instead of questioning the underlying corporate structure that makes it logical that some members of the team receive much greater compensation than others.

The Whole Foods ideology of ‘the team’ functions, in part, by distinguishing the American worker from the distant producer responsible for supplying Whole Foods with healthy and sustainable commodities. In chapter six, I discuss the company’s Core Value to “Create Ongoing Win-Win Partnerships with Our Suppliers” as an ideology that appears to aim towards a more equitable marketplace but that instead reifies the differences between workers and consumers in developed nations and rural people and agricultural workers of the developing world. Through its branded fair trade program “Whole Trade,” Whole Foods can achieve higher levels of productive efficiency and tap into distant agricultural land while offering its shoppers the comfort that those working on those farms are treated well. As an ideology backed by pastoral promotional posters, ‘fair trade’ suggests that positive social action is simplified into the act of buying the right thing. The purchase of the fair trade commodity implies other-oriented action and not self-interested consumption; this purchase is, in itself an act of care that I have come to refer to as commodity altruism. Similar to commodity fetishism, in commodity altruism the thing itself is seen as having value, masking the real social relations that take place behind it. The commodity here is tangible proof that distracts from any interrogation of the problematic nature of the persistent hierarchy of global exchange—a
hierarchy that is only made more evidentiary by the fact that Whole Foods, a corporate supermarket chain, ‘philanthropically’ lends money from its proceeds to small entrepreneurs.

In concluding this chapter I show that hierarchies even exist among those who receive loans from Whole Foods. The company’s lending practices show that “Win-Win Partnership” with Whole Foods means different things to an entrepreneur based on their position within the global economy and their aspirations for their business. Whole Foods offers supplier-partners two different types of loan partnerships through two different programs—one, the nonprofit Whole Planet Foundation and two, the corporately operated Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP). These two programs offer further evidence of the practice of commodity altruism, as the marketing of these products and initiatives adhere to differential cultural conceptions about what people and businesses need to flourish. Though radically different in its treatment and representation of loan recipients, the fact that Whole Foods contributes to the success of small businesses worldwide serves as further proof of its care for suppliers. By putting consumer dollars in the right places to ensure that other ‘good’ businesses reach their full potential, Whole Foods expands its reach and with it the reach of the positive possibilities that the company sees as inherent in the enactment of Conscious Capitalism.

With the development of ‘good’ businesses a central factor in “the quality of our lives, our health, our overall well-being, and even our happiness,” we have only to thank
Whole Foods for its role in advancing the practice of Conscious Capitalism.\textsuperscript{21} And yet, what I see as the most troubling effect of the ‘good’ done by Whole Foods is that it is just \textit{good enough} and this is proven by its success as a business and tenuous ability to stay on top. Whole Foods appears both to be both doing ‘good’ and not doing enough, because, in the end, it is part of system that produces inequality, adapting to integrate its own externalities and oppositions. Collectively, the chapters of this dissertation systematically unmask the contradiction that lies beneath the mission that Whole Foods has been founded upon and to which it owes its success—working towards a ‘better’ capitalism ensures only the continuation of capitalism and, thereby, exacerbates the inequalities, exploitation, and degradation that occur in its advance, because these injustices that are necessary to its maintenance. Whole Foods is a supermarket. It works within, not against the free market and, thus, cannot rectify the inequalities in the capitalist food allocation system, let alone cure the health, ecological, social, and economic maladies of the world. And it is not that the company fails to recognize this, as CEO Walter Robb candidly admitted in a 2014 interview with freelance journalist Tracie McMillan: “Ultimately customers get to choose. It’s a free market, and we’re going to present our choices, and then people are going to decide if they’re worth it or not… You know, we’re not miracle workers…We’re just a grocer.”\textsuperscript{22}

Whole Foods is not a lie being sold to American consumers but an attempt to address the contradictory desires of American consumers the only way a corporation

\textsuperscript{21} Mackey and Sisodia, 263.
can—by keeping capitalism in tact. When Whole Foods sells us its vision of care, what we are buying is a capitalist utopia—one that is enacted through promises of higher standards of production, better treatment of labor and the earth, and investment in communities and the innovation of small entrepreneurs. The narratives offered by Whole Foods are appealing because they resonate with the stories we tell ourselves about the world we live in and about what we need. Lest we forget, the success of Whole Foods as a business is the result of American consumers choosing to shop at its stores and wanting Whole Foods stores in their neighborhoods. In its branding and its mission, Whole Foods is successful because it works from instead of transcending the contradictory nature of our desires, promising us that we can have our ethically-sourced, organic, gluten free, vegan cake and eat it too. Our sarcasm towards Whole Foods is indicative of our knowledge of our contradictory desires, as we surrender to our consumerism believing, or merely hoping, it has taken a less harmful form.
CHAPTER 1

The Historical Intersection: Supermarkets, Natural Foods, and Consumer-Citizens

America’s Healthiest Grocery Store™

Who are we? Well, we seek out the finest natural and organic foods available, maintain the strictest quality standards in the industry, and have an unshakeable commitment to sustainable agriculture. Add to that the excitement and fun we bring to shopping for groceries, and you start to get a sense of what we’re all about. Oh yeah, we’re a mission-driven company too.23

Perhaps the most beneficial and problematic issue for Whole Foods Market as a business is the fact that the company and its store are perceived as exceptional—completely different from other grocery stores and supermarkets. A key part of this exceptionalism is distinguishing Whole Foods from the cultural matrix from which it developed. If we think of Whole Foods as a novel intervention into American consumer culture and the food industry, it appears that Whole Foods is offering something completely radical—something that consumers never knew they needed, and perhaps they do not need at all. However, needs change over time, and the avenues by which we meet them must change correspondingly. Needs are based on what individuals find to be useful and are the result of specific lifestyle practices and historical circumstances.

---

Subsequently, new businesses develop to address recently developed needs and existing businesses evolve to keep pace with consumers. This is not to forget that we reside in a capitalist culture in which businesses must expand, and therefore, needs must advance in order to keep the market moving.

To get a total picture of Whole Foods as a cultural product that attempts to address contradictory consumer needs, this chapter lays out three key interrelated histories that have led to the existence and success of the Whole Foods Market Corporation. While many accounts of Whole Foods either focus on the role of knowledgeable, ethical consumers in the company’s success and the commensurate intensification of the natural foods industry over the course of the company’s expansion, few have considered the long-term historical development of socially conscious consumers or anti-industrial food. Even fewer accounts have considered how the evolution of food retailing and the American supermarket have led to the inception of a chain like Whole Foods. Read collectively, these three histories come together to show that Whole Foods is an outcome of the trajectory of consumer capitalism, rendering the company ordinary and its success unsurprising.

What critics of Whole Foods miss in asserting that the company is perpetrating a ruse that reifies the class hierarchy and exacerbates disparities in food access is that the company is only able succeed because American consumers choose to conduct business with their stores. What Whole Foods sells—products and ideologies fused together under the Whole Foods brand—meets a consumer need, but we should not consider this a need of all people nor all Americans. Whole Foods is effective as a brand because it acts on
upper class consumer knowledge and preferences, drawing in a lucrative yet hard to please consumer demographic. In meeting the needs of this group, Whole Foods becomes a site of aspirational consumption for those who hope to enter their demographic, as well as those who wish to indulge in that lifestyle on occasion. However, because the company works towards a mission that contradicts the nature of capitalism as exploitative and profit maximizing, it is also able to draw consumers who see their shopping less as a reflection of their status but, rather, as the enactment of social and environmental altruism. Whole Foods’ brand and tactics do not work in a cultural vacuum but have been produced from and contribute to a culture of self-interested consumption, on the one hand, and the desire for a better world, on the other. The foundational contradiction within the Whole Foods brand is in its attempt to balance these two oppositional interests to show that what is good for consumers is good for business, as well as for the planet and its inhabitants. Working from this paradox to build a financially and socially successful brand is not, however, a trick on consumers; it is a mediation into capitalism by which the negative effects of the system are managed in its sustenance. This is to say that Whole Foods does ‘good’ through an imperfect system and because of this, there is a limit to their *goodness*—a limitation that consumers consent to in their choice to meet their individual shopping needs at Whole Foods stores.

Of course Whole Foods chooses store locations based on consumer demographics and designs stores as reflections of those communities. But this practice is not atypical. Historically, grocery stores and supermarkets have been designed to fit into the communities they inhabit, incorporating products that suit regional tastes and meet
the needs of established ethnic communities. It is because communities tend to be somewhat socially and economically homogenous that food stores can gear their offerings and service style to the budget, taste, and lifestyle of the majority of residents. With the success of a food store lying in its ability to serve a given community, an unsuccessful store indicates that it did not meet needs. When consumers choose not to shop at the store that is closest to their homes, it indicates that there are more pertinent factors than proximity, including product offerings, cost, and shopping environment. Consumer needs are not constrained by the options provided and cannot be completely manipulated by capital. These facts are important when considering the success of Whole Foods because the company has closed very few stores over its history, indicating that local residents find something useful in its stores. If needs and desires, as well as dietary and lifestyle ideologies, cannot be forcefully imposed on a community, the success of Whole Foods must be in part attributed to its ability to address some preexisting consumer needs and/or preferences.

However, once a grocery store as having the things community members need, they are more open to explore the other items within its walls, picking up additional things they want to try. Over time, novel commodities can become needed—this is what Marx saw as the historical construction of needs. Supermarkets have always worked in the production of value, and thereby the creation of needs, by enticing shoppers to buy more and ‘better’ goods. This is why products are placed out in the open, begging us to take as much as we like, picking between name-brand and generic products, fresh and

24 Marx, 125.
frozen produce, and finer and more budget-friendly cuts of meat. Food products in themselves bear a certain level of class status with higher prices generally indicating to consumers that these things are of better quality. This is most clear in the case of nationally distributed name brand packaged goods, which have their origin in the Industrial Revolution. Since that time, brand names and logos have come to serve as emblems of quality and trustworthiness and are something that financially capable shoppers are often willing to pay for. With the production of multiple varieties and brands of the same basic product, the act of grocery shopping became more than simply buying food, since it is complicated by socio-economic and lifestyle factors that effect the decision making process. Purchasing choices, including the choice of where to shop and what brands to trust, are no doubt influenced by branding initiatives and advertising campaigns, but even these efforts work from existing cultural ideologies. Though brands may work to sway consumers, this process is slow and less like indoctrination than integration. Whole Foods is not the first company to employ ideology to sell a product and build a relationship of trust with its customers, and it certainly is not the first company to direct their commodity at an upper-middle class clientele.

Even in the early years of the chain store, the founding companies understood the importance of creating a recognizable brand image that could be easily identified by their customers and would, in this visual recognition, call to mind the practices and values of that company and its stores. Early chains also practiced customer differentiation, creating higher- and lower-end versions of their stores to suit the needs of specific shoppers and
communities. Just like food branding, chain store branding functions because not all shoppers value the same things. Though advertising through the first half of the twentieth century may have focused more on the commonalities of all Americans than the differences, there was inarguably a class-based element to branding. Generally holding middle class taste and values as the standard, even those products marketed as more budget-conscious re-presented the virtue of the middle class with the added benefit of price-savviness. Whole Foods was conceived of during a specific historical moment in which the blossoming demand for natural foods could be capitalized. But the success of Whole Foods is in its ability to increase the demand for its products through the creation of a brand that works from and builds upon existing consumer concerns about the state of the food industry.

We must realize that acting in the interest of class-based lifestyle preferences or tastes, and selling products at prices that may not suit all shoppers, was not a marketing ploy developed by Whole Foods. Market differentiation is embedded in the historical roots of consumer capitalism, as is the desire to attract consumers who have the greatest discretionary income as well as the most to prove socially through the types of commodities they purchase and venues they frequent. Here I am taking a cue from Thorstein Veblen’s theory of “conspicuous consumption,” as published in his 1899 work *Theory of the Leisure Class*, to suggest that those who hold social and economic power (and are truly comfortable in their affluence) have nothing to prove in the display of

socially significant commodities, and therefore, do not play a significant role in the advance of consumer capitalism. Instead, it is those who feel like they must prove their status, including their ability to act on their values and ethics through their consumer choices, who are most valuable to capitalism. The ability for Whole Foods to create a uniquely valuable commodity is in their ability to attach socially relevant acts to individual consumption of one of the most basic commodities—food. By rendering the supermarket as a venue of social and ecological justice, Whole Foods functions from a contradiction of contemporary consumer capitalism: The consumer has come to want it all—self-fulfillment, happy workers, vibrant communities, a green planet—but only when his needs and desires are first met.

History 1: The Consumer-Citizen

Coming of age during the 1970s, John Mackey, founder and co-CEO of Whole Foods, became interested in the alternative lifestyle associated with the countercultural movement. Specifically, Mackey was drawn to the counterculture’s promotion of natural foods and organic production as a means for achieving personal health, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Mackey was, however, different from many in the movement. Taking an interest in natural foods as a potential business venture, he believed a bridge could be created between altruistic and holistic missions and the convenience and variety to which Americans had grown accustomed. Mackey attributes the success of his concept of the privately owned large-scale natural foods grocery store to consumer demand, a

---

need that already existed. Whole Foods has been able to expand and profit because of the evolution and expansion of this need as more and more consumers gain knowledge about their food and seek out the standards upon which the company prides itself.

The mission of Whole Foods is integral to its commodity, which, as I have claimed, is the brand its leadership has created. But the vision to create a better world through the sale of food to individual consumers offers a privatized solution to global economic and social justice issues that are a result of capitalism and the inequalities perpetuated in its advance. Through Whole Foods and his theory of Conscious Capitalism, Mackey validates the ideology of “ethical consumption.” A term that has gained popularity in recent years in economic and political discussions, ethical consumption is generally understood as a practice in which individuals think more carefully about the impact of their purchases, choosing commodities that have less of a negative impact on and/or contribute positively to the earth and its people. Ethical consumption has become a powerful ideology in the branding initiatives of mission-driven companies as it asserts that care for the environment and others, as well as a general commitment to social progress, can be measured according to where individuals shop and for what they shop. At the same time, ethical consumption privileges financially powerful corporations as uniquely capable of providing the tools for creating a more just world. By addressing consumers as socio-political actors, Whole Foods and other Conscious Capitalist firms have come under scrutiny for their perpetuation of inaction by individualistic, apolitical consumers. However, when considering the totality of what it is
to be a consumer in advanced capitalism, it becomes clear that consumers are neither completely self-interested dupes nor free-thinking other-oriented agents.

In their work *The Unmanageable Consumer*, Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang juxtapose the wide variety of academic and popular interpretations of the notion of ‘consumer’ to address cultural ambivalence towards consumption and the consumer economy. The pair argues for the importance of viewing consumption historically, claiming:

...our actions and experiences as consumers cannot be detached from our actions and experiences as social, political and moral agents. The fragmentation and contradictions of contemporary consumption are part and parcel of the fragmentation and contradictions of contemporary living.\(^{28}\)

They see the paradoxes of contemporary consumption as being rooted in the evolution of consumerism, stemming from the abundance of choice facilitated by the development of mass-production. The modern age offered people of all classes the ability to spend their incomes as they saw fit, and, presented with a greater number of goods at more affordable prices, people took to spending *more* and saving *less* with conspicuous consumption as a display of their socio-economic status.\(^{29}\) Gabriel and Lang assert the complexity of the discourses surrounding the term ‘consumer’, claiming that viewing consumers simply as ‘victims’, ‘choosers’, ‘activists’, or ‘citizens’ neglects the myriad factors that effect consumers, their understanding of the goods they purchase, and the

---


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 12.
impact of those purchases on the world around them. Even in seeing consumption as an individually motivated choice, individuals are shaped by the societies they inhabit and, as I have noted, come to see their needs through their experience within that society and what it offers.

At a basic level the dependency of individuals upon consumerism to meet their socially conditioned needs and express alliances makes the personal consumer act a political one. In a capitalist democracy, the health and wealth of the nation are directly tied to the success of private business, which is contingent upon citizens acting as consumers. Here, the government is dependent upon private business, while it is also responsible for mediating between it and the citizenry, whose fundamental rights it is bound to protect. The government serves a contradictory role, promoting consumption, while ensuring that citizens are not excessively exploited by capital. In this, the public becomes ‘consumer-citizens’ with democracy, freedom, and political action all bound to the practice of shopping. The theorization of this hybrid subjectivity suggests that consumer choices have powerful political and social implications. Yet, the definitions of ‘citizen’ and ‘consumer’ are problematically oppositional, as Gabriel and Lang explain:

The idea of citizen implies mutuality and control as well as a balance of rights and duties that is neither evident nor especially attractive to us. Citizens are active members of communities, at once listened to, but also prepared to defer to the will of the majority. Citizens have to argue their views and engage with the views of others. In as much as they can make choices, citizens have a sense of superior

30 Ibid., 3.
responsibility. Choosing as a citizen leads to a very different evaluation of alternatives from choosing as a consumer. As a citizen, one must confront the implications of one’s choices, their meaning and their moral value... Consumers, on the other hand, need not be members of a community, nor do they have to act on its behalf. Consumers operate in impersonal markets, where they can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations.\textsuperscript{31}

Being a citizen is work. It requires that we listen and respond to the interests and opinions of others and that we weigh our own priorities against the greater good. Being a consumer is pleasurable. Consumers, on the other hand, “act as atoms... free from the obligation to account for their preferences and choices.”\textsuperscript{32} The consumer-citizen is then at best a negotiated form of citizenship that presents personal choice as a means to achieving societal goals and in doing so places the individual over the whole. Because it is the individual’s choice to act in socially-minded ways, and he is not duty-bound to others, he is able to prioritize his interests and, therefore, appear extraordinary when he chooses to put others over himself. Moreover, if citizenship and civic duty are expressed through consumption, wealth becomes the criterion for becoming an active citizen. This in effect weighs the ‘democratic’ decision making process towards those with the highest incomes, while rendering the poor as failed citizens, incapable of making good choices.\textsuperscript{33}

While it is arguable that this subjectivity dismisses the very premise of citizenship, which

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 174.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 175.
is first and foremost collective, consumer-citizenship is undeniably the prevailing ideology of socio-political engagement at present and, therefore, we must ask what can be done within its parameters.

Though Gabriel and Lang save the discussion of the term ‘consumer-citizen’ for later in their book, situating its widespread use in the 1980s with the breakdown of the Keynesian economic model, I find it representative of the cultural understanding of consumer action as socially and politically relevant since the beginning of the industrial era. Therefore, I would like to impose this term upon Gabriel and Lang’s ‘four waves’ of consumer movements, as well as the historical accounts of other scholars who attempt to illustrate the political relevance of shopping. Long seeking assurance of safety, quality, and affordability in the products they purchase and, often to a lesser extent, social justice and equality in the marketplace, consumer-citizens need to be viewed as historically specific, with their actions and beliefs manifest from specific social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. As with any historically situated practice, consumer movements overlap and have continuities, which can be seen in the Whole Foods vision of consumer empowerment and the consumer-driven market.

Over time, the nature of consumer action has been shaped by the changing prevalence of consumption within everyday life. With Americans coming to see their freedom as the freedom to consume and as the right to be protected as consumers, the ways that they interact with and confront the marketplace has changed. Yet, our relationships to each other as citizens has changed as well. As consumption wove into the fabric of American identity and naturalized as the means to meet needs and define
oneself, individuals’ relationships to the collective citizenry changed. As sociologist Josee Johnston has argued, citizenship in itself is winnowed away as people embrace individual choice as not only freedom but as a fundamental right.34

If we consider Gabriel and Lang’s first wave consumer movement, we can see an earlier social ideology at play. The co-operative movement that took place in England during the late nineteenth century empowered people to work together, combining their productive power and divvying up profits equally. This movement stood in direct opposition to the capitalist industrial system that exploited humans as labor, giving them degraded wages for their productivity. Working from a collectivist mentality, which was more prominent prior to the naturalization of industrial labor and individualistic consumption, co-operatives were seen as a means to a richer, more democratic life for communities, wherein people could collectively determine their productive needs and fairly share its proceeds.35 Of interest to this inquiry is the fact that many of the co-operatives across the globe that are in existence today are based in the production and exchange of food, which Gabriel and Lang see as a result of the ability of co-operatives (co-ops) to establish a level of trust that is lacking in the corporatized food system. Despite the fact that co-operatives are no longer seen as a substantial threat to capitalism like they were at the turn of the twentieth century, grocery co-ops provide an alternative to the dominant mode of conducting business.36 Problematically, as we can see in the success of Whole Foods, consumer desire for both abundance and choice as well as

35 Gabriel and Lang, 157.
36 Ibid., 159.
fairness and sustainability have hindered the ability for grocery co-ops to function outside of the capitalist food system. Most co-operatives are now sourcing at least some products from national manufacturers, specifically those with roots in the counterculture that are seen as producing more ethical ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ foods.

But the transition of citizen-consumers to consumer-citizens began long before the integration of mass-produced foods into grocery co-ops. At the turn of the twentieth century, American consumers had already grown accustomed to the relative abundance and choice offered by technological advances and mass-production—a luxury that would only grow over time. The notion that consumers are entitled to a specific quantity and quality for their money came to the fore in the ‘value-for-money’ consumer movement. Though the second wave of activism first sought to limit the power of corporations, by the 1920s the movement’s focus shifted to consumer empowerment and education, as Gabriel and Lang note: “This was the first time that consumer activism saw itself as enabling consumers to take best advantage of the market, rather than trying to undermine the market through co-operative action or political agitation and lobbying.”

During the Great Depression, consumers became central to the reinvigoration of the nation’s economy when President Franklin D. Roosevelt added the Consumer Advisory Board (CAB) to the National Recovery Administration (NRA). However, the decision to grant citizens a voice as consumers and offer assurance of the government’s protection of consumer ‘rights’ has been interpreted as a means to achieve a hegemonic

37 Ibid., 160.
consumer culture in order to redeem the struggling economy. In her book *A Consumers’ Republic*, Lizbeth Cohen explains that under the advice of Keynesian economists, Congress came to see that “private investment and self-regulating markets could not remediate a stagnant ‘mature’ economy like America’s.” By “nurturing some of the political goals that proponents of the citizen consumer ideal sought [such as the] enhancement of American democracy and equality,” the government solidified the centrality of consumption within American patriotism and personal identity. With an equitable marketplace in which all Americans had the ability to attain a comfortable level of consumption or ‘freedom from want’, citizen-consumers began to see their ability to make consumer choices and to influence markets as inherently political. And yet, Gabriel and Lang show that confidence in the marketplace was not completely ensured by governmental oversight, as the political interventions of corporate interests were clear to the American public with the legislation of business-friendly economic policies. Because of this, consumer groups were created to “test products, inform the public, and protect consumers.” Unencumbered by industry interests, these groups were go-to sources for advice on what to buy and where to buy it. The most notable of these organizations was the Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports*, a magazine that reached the height of its popularity in the 1990s, indicating the persistence of ‘value-for-money’ ideology.

---

39 Ibid., 54-55.
40 Gabriel and Lang, 160, quoting the Consumers Union.
Despite the popularity of Consumer Reports, the decline of consumer organizations at the turn of the millennium is indicative of a shift in the marketplace. There are two key factors in this change, both of which are the effects of the corporate consolidation in manufacturing and retailing that took place with the rise of pro-business neoliberal economic policies—a consolidation that I would argue was in part facilitated by the second wave of consumerism’s focus on consumer knowledge instead of the constraint of capitalist powers. First, because large corporate retail chains are able to offer consumers lower prices, these savings to the individual trump the desire to seek product knowledge. As a result, support for consumer interest groups has waned along with consumer willingness to pay for higher quality goods. But, as I have claimed, these groups have contributed to their own demise by addressing consumers as individuals responsible for assessing what value they are willing to accept for their money. In effect, prioritizing individual choice has contributed widespread disinterest in the collective action (and monetary support) required for a consumer movement. Moreover, businesses now assert the importance of the individual choosing ‘better’ in order to gain consumer confidence. We see this appeal to individual consumers as choosers taken up by Whole Foods in recent years as the company attempts to draw shoppers from the value savvy camp by using the size of its operations to cut costs on staple goods, while retaining its core customers by offering more specialty, limited edition, and exclusive products as made possible by post-Fordist production.

The ability of large manufacturing firms to quickly respond to a diversity of consumer interests is the second factor that has resulted in the waning of the value-for-
money consumer movement. With the ability to produce limited runs of specialty commodities and chain retailers able to quickly turn over inventory, it has become increasingly difficult to give timely side-by-side product comparisons, resulting in more choice and less knowledge.\textsuperscript{41} In discussing mass designer fashion, Paul Smith employs the term “mass customization” to explain the rise of flexible, ‘on-time’ production as brands attempt to stay one step ahead of the competition in responding to consumer trends through product differentiation and frequent variation.\textsuperscript{42} We can see this even in the food industry with ‘get ‘em before they’re gone’ limited edition seasonal product varieties—for instance, the gamut of ‘pumpkin spice’ flavored foods during the 2014 holiday season, many of which were of the ‘all natural’ variety sold at Whole Foods. In the era of mass customization, what appears in traditional economic theory as rational actors driving the market through their consumptive choices, is instead consumers motivated by a market that monitors their purchasing patterns in order to produce a seemingly endless variety of superficially different commodities. The appearance of authenticity in the mass-produced suggests to consumers that these products are made for individuals with a certain cultural knowledge and not accessible to just anyone. Mass customization functions from a foundational desire for identity through consumption whereby consumers see their shopping as unique and empowering. In this sense shopping and the act of choosing from a range of mass-produced goods is a reflection of both

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 161.
\end{flushright}
personal freedom of expression and economic freedom, enabling individuals to see themselves as citizens-through-consumption.

However, mass customization thus poses an often unrecognized problem for consumer-citizenship: the brand being purchased may simply be the superficial signification of identity created by a company that is solely interested in capturing as many demographics as possible, having no social or political stake in an specific group or agenda. Here, I refer back to the conglomeration of corporate firms, as well as the production of higher- and lower-end product lines. With a single corporate umbrella representing the lifestyle interests of a wide variety of consumers, often even catering to oppositional interests, the only real interest is profit. By acting as consumer-citizens instead of citizens we are, in this sense, voting for the reign of capitalism over democracy. This illusion of individuality and diversity provided by mass customization has contributed to the decline of a united value-for-money movement, with consumers choosing fleeting trends that reflect their current lifestyle, including social, political, and economic interests, over long-term, stable investments in quality goods. But the value-for-money movement was never a real contender against the robust development of capitalism. The consumer movement that followed is indicative of the deepening presence of individual consumption in the American notion of citizenship, and it is in this third wave that we find the ideologies that are foundational to the inception of Whole Foods.

Spearheaded by Ralph Nader in the United States, the third wave consumer movement was rooted in the consumer’s continuing discontent with the power of large
corporations and the ability of these firms to deceive consumers, jeopardizing their safety in the name of profit. Nader’s focus was on informing consumers of the atrocities committed in the name of capital in order change the market itself. For Nader, capitalism was and is “something to be accepted, but which has to be worked hard on to prevent its excesses becoming its norms.”

While Cohen cites the role of public interest organizations and nonprofits in serving as a unified source of representation to aid the diverse consumer society to influence legislation during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administration, Gabriel and Lang note that, unlike the second wave movement, the third wave worked primarily from grassroots action. This do-it-yourself activism resonated with young people, who, in the midst of an unpopular war and a slumping economy, were lacking faith in bureaucracy and seeking alternative avenues to have their voices heard. Through Nader’s vision, youth came to see that active citizen involvement was the best means for preventing governmental collusion with industry, which worked against the interests of consumers.

We can see this grassroots ideology reproduced by Whole Foods when the company places itself on the side of consumer-citizens in working to demand the federal government create stricter food industry standards, specifically in the creation of the National Organics Program, which I will discuss in the next chapter. With Mackey asserting the company’s altruistic integrity because of its roots in the counterculture, he attempts to obscure the fact that Whole Foods is a business, thus needing outside scrutiny.

---

43 Gabriel and Lang, 163-64.
44 Cohen, 352; Gabriel and Lang, 164.
like all others. By rendering itself as the exception to consumers because they are already holding the consumer’s best interest at heart, Whole Foods re-presents the third wave consumer movement. It places the idea of being a ‘good business’ at the center of consumer welfare, solidifying the company’s purity and authenticity by aligning itself with organizations that counter the growth of Big Business—environmental, animal rights, and social justice groups.\(^4\)

Yet, it is in the latest consumer movement where we see the issues addressed by these organizations come to the fore with what Gabriel and Lang term ‘alternative consumerism’. Originally a disparate set of consumer practices touching on myriad ecological and social interests, alternative consumer interests have fused over the past twenty years, creating a more cohesive movement. Through the active participation of manufacturers and retailers, consumers have been presented with the possibility of addressing a variety of socio-political concerns through the marketplace, often through the purchase of a single commodity under the premise of ethical consumption. Gabriel and Lang note that ethical consumption has even been referred to as “political activism,” articulating the conflation of consumer interests and citizen responsibilities that has taken place since the 1980s with the naturalization of neoliberal economic ideologies.\(^5\)

The ethical consumer appears as the most evolved form of the consumer-citizen paradox as facilitated by the rendering of the logic of capitalism into the fabric of daily life.

\(^4\) Gabriel and Lang state: “Naderism’s persistent charge at the collusion of big business and the state has found new allies. These have included environmental groups, animal welfare groups, trades unions, as well as other consumer groups” (165). My claim is that the partnership between Whole Foods and these same types of organizations has granted them continuing credibility with the cautious consumers and activists who, despite their general contention against the growth of capitalism, continue to shop at Whole Foods, promoting its growth as a capitalist firm because the company recognizes and attempts to address at least some of their concerns.

\(^5\) Ibid., 166.
life and human relations. While older forms of consumer activism continue to exist, the predominance of ethical consumerism is an effect of the centrality of individual choice to American identity and the waning of collective action as a means for empowerment. Individuals have come to see it as their personal responsibility to ‘do the best they can’ through their daily activities, which the marketplace has enabled through the creation of ethical alternatives. Ethical shopping—often conducted in combination with other small acts like recycling, riding a bike to work, and donating used clothing to charity—is a choice made by individuals in the name of social and ecological betterment that, moreover, enables consumers to feel better about their impact on the world. While these actions can have positive effects, they do not challenge the overarching structures that have made it necessary to consider ‘better’ alternatives.

It is in the interest of capitalism that consumer-citizens see the positivity of their individual actions as their only means for action, because, as Margaret Thatcher has so famously said, in capitalist society “there are only individual men and women.” Ethical consumerism shows there is no possibility of forging a truly collective quest for justice in the marketplace because the existence of the marketplace is based on the individual as driving-force. Leftist ethical shoppers may cringe at my imposition of Thatcher’s words and my minimization of the potential for market-based change onto their actions, but the fact remains that ‘socially-minded’ individuals can no longer see the foundational problem of using individualism as a source of collective betterment and that consumption first and foremost enables the expansion of capitalism. Here I am in agreement with Josee Johnston who sees the rise of the ethical consumer as the social materialization of
Thatcher’s capitalist vision, representing a “shift… towards post-industrial values (e.g., environmentalism) and recognition-based identity politics (e.g., sexual orientation), along with concerns about the social and economic impact of globalization.” Unlike the Naderist movement, ethical consumers are not against the growth of corporations and are instead concerned with how things are produced and sold, seeing the things they purchase as a reflection of their personal identity and values. Problematically for the American consumer accustomed to abundance and value, a key part of ethical consumption is the belief that things can be ‘reasonably’ priced and ‘fairly’ produced. Here capitalism is asked to be as efficient as possible but minimally exploitative—a thorough contradiction and one that is projected in Whole Foods with its customers demanding the company follow through on their promise of high standards while providing shoppers with lower prices.

Though Johnston states that there has been a growing discontent with material abundance (what Gabriel and Lang refer to as “ennui”) since the turn of the millennium, she asserts that ethical consumption is not equal to constraint. Her stance is consistent with Gabriel and Lang who, in discussing the “green consumption” trend that was prevalent during the late 1980s, write: “Its fundamental message was less apocalyptic than it was in the early 1970s and more accommodating to productionism. ‘Consume carefully’ it proclaimed, rather than ‘don’t consume’ or ‘consume less’.” The allure of alternative consumption is that by consuming “carefully or differently” we can meet our

47 Johnston, 238.
48 Ibid.; Gabriel and Lang, 169.
49 Gabriel and Lang, 167.
personal needs, right the wrongs of our consumer past, and even fashion a better world for those who are not afforded the same consumer privileges.\textsuperscript{50} It is because ethical consumption retains the same emphasis on the individual as the facilitator of all action—as he who drives the market and therefore directs the productive practices of capitalism—that it can co-exist with expansion of capitalism to produce what are only superficial changes within the marketplace.

In accordance with Mackey and Sisodia’s claim that conscious businesses will prevail in comparison to their traditional counterparts, Gabriel and Lang show that companies that have changed their production methods to reduce their carbon footprint in an effort to address consumers’ concerns have increased their viability in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{51} Appearing as ‘better’ than less ethically-minded companies, those that take interest in fair labor, sustainability, and community development initiatives (whether mission-driven like Whole Foods or as acts of Corporate Social Responsibility as conducted by Walmart) have been able to attract and retain consumers (to a greater or lesser extent) by mediating some of the most egregious detriments of capitalist expansion. In this, the production of ethical commodities or the introduction of a ‘mission’ to appeal to ethical consumers plays on the demographization of the marketplace that has taken place in the era of mass customization—large companies release lines of ‘green’ products to compete with their traditionally sourced and produced

\textsuperscript{50} Johnston, 238.
\textsuperscript{51} Gabriel and Lang, 167-69.
brands or rebrand themselves as always having cared about the planet, addressing consumer trends while asserting authenticity.

Whole Foods is unique in its ability to harness the appeal of mass customization through their brand in the production of a commodity that constantly evolves. This can be seen both in its brand’s mission and its stores’ product offerings. By continuously evolving, the company appears to have already addressed the needs of its customer despite only staying at pace with consumer concerns as they develop. By staking a claim to constant improvement, Whole Foods asserts its ability to adapt to the ethical market (or market for ethics) while also owning its imperfection and inability to stay ahead of consumer demand. It is its mission that gives the company its edge over the competition—the fact that it always-already cares because it has built its brand and reputation on consumer concerns. Yet, we must also remember that while offering a greater purpose for business than capitalist accumulation, the corporate mission of Whole Foods is concretely tied to its ability to profit.

Borrowing elements from all four waves of consumer action, Whole Foods settles firmly in the final phase of ethical consumption, calling to individual consumers to accept the lot of advanced capitalism, along with the triumph of large corporations, while imploring those shoppers to constantly demand better for themselves, their families, and the world around them. The mission of Whole Foods is the product of the historical moment of its company’s inception. Whole Foods as a company and the reluctant faith American consumers put into it have only been made possible with the integration of consumption into the fabric of everyday life and social relations—our sarcasm about the
importance of shopping both for pleasure and in defining who were are. When stripped down to its barebones functionality, Whole Foods is still a supermarket. Whole Foods stores show the evolving character of the supermarket and its place in American life. Its actions as a company illustrate the negotiations that must take place in responding to the conflicting demands presented by the intensification of capitalism and competition on one side and the mandates for consumer protection and ethics on the other. As with the evolution of consumer movements, changes in the retailing of groceries show the effects of deepening of capitalism as well as continuities of older practices. With the history of food retailing affected by the actions of consumers, these two histories cannot be disassociated.

**History 2: A Super-Market**

Supermarkets are a fairly recent invention, yet they have been *naturalized* as the place from which food is procured. The development of the supermarket in the United States began with the emergence of new technologies in the late nineteenth century. These innovations, which resulted in increased agricultural efficiency in tandem with the development of industrial factories, spurred rural to urban population migration and immigrants’ decision to settle in urban areas. With a large bustling population, an efficient distribution system for food needed to be established. It quickly became clear that the early modern food system could not serve the growing population nor provide the proper outlets for the food products of mass-production. Early food retailing was an industry divided and labor intensive process. While retailers were normally clustered together for consumer convenience, food shopping required visiting and maintaining...
relationships with several merchants, as prices paid and credit given were often contingent on the rapport between the two parties. Consumers viewed their local shopkeepers and vendors as knowledgeable and caring neighbors, while demanding their dedicated personal service in addition to “equitable treatment, low prices, and high-quality merchandise that fit their needs.” With the success of their business, and their personal livelihoods, contingent on meeting consumer needs, shopkeepers catered their offerings to the demands of their clients, allowing for little margin of error or ability to standardize their product lines.

Food selling was, therefore, both time-consuming social labor and a costly endeavor. Purchasing in small lots from wholesalers, simply stocking a store’s shelves came at great costs—costs that were passed along to consumers in the retail prices determined at the point of sale. These expenses were only compounded by the lack of shelf-stable packaging and refrigeration at the turn of the twentieth century. Any food that exceeded its shelf-life would have to be disposed since customers felt that the sale of subpar goods was a sign of personal disrespect and could damage the reputation of a shop and its owner in the eyes of the community. With minimal inventory, little prospect for attracting new clients, and a need to retain the few customers they had, shopkeepers extended services like credit and delivery, which only presented added strain to the


minimally staffed and under-profiting businesses. As Marc Levinson notes, with store owners struggling to meet consumer demands while essentially paying to keep shoppers coming through their doors, “the average food store… had a very short life expectancy.”

In effect, the costs of operating a food store far outweighed the benefits, and in the early years of the twentieth century, it became clear that if the food industry was to expand and profit like the rest of the retail sector, it would need a new direction. The success and growth of department stores over the course of the nineteenth century indicated that Americans were coming to embrace the notion of shopping for leisure and saw the pleasure of buying and owning things. However, food was, and is, seen as different from other consumer goods. Unlike durable goods, food was seen as something purchased out of necessity and thus subject to limited demand because people only needed so much. Self-guided shopping also seemed impossible in the world of edibles. Clerks were needed for handling and quality control, and there was little wandering a food shopper could do in a small-scale food shop that offered an extremely limited variety of goods. This narrow view of food shopping began to change with innovations of mass-production, namely the machine-made cardboard box and the streamlining of the canning process using tin cans. These two methods of packaging not only “appealed to a public increasingly concerned with hygiene and sanitation,” but also allowed for a reduction in labor at the point of sale.

56 Levinson, 41-42.
By offering a steady supply of pre-measured packages that could be sold at predetermined prices, the advent of prepackaged foods allowed retailers to focus their efforts on selling, relieving clerks from the most labor-intensive tasks—measuring and haggling. While grocers attempted to begin to wean shoppers from their dependence on the time-consuming personal service and costly amenities, consumers were torn between what they had come to expect from the food shopping experience and their desire for lower prices. Doubts regarding the quality of mass-produced edibles and the reliability of manufacturers’ claims lingered into the first two decades of the twentieth century, as many shoppers continued to patronize their reliable and familiar local grocers, feeling word-of-mouth was still the best assurance of quality. However, clerks’ discretion would come to be used against them as advertisements for national brand products warned of “substitution evil,” whereby clerks would use their power of influence over customers to offer alternatives that they promised were as good as the advertised products.  

The rise of advertising and mass publication targeted primarily at the new middle class was key in creating the modern food consumer by placing national brands at the center of American culture. Through ads Americans came to see mass-produced products as useful, safe, and, moreover, a symbol of quality life in the modern age. This shift in the appearance of food and the interpretation of ‘quality’ resulted in a redefinition of American needs according to a lexicon of brand name food products where those names overwrote the foods that composed them—“cooking oil” became “Crisco” and “oatmeal” without an image of a Quaker on the box became unrecognizable, foreign, and  

57 Strasser, 84.
 unacceptable. It was in this establishment of trust for national food brands that we find an adjacent development—the chain grocery store.

Despite being first introduced in the late nineteenth century, it would be decades before the chain grocery store would become the go-to place for American food shopping and even longer before it would develop into a competitive industry, evident in its appearance as a recognizable roadside landmark. Up until the 1920s, the majority of retail transactions were conducted at small, independent stores, which meant that for mass-produced goods to reach consumers, they had to travel through an intricate supply chain that took them from manufacturers to wholesalers or “jobbers” to hired or licensed salesmen to retailers and finally to consumers. This distribution chain, while helping to sustain many independent businesses, was not beneficial to manufacturers who had little control over the sales practices or representation of their products in the retail sphere. To build dedicated consumer-markets manufacturers needed the support of retailers, and the intervening wholesaler broke the direct chain of communication between manufacturer and retailer. For name brand products to truly flourish in the marketplace, changes would have to be made in the way products were received by and sold in stores, which would require more business-minded storeowners with better capital practices and more capital to invest in their inventory.

Chains reduced the need for wholesale middlemen, allowing manufacturers to sell directly to independent distribution centers that serviced their regional stores. Working with chains was financially beneficial in that it provided manufacturers with high-volume orders and also saved them on storage space and delivery expenses. Setting the model for
what would become the grocery industry, the first successful food retail chain was the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company—the A&P. Established by the New York-based Hartford family in 1880 as a coffee and tea retailer, the A&P slowly added a variety of food products to their inventory in response to changes in the market and consumer demands. The initial capital provided by the A&P’s early years in the tea and coffee business, as well as the wide regard for their name, facilitated the A&P’s rapid expansion and enabled them to take advantage of economies of scale by making large purchases from manufacturers. These savings were then passed on to their customers, which was essential to the chain’s popularity as the demand for lower prices grew in the second decade of the twentieth century when Americans were rattled by general inflation and high food costs.\(^{58}\)

The A&P served not only as one of the first large clients for national manufacturers but also as innovator of some practices in the nascent industry that would last into the next century. First, the Hartford family saw that consumers were coming to see brands as testaments to quality. Going a step further than other stores who were competing by lowering their prices on brand name goods and offering generic versions of those products at even lower prices, A&P made a name for itself when it began putting its unique red “A&P” label on a few staple goods. In doing this, A&P became the first grocery store brand, carrying this visual motif to the exterior of the first “Economy Store” in 1912.\(^{59}\) The store brand became a testimony of the sale of quality goods as once
assured by the local independent storeowner. Price savvy shoppers came to see a chain’s house brand products as offering the same quality and value present in their stores.

A&P’s second innovation, the lower-end “Economy Store,” was another industry game-changer, and shows the demographization of consumers at an early phase of consumer capitalism, long before Whole Foods would be deemed a class-specific supermarket. A&P effectively operated two store formats during the early part of the twentieth century—their traditional full-service stores, which continued to offer highly personalized service along with higher priced commodities for those who could afford them, and their Economy Stores, which appealed to cost conscious consumers who were willing to sacrifice the familiar shopping experience to save money. Based on A&P’s years of retail experience and observations of other successful grocery stores, the Economy Store offered a wider product line, meeting consumers’ needs for food items within a single location, and banished costly and extraneous practices like customer credit, promotional giveaways, home delivery, advertising, and interior adornments. By limiting personal service the Hartfords reduced the number of employees needed to operate the larger Economy Stores, which further cut down their overhead costs. Whereas traditional stores profited off of the individual sale of higher price commodities, Economy Stores profited by selling more goods at lower profit margins.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the differences in operations, both stores were associated with the positive reputation that the company had built as a fine retailer. But even the Economy Store model was flexible. During the 1920s, changing American lifestyles and the greater economic stability of the

\textsuperscript{60} Walsh, 25-28; Strasser, 224; Levinson, 63.
interwar period meant that shoppers were once again looking for higher-priced prepared and convenience foods and service amenities. It was at this point that a greater number of amenities were integrated into the economy model. The longevity of the A&P chain is reflective of their ability to respond to changes in consumption, including a later innovation that would become the standard for grocery retailing—the self-service format.

In carrying a wide variety of foodstuffs at very low-prices, A&P Economy Stores relied on a no-frills approach to food sales, meaning those stores lacked extravagance of the department store of the same period. Food shopping remained a need-based activity until Southern grocery entrepreneur Clarence Saunders developed a plan to refashion the food retail space, creating an efficient system that offered both value and ease in shopping in order to elicit consumer desire as department stores had for decades. Like Hartford, Saunders envisioned a more democratic shopping space that offered consumers the best value for their money; however, he also saw the potential for engaging shoppers with larger disposable incomes in the retail environment, inspiring them to increase the size of their purchases and thereby adding to the store’s profits. In conceptualizing the self-service store Saunders removed the necessity for clerks throughout the store by placing all products within shoppers’ reach, letting them choose between a wide variety of mass-produced name brand packaged goods. Moving away from the open floor plan of the traditional grocery store, Saunders mapped a structured pathway of aisles that would channel shoppers through the store. He believed that by ensuring that customers passed by the full inventory, they would pick up products, read labels, and come to want more things, adding to their total purchase. But, as the old adage goes, you have to spend
money to make money. The self-service store required a sizable initial investment for
construction of aisles, and installation of lighting, cash registers, and (later) refrigeration,
all of which added to the modern upscale atmosphere and efficiency. This plan was first
tested on the public when Saunders opened his first Piggly Wiggly store in Memphis in
1916. Saunders would find his investment to pay off handsomely with the growth of the
Piggly Wiggly franchise chain. Self-service quickly became the preferred format for food
shopping, as only a decade after the doors of its first store opened, each small, efficient,
and well-stocked Piggly Wiggly location was able to yield twice the sales dollars as the
average A&P store.61

Importantly, the change in the layout of the grocery store was accompanied by a
corresponding change in the culture of shopping. It was Saunders’s understanding of the
type of consumer he wanted as his customer that was key to making the Piggly Wiggly
into the hub of modern food shopping. While Saunders cast as wide of a net as possible to
get the maximum number of people inside the doors, he was also well aware of the
importance of attracting and pleasing affluent shoppers. He saw the connection between
consumption and lifestyle in the modern age and employed that ideology to change the
culture of grocery shopping. Saunders touted his self-led shopping experience as an
exercise in consumer freedom. Once constrained by the offerings and recommendations
of shopkeepers, shoppers, specifically women, “could purchase whichever brand or item
they wanted, free from the pressure that a clerk might exert.”62 Seeing the need for his

61 Tolbert, 180.
62 Deutsch, 54.
gmade grocery store to reflect the society it inhabited, instead of focusing on low prices—which, as mentioned, were the standard for competition between stores—Saunders’s marketing centered on the social interests of the white, middle class, homemaker whom he saw as the anchor for his business. This is not to say that price was not an important consideration in the Piggly Wiggly’s success; however, the cultural value of the Piggly Wiggly is in how it effected the grocery industry and consumer perceptions of food shopping as both a democratic and inherently classed social activity—a persistent and contradictory ideological divide that we can see in our discussions of shopping at Whole Foods as both a ‘better’ and more expensive choice.

Food prices have always been a point of contention, as they impact what foods people buy and how food is sold. However, food prices are affected by political and economic factors that are beyond retailers’ control, leaving storeowners to adapt to changing circumstances or risk losing their customers. We find the development of the first supermarket during the Great Depression, when Americans were willing to sacrifice all consumer luxury for lower prices, and grocers, faced with rising wholesale costs and declining consumer spending, were forced to strip down their operations. A far cry from what a twenty-first century consumer thinks of when hearing the word “supermarket,” these large, bargain food distribution centers were able to offer even greater value by further cutting costs through “bulk purchasing, self-service, and low-overhead” taking the model set earlier by A&P to a grand scale.⁶³ On the interior the earliest supermarkets were barebones warehouses where customers guided themselves through a variety of

---

⁶³ Mack, 17.
food products that were not so much displayed as left in stacks on the floor, sometimes still in their open shipping cartons.\(^{64}\) By offering minimal accommodations and purchasing in massive quantities, supermarkets were able to deliver on the promise of offering the lowest possible prices, creating consumer frenzy through advance advertising of sales, which enabled them to attract customers from established stores.\(^{65}\) Even as single outlet operations, the huge warehouse stores were often able to sell in even greater volumes than small grocery chains and thereby purchase directly from manufacturers, receiving the best possible prices. Supermarkets offered even deeper discounts by introducing “loss-leader” selling—a practice where certain items would be sold below cost, drawing customers in the doors where they were likely to purchase more than that one item.\(^{66}\)

Of course, for loss-leaders to be financially effective, customers needed to browse the stores and pick up additional items that would make up for the costs stores incurred by selling below cost.\(^{67}\) While value pricing and cutting cost was necessary for keeping the food industry afloat, these measures also helped American consumers stay within their budgets, showing them that the splendor of consumer culture was not too distant even at times of economic duress. Supermarkets further perpetuated these notions of excitement and abundance through promotional incentives and sweepstakes, creating a carnivalesque atmosphere.\(^{68}\) What supermarkets lacked in retail environment and service

---

\(^{64}\) Walsh, 47.
\(^{65}\) Mack, 16-17.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{68}\) Mack, 17-18.
they made up for in cheap amusements and space. Here we find the institution of the parking lot as the essential amenity of the supermarket. At a time when the automobile was becoming commonplace in America, supermarkets offered their shoppers ample parking lots, allowing customers to arrive by car and load up on value-priced goods.69 Even today, while many urban grocery stores lack substantial parking, Whole Foods commonly offers garages at their urban locations. Though hardly fulfilling their eco-friendly mission, Whole Foods uses its economic power to purchase extra space in order to ensure its customers’ needs are met.

But for early supermarkets, amenities were ancillary to the price, and because volume of purchase was one of the easiest ways for a retailer to cut their costs, it was not long before supermarket operators would set to expand their reach by creating chains, with the first successful supermarket chain being Michael J. Cullen’s King Kullen. A former A&P employee, Cullen opened his first supermarket in 1930 in Queens, New York and shortly thereafter added a number of stores in the area, each of which sold more than the combined total sales of ten A&Ps.70 Cullen understood the importance of standardization and centralized oversight of his stores, but realized this had to be done on terms that agreed with the discount shopping model of the supermarket. Cullen introduced the concept of departments into food retailing. By creating a standardized inventory and departmental floor plan for his stores, Cullen enhanced the shopping experience for his customers who could enter any King Kullen store and know where to

70 Mack, 16-17.
find specific products. Supermarkets like Cullen’s were also able to expand the types of food products offered. By employing modern refrigeration technology, Cullen and other large profitable supermarkets were able to add self-service meat and dairy departments, further reducing their customers’ need to visit other retailers. The addition of meat and dairy departments also extended the reach of product standardization, as supermarket executives worked to force meat cutters and dairy producers to implement changes to their products and production methods that would make for easier retailing.

With the success of King Kullen stores, it became increasingly obvious to those in the industry that bigger was better, and single stores felt pressure to expand into chains or surrender to being bought out by or incorporated into prevailing chains. During the 1930s and ’40s the size of chains grew as the per unit size of food stores grew. Chain stores, beginning with Piggly Wiggly and A&P, were perceived as a threat not only by manufacturers, who considered their profits at the pricing whims of powerful retailers, and small retailers, who could not compete with the discount prices offered by large stores, but also by the American people at large, as it was widely believed that corporations were actually responsible for the “inequality in the distribution of wealth and income.” The growth of and competition between supermarket chains during the ’30s and 40s only validated earlier concerns that chain leadership had worked to abate prior to the Depression. With the rise of extremely competitive large supermarkets and supermarket chains in the mid-1930s, the political efforts against the formation of chains

---

71 Walsh, 47.
72 Greer, 152.
73 Gwynn.
74 Greer, 55.
reached its maximum, and grocery industry representatives who supported the supermarket at its inception began to see the ravenous cost cutting as harmful to the health of the industry.\textsuperscript{75} The problem with chains, at least within the industry and in the eyes of consumers, had shifted from one of corporate threat to one of aesthetics and taste. This shift reflects the integration of capitalism into the American lifestyle, as citizens were coming to see chain stores as part of the nation’s landscape and corporations as part of daily life; this was a shift adjacent to that which took place in the value-for-money consumer movement when proponents changed their focus from thwarting corporate growth to lobbying for better corporate practices.

Leading the charge against the unsavory practices associated with chain supermarkets was the Super Market Institute (SMI), a trade organization that formed in 1937.\textsuperscript{76} The associated industry representatives and store owners found that there were factors other than price that effected consumer purchasing, and increased sales could be achieved by “improving the visual environment” and creating a full sensory experience that included the management of smell and sound.\textsuperscript{77} Producing this environment required investment in modern technologies, such as refrigeration units to keep meat, dairy, and produce fresh and food odors to a minimum and sound absorbing floor tiles paired with stereo systems to reduce the sounds of the bustling store, offering instead an enjoyable soundtrack to lull consumers as they made their way through the aisles. Upgrading the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 51, 152; McAusland, 15.
\textsuperscript{77} Mack, 21.
visual environment required attention to store design and aesthetics, including crucial decisions in regards to paint colors and fixture choices. As the supermarket’s success was based on its ability to sell its products, namely food, that too had to be presented in an attractive manner. Store managers envisioned and executed massive displays of the abundance of quality goods available to their discerning consumers, often arranging products thematically to inspire consumer purchases.⁷⁸

With the growth of reputable chains under the guidance of SMI, consumers came to have a distinct set of expectations about supermarkets, and during this time, floor plans and architecture become increasingly standardized according to the logic of self-service departmental shopping. The aestheticization and branding of the supermarket was completed in the golden age of the supermarket, which took place during economic upturn of the 1950s. The splendorous architecture and ambitious ad campaigns of supermarkets reflected a newly affluent consumer base with different expectations for spaces of consumption. With the migration of middle class families to the suburbs, supermarkets honed in on creating a space that appealed to the interests of this desirable consumer group, fitting the landscape of newly developed American communities. The opening of new supermarkets “generated excited and glowing newspaper reports” as the “standardized designs, in use since the 1930s and 1940s, were refined and modernized, creating instantly recognizable and iconic buildings such as A&P’s colonial-themed stores; the glass arch-shaped designs of Safeway, Penn Fruit, and others; and the

⁷⁸ Ibid., 21-29.
towering pylon signs of Food Fair and Lucky Stores.” Trips to the supermarket became “exciting adventures” made possible by the “new, streamlined, aesthetically pleasing” shopping establishment of the post-war period, which fulfilled the promise of post-war consumer society, offering abundance, affordability, convenience, and enjoyment.\(^\text{80}\)

With the desire to offer the greatest possible variety of products, the average supermarket grew in size to accommodate self-service meat and dairy departments and more extensive produce departments—all made possible by the introduction of efficient Freon cold cases, plastic film, and wrapping machines—in addition to the inclusion of non-food items that became part of the product line during World War II when food revenues were low due to rationing.\(^\text{81}\) During the same time period, more orderly distribution methods were put in place as the industry and related technologies evolved, ensuring a constant supply of packaged and priced food commodities lined the shelves. Supermarket chains added in the standardization of product offerings across the nation with centralized warehouses that deployed regular shipments to regional stores.\(^\text{82}\) Therefore, it is no surprise that the supermarket became the poster child for the merits of capitalism during the Cold War era—a place where US politicians could proudly take foreign dignitaries to show the wealth and efficiency of the nation. As Tracey Deutsch notes, “Supermarkets showcased modern American solutions to universal needs.”\(^\text{83}\)

\(^{79}\) Gwynn.
\(^{80}\) Deutsch, 183.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 188; McAusland, 62-65.
\(^{82}\) McAusland, 70.
\(^{83}\) Deustch, 191-92.
Yet, because the vast majority of chain and independent food retailers nationwide came to employ the supermarket format and carry the same national branded goods and general variety of products, differentiation of stores is largely based on the aesthetics. While the corporate standardization of chain stores was essential to creating roadside recognizability in order to draw local shoppers and out-of-towners, the proliferation of recognizable chain stores serves as visual testament to the consolidation of the supermarket industry, which has been taking place since its early years. Surprisingly, supermarket merger litigation only began in the 1960s, with the Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) first case waged against Von’s Grocery Co. in 1966, prior to the institution of the first draft of the United States’ Merger Guidelines in 1968. Still, there were few cases in which supermarket mergers were blocked prior to the 1980s with the introduction of provisions for handling supermarket mergers added to the 1982 and ’84 editions. In general, supermarket mergers were not contested unless they were perceived as a threat to competition that would result in higher prices for consumers. As an effect, what we see as a homogenous landscape is the result of consumer demand for value and predictability, while the integration of community specific elements reflects citizens’ desires for unique and authentic neighborhoods—contradictory longings that are addressed in mass-customization. Loyal chain shoppers come to see their local chain store as part of the community, a place they feel comfortable and specifically reflects their needs and interests, while other branches of the chain would serve their needs in a

pinch. It is, therefore, mainly aesthetic elements that speak of certain lifestyles and values that induce consumer loyalty to the modern and contemporary supermarket.

Though naturalized as the place for food shopping and part of the local landscape by the 1950s, the supermarket received another backlash when recession hit during the 1970s. Supermarket entrepreneurs and food industry executives, including SMI and Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), argued that the increased prices that consumers saw in stores was a reflection of increased food costs due to inflation, declining agricultural surpluses, and US commitment to foreign aid, factors over which the industry had no real control.\textsuperscript{85} Despite these claims by the food industry, consumers, predominantly women tasked with their household shopping and oversight of their families’ grocery budgets, saw high prices as the result of retailer spending on promotions, advertising, and store décor. These consumer-citizens turned their backs on supermarkets, instead doing their household shopping at discount stores, and returning to the supermarket only to make their voices heard on the picket line.\textsuperscript{86} While many chains in the 1960s and ‘70s maintained their dedication to an aesthetically pleasing shopping environment while attempting to meet consumer demand for more reasonable prices, other retail entrepreneurs introduced a different type of no-frills outlet. Akin to the supermarket of the 1930s, “discount centers” and “super stores” were introduced. These budget-priced department or warehouse stores—places like Costco and BJ’s Wholesale—

\textsuperscript{85} Mack,129.  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 117.
offered a more limited variety of staple groceries and emphasized the value of buying in bulk.\textsuperscript{87}

The consumer uprising not only propelled the supermarket’s return to a more value-centric mission but also had political ramifications, including the use of computer technology for greater governmental oversight of industry practices. The regulated system meant that the food retail industry needed to comply with standards that would empower consumers by giving them easy access to relevant information. Two of the most important measures here were the notation of unit price on shelf tags and easily identifiable “open-code,” i.e., use-by or sell-by dates, on products.\textsuperscript{88} These requirements effected the entire food industry as food products were dated by manufacturers and unit pricing became a key factor for determining package size for food products (as larger quantities often meant lower unit prices, consumers came to find value in buying in bulk).

Another innovation added a new level of expedience to the shopping experience: the Universal Product Code (UPC). Beginning in the 1970s, manufacturers printed UPCs, more commonly known as “barcodes,” on products, which could then be read by an optical scanner at the supermarket checkout. This technology added efficiency by eliminating the need for cashiers to enter the price of each product and also gave the

\textsuperscript{87} McAusland, 99-103.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 83. Unit pricing is the breakdown of price to a standard unit of measure for easy cost comparison (i.e. The unit price of a can of soup, a liquid, is one ounce. The consumer can use this number to compare the costs of all soups that may be sold in different size cans). See “Unit Pricing,” Nutrition Department at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, accessed September 9, 2015, http://www.umass.edu/nibble/infofile/unitpric.html. Open-code dating is the calendar date indicating when a product should be sold or used by. Open-code dating gives the consumer clear indication of a product’s expiration versus production coding. See “Food Product Dating,” USDA Food Safety Inspection Services, http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/food-labeling/food-product-dating/food-product-dating.
customer “a receipt that [printed] out the specific name and price of each item purchased” enabling shopper to keep more accurate records of their spending.\(^89\)

Thus, even though computer technology was important for monitoring industry practices, the investment paid off throughout the food distribution chain, as it facilitated greater efficiency and profitability since computerized inventory and analytic systems allowed for scientific management of physical stock and consumer purchasing data.\(^90\)

Naturally, large chain stores were more readily able to afford the new equipment. This technology allowed them to achieve even greater efficiency, more reasonable prices, and increased customer satisfaction, thereby giving them an even larger slice of the market. Since offering the best prices became the name of the game during this period of recession, inflation, and boycott, supermarkets and supermarket chains became ravenously competitive once again, and in the era of large chains, store buyouts were seen as one of the only means of achieving a greater market share. By increasing their presence in the market, a large supermarket chain had the collateral to finance new operations, allowing them to spread their maintenance costs over a greater number of units, thus making each a smaller fraction of overhead costs proportionally. Moreover, chains could purchase stock at even greater volumes, thereby cutting their costs (and passing savings onto consumers) through bulk ordering from producers.\(^91\)

The thrust to expand chains has only intensified since the 1970s with the instatement of neoliberal economic policies, including the loosening of antitrust laws

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 105.  
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 83.  
\(^{91}\) Yee, 28-30.
during the Reagan administration. Yet, the introduction of Walmart’s endeavor into the grocery business with the opening of their SuperCenters beginning in 1988 appears as the catalyst for supermarket consolidation during the 1990s. During this time, we see the conglomeration of supermarket chains as well as growth in store size and product offerings as an attempt to compete with Walmart’s SuperCenters and increasingly popular wholesale clubs.\textsuperscript{92} Notably, the contemporary supermarket offers more than foods to be prepared by the home cook, displaying a wide array of products prepared and semi-prepared foods, household items, health and beauty aids, libations (available on a state-to-state basis), children’s toys, and pet care goods, as well as services including cafes, wine and coffee bars, dry cleaning, full-service banks, and childcare. Contemporary supermarkets work to not only draw consumers in with the promise of fresh foods and value in a food-centric environment but also offer those customers \textbf{everything} they might need, therefore eliminating trips to other retailers for miscellaneous items. In effect, if we read Whole Foods as a supermarket and \textit{not} as something unique and special that functions outside of the capitalist dictum of expansion, the fact that it has absorbed the majority of its competition is not surprise or even unusual.

The consolidation of the industry during the late 1990s through the merger of large supermarket chains was cause for alarm for the FTC.\textsuperscript{93} These mergers resulted in powerful regional chains as well as the first nationwide food retail chains. Since then, supermarket mergers have faced more investigations than that of any other industry aside

---

\textsuperscript{92} Deborah L. Feinstein and Michael B. Bernstein, “All Over the Map: Grocery Store Enforcement from Von’s to Whole Foods,” \textit{Antitrust} 22. 1 (Fall 2007), 54.  
\textsuperscript{93} Balto, 38.
from pharmaceuticals. All supermarket pre-merger notifications are placed under the purview of the FTC as the agency developed to protect consumer interests. It is not surprising that the FTC took issue with the proposed merger with between Whole Foods and Wild Oats Market in 2007. Whole Foods had finally narrowed its niche market enough to appear as a monopolistic bully within the industry but, moreover, was beginning to appear as a threat to consumer choice and price competition. Because of the unique nature of the commodity being sold—food as both necessity and consumer good—the potential price increases resulting from horizontal mergers are specifically of concern for citizens in a nation founded on democracy and equality. And this worry over rising costs is not unfounded; a December 2012 study by the FTC found that generally mergers result in higher prices on average as “those mergers generating the largest price increases take place in the most concentrated markets,” which are predominantly urban and semi-urban geographic areas, like those most commonly occupied by Whole Foods.94

Part of the difficulty in “creating a consistent framework for analysis” of supermarket mergers is the definition of the supermarket as a distinct, internally relative product-market in which competition takes place.95 The FTC works from their definition of “supermarkets,” which, created in 1988, takes into consideration the “one-stop shopping” ideal held by contemporary firms, adding the specific criteria that stores be “at least 10,000 square feet of selling space and sales greater than $2 million per year.”96

Changing retail formats have proven to complicate analysis of supermarket mergers and

95 Feinstein and Bernstein, 53.
96 Balto, 41.
their effects upon competition. While the FTC remains firm in its definition, more
department stores now offer food products, and more supermarkets are offering the types
of specialty products once exclusively available at stores like Whole Foods. The
commission’s analysis is further complicated by what they consider to be the relevant
geographic market, which is reflective of how far consumers are willing to travel to shop,
and is contingent upon physical and artificial barriers as well as market concentration.
These criteria are not finite or applicable across investigations and fail to account for the
fact that shoppers may be willing to travel further to reach a specialty retailer and may
visit such a venue infrequently, conducting most of their food shopping at a traditional
supermarket.97 Problematically, the FTC appears to take for granted the naturalized
position of the supermarket within American society—we know one when we see one,
and we know what purpose it serves—and in this does not consider the intricacies of
consumer preferences or brand alliances. With the breakdown of Americans into
demographics and niche markets since the 1980s, there has been a proliferation of
supermarket types and styles that reflect the divergent tastes of the population. The
success of stores that range in price-point and target consumer has been based on the
ability to accurately calculate the demographics of the surrounding area in order to meet
the tastes of those potential customers. This fact is important to note because Whole
Foods has been criticized for targeting a specific consumer demographic, while doing so

97 Ibid., 42.
is, and has been, common industry practice as the opening of a new store is a large financial investment.98

The overall familiarity of the supermarket experience, regardless of name or location, is solidified in both its scientifically rationalized layout and the predominance of national brand names across the nation. The supermarket floor plan, whether large or small, generally follows a single general pattern in which the perishable items—meats, dairy, baked goods, hot/prepared foods, and flowers—are found at the store’s periphery, and higher profit non-perishable, miscellaneous, and frozen items are located in the central aisles, with brand name goods occupying premium space at the ends of aisles and at eye-level shelves.99 Yet, consumers seem to hold devotion to particular supermarkets or supermarket chains, suggesting that minor differences are crucial in the consideration of where to shop. In reaching the local community, the ability to promote or highlight different regionally desirable products is also important. Developing the right product line and aesthetic thus requires a customer-centric approach in which the specific practices and preferences of area shoppers are taken into consideration instead of relying on general consumer trends or industry predictions.100

Not only does location specific merchandizing help shoppers from the community find popular ethnic, local, and lifestyle brands and products, it also helps retailers

99 Nestle notes that the layout of the contemporary supermarket has been achieved only through the trails of previous models compounded with “extensive research” aiming on getting the consumer to “walk up and down the aisles as long as possible, but not so long that you get frustrated.” Marion Nestle, What to Eat (New York: North Point Press, 2006), 19.
increase revenues by giving prime space to commodities that are most likely to sell.\textsuperscript{101} The ability for stores within chains to tailor their product orders and display layouts to the tastes of their core shoppers has only been possible since the mid-1960s with the end of the period of standardization, caused by the need to maintain order under intense government scrutiny.\textsuperscript{102} Assessment of products best suited to a local community is important for all supermarkets but especially for small supermarkets, or superettes, where shelving is limited. With the technology in place to make shopping more customer-friendly while making it easier for companies to analyze consumption habits, the contemporary supermarket is able to satisfy its customers and ensure healthy sales.

Honing in on the preferences of local shoppers is thus an industry wide practice but is often seen as something specific to Whole Foods. This may be because the company puts so much emphasis on being part of the community. The store leadership’s attention to the interests of local shoppers in not only the products they will buy but also the events in which they will engage, for instance wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, or children’s activities, facilitates the success of a Whole Foods store and its centrality within the community.

As supermarkets have worked to become brands in their own right with an eye to the communities that they serve, shoppers of specific branded supermarkets can be seen as communities in themselves with the supermarket as a site for fostering their engagement. With individuals often choosing one store over another for similar social,

\textsuperscript{101} For background information on store product selection in relation to local foods and meeting/creating consumer demands for these products see Amy Guptill and Jennifer Wilkins, “Buying into the food system: Trends in Food Retailing in the US and Implications For Local Foods,” \textit{Agriculture and Human Values} 19 (2002), 39-51.
\textsuperscript{102} McAusland, 104.
cultural, and/or economic reasons, branded supermarket communities become reflective of actual communities in which the individuals share a similar socio-economic background and lifestyles or, to use another term, what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*. And it is with this attention to community in mind that led to a distinct formation of the late twentieth century: the “fresh format” supermarket, with the most widely recognized of this genre being Whole Foods Market.

The fresh format supermarket, or what I refer to as natural foods supermarket, came to be during the 1980s alongside the era of mass-customization and demographization of American consumers. Unlike the natural foods store and co-ops before them, natural foods supermarkets take the floor plan and scale of the conventional supermarket, offering consumers a more wholesome version of the familiar supermarket experience. Offering an abundance of ‘natural foods,’ these stores highlight organic and whole foods, shunning synthetic ingredients and chemical additives, while attempting to offer an array of products and conveniences provided by conventional supermarkets. Additionally, natural foods supermarkets tend to privilege fair trade and eco-friendly practices, expressing this ideology within their stores’ signage and literature. The natural foods supermarket and its customers take a paradoxical turn from the trust that

104 Natural foods supermarkets can be seen as a distinctly evolved form of the co-ops and health foods stores of the ‘60s and ‘70s, which were often limited in variety and stock as well as appeal, seeking to serve a smaller demographic of the counterculture, namely those interested in “countercuisine” as a means of creating an alternative to the industrialized food system. See Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007): 4; “Supermarket Facts: Industry Overview 2011,” Food Marketing Institute, accessed September 9, 2015, http://www.fmi.org/research-resources/supermarket-facts.
105 For specific example of natural foods supermarket rhetoric regarding natural foods, environmental stewardship, and community/worker fairness see “Declaration of Independence.”
has been put in national branded food. Excluding many of the established ‘Big Food’
name brand products, these stores focus on natural and organic brands that put personal
and planetary wellbeing at the core of their business. As smaller specialty supermarkets
these stores often sell goods at higher prices—a premium that is justified in the
association of better products and production practices, but that is also often a result of
the smaller scale purchasing and contracts with smaller scale producers. Many natural
foods supermarkets also present themselves as a unique source of community interaction
and education. They do this by offering services like cooking demonstrations, nutritional
and holistic health advice, and samples of new and uncommon foods.

Like independent natural foods stores, the interior space of the natural food
supermarket is designed to elicit a connection to a more natural, symbiotic state of being,
differentiating it from the conventional, industrial, and corporatized food retailing
system. Though the processed/fresh center/periphery model is still utilized in the floor
plan of the natural supermarket, it abandons one or all of the key features of the
supermarket’s tried and true interior space, such as the long-wide aisles, bright lights, and
bland off-white linoleum flooring.106 Natural foods supermarkets, regardless of their
corporate status, often appear more cozy with dimmer lighting, handwritten signs, and
more earthy décor, such as wooden shelving and whimsical items such as barrels and
rope, instead of the industrial-grade white-painted metal racks common in traditional

106 See the definition of “Fresh Format” as provided by the Food Marketing Institute in “Supermarket Facts.”
supermarkets. Products are still organized by department, though produce may occupy a proportionally larger space than in conventional supermarkets, and other departments common in large supermarkets, such as office supplies, children’s toys, and seasonal décor, may be omitted altogether.

Clearly, in the range of products offered, the natural foods supermarket has an intended target consumer. These stores cater to alternative diets that are commonly practiced by middle and upper class individuals, with a range of hard to find specialty and imported items, homeopathic remedies and vitamins, and eco-friendly household products and pet foods—most of which require consumer dietary and/or culinary knowledge and willingness to pay premium prices. Affluence and education are, therefore, often taken as obvious traits of the natural foods consumer. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while the natural foods supermarket is a late twentieth century concept, the practice of catering to a specific consumer demographic is not new. What is new with the natural foods supermarket is the marketability of more naturally produced foods, which have only become valuable with increasing consumer knowledge about the food production system and a corresponding willingness to pay for the assurance that the food they are purchasing is of the highest quality. Thus, while the natural foods supermarket presents itself as a hub of food knowledge and healthful, ethical consumption open to all, it necessarily relies on the class-based ideology of consumption in addressing its demographic to achieve its success. We must keep in mind

107 We can also see this in the case of Trader Joe’s, which, though not a natural foods supermarket, or a supermarket par se, draws from the same general client base as Whole Foods in their selection of niche products and unconventional, but community oriented, environment.
that the natural foods supermarket as a business grew out of natural and organic foods movements that are historically rooted in the middle and upper classes. This suggests that the goals of Whole Foods, and other community-minded natural foods stores, to educate consumers about both shopping for and preparing ‘better’ food retain the same class-based distinction that was inherent in the movement from which the company arose. Alternative food movements only hold value in that they are alternative, meaning that something other must exist. For natural foods to be a movement, and for the natural foods supermarket to have value, conventional practices must continue. Without industrial food, natural food would have no meaning.

History 3: A Natural Alternative

In his book *Natural Prophets*, Joe Dobrow claims that the questioning mentality and the goal for societal betterment held by students and activists during the 1960s and ‘70s led to the rise of the natural and organic foods industry as the nation headed into the new millennium. It was the relevance and resonances of the countercultural ideals that drew Mackey and others to natural foods and the desire to promote natural foods as a means to earn a living.108 As Mackey explains in *Conscious Capitalism*:

My search for meaning and purpose led me into the counterculture movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. I studied Eastern philosophy and religion at the time and still practice both yoga and meditation. I studied ecology. I became vegetarian (I have been vegan for ten years). I lived in an urban co-op/commune in Austin,

Texas, for two years, and I grew my hair and beard long. Politically, I drifted into progressivism (or liberalism or social democracy) and embraced the ideology that business and corporations were essentially evil because they selfishly sought only profits. In contrast to evil corporations, I believed that nonprofit organizations and government were “good,” because they altruistically worked for the public interest, not for profit. With that background, I was clearly “well prepared” to launch a business in 1978… We [Mackey and his then-girlfriend, Renee] were both very young… and idealistic, and we started the business because we wanted to sell healthy food to people, earn a decent living, and have fun doing both.¹⁰⁹

Though anti-mainstream and by extension unprofitable during the counterculture’s heyday, natural foods were able to gain approval, as more Americans became aware of the detriments of modern industrial food, following a series of food scares, as well as publicized advances in health and nutritional sciences. Natural food producers and retailers gained social and financial influence accordingly. Growing interest in natural foods enabled Mackey to expand his operations when, only two years after opening Safer Way, he noticed “a number of much bigger natural-foods stores had sprouted up around the country.” In 1980 he closed the doors of his original store, combining forces with another local natural foods store to open the first Whole Foods Market, which, though large in its day at 10,000 square feet, paled in comparison to the average 38,000 square foot Whole Foods of 2014.¹¹⁰ A short time after opening the larger store, Mackey found

¹⁰⁹ Mackey and Sisodia, 1-2.
he had to change his business practices to better meet needs of his increasing customer base and attract more people to the consumption of natural foods. Seeing the inefficiency and lack of quality products offered by natural foods retailers—a sector dominated by member owned and operated co-ops—he started to consider the advantages of a capitalist business, deeming himself an entrepreneur. He pondered the ways he could develop his business without falling into the trappings of greed and selfishness typically associated with capitalism. Placing a mission based on the counterculture’s ideologies regarding natural foods at the center of his business—a mission that could be advanced through capital success—Mackey came to see that capitalism could be ethical or, to use his term, “conscious.” I see Mackey’s natural foods supermarket as the lovechild of the countercultural movement and capitalism—the maximization of care through efficiency and capital.

The natural foods supermarket—and the natural foods industry overall—was a long time in coming. The consumer mandate against industrial foods did not originate from the anti-authoritarian hippies of the counterculture. In fact, the counterculture initially had little interest in food production or holistic health, only wandering into natural health food stores during the mid-‘60s in their quest for things unordinary. While the hippies found the businesses’ proprietors to be middle-aged “health nuts,” it was through the teachings of the older generation that young activists came to see natural foods as an alternative to mainstream corporate America. But the story does not begin there. To find the roots of the now lucrative natural foods industry, we must look back to

111 Belasco, 33.
the introduction of industrially processed foods. This history dates to the 1850s when the artists and writers associated with the Romantic movement were first to shun the newfound refinement methods of the industrial age, which were seen as not only disruptive to the quality of food, but a menace to society.\footnote{Samuel Fromartz, Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc. 2006), Kindle edition, loc. 2283.} While the bland foods vegetarian diet of the Romantics never attracted popular attention, their staunch principles remain at the center of the unflattering cultural imaginary of ‘natural foods’ today.

With the advances in industrial production over the first half of the twentieth century, natural foods advocates continued to be seen as eccentric or backward. During the Industrial Revolution, only few alternative health practitioners received brief popularity for their extreme health regimens and dietary tactics that played on consumers’ anxieties regarding contamination of the body and mind by the industrial age. The most well-known of these practitioners were J.H. Kellogg and his former patient C.W. Post (both now brand names associated with sugary breakfast products that are a far cry from their namesakes’ intentions).\footnote{See Fromartz, Chapter 1: “Humus Worshippers”; Dobrow, Chapter 1: “The Milkman or The Cow”; and Harvey Levenstein, “Natural Foods in Shangri-la,” in Fear of Food: A History of Why We Worry About What We Eat (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).} The health advice offered by Kellogg and Post was in stark contrast to the dietary practices of the majority of Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, but not too far from the advice offered by Mackey and his Whole Foods colleagues. Building on his background as a Seventh Day Adventist, Kellogg recommended a completely vegetarian diet with emphasis on plain, whole foods, such as
grains, nuts, fruits, and vegetables, and demanded avoidance of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, and spices (which were said to “inflame desire”). He also advocated for total body health, asserting the importance of exercise and spa treatments. Kellogg’s lifestyle practices were taken up mainly by affluent Americans, including actresses, artists, and businessmen, arguably making ‘Kellogg’ the first dietary status brand—arguably an early forerunner to the Whole Foods brand. Yet, Kellogg’s commodity of dietary purity was too obscure, too unprofitable, and completely contradictory to a nation built on abundance and freedom. It thus is no surprise that his call for a ‘return’ to older methods of eating and food production were often overlooked simply because they were contrary to profitable advances in industry.

It was not until the 1940s that the term ‘organic’ was used as counter to industrial agricultural methods, as found in the work of Lord Northbourne, an English biodynamic farmer, and J.I. Rodale, publisher of Organic Gardening magazine in the US. When considered in light of the basic definition of ‘organic’ as ‘derived from living matter’, the use of the word to describe only some agricultural products seems odd; as Peter Singer and Jim Mason note, “the idea of an ‘inorganic tomato’ is a contradiction in terms, unless it is, say, a tomato-shaped glass ornament.” Yet, in discussing J.I. Rodale’s 1942 conceptualization of “organic gardening,” Singer and Mason explain that what ‘organic’ refers to is not the product but the material used in its treatment. In this, ‘organic’

114 Fromartz, loc. 2300-09.
115 Ibid., loc. 447.
products come from living matter and are not treated with synthetic materials. Organic farming remained a niche trend even with the development of a network of organic farmers during the 1940s and 50s, with organic and natural foods going unnoticed by mainstream Americans who were relishing in the abundance afforded them by industrial production during what Harvey Levenstein refers to as the “Golden Age of American Food Processing.”

Yet, as the breadth of industrial agriculture increased, so did its opposition, and the organic movement slowly gained momentum after the Second World War. In 1950 the movement’s credibility boosted when Rodale was given the opportunity to testify at the congressional meeting assessing the scientific standards for the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) “Generally Recognized as Safe” (GRS) category. Used to denote common food additives that have been determined as having no adverse effects on humans, GRS had up to this point served as the food industry equivalent of “innocent until proven guilty.” Companies were trusted to test the safety of the additives they wished to use, and any and all substances not shown as directly resulting in detriments were permitted into the category. This changed only slightly after the hearing when the committee ruled that while companies would be required to “submit test of future additives to the FDA” going forward, potentially hazardous chemicals that had already approved by the FDA would not be subject to further tests.

\[117\] Ibid.  
\[118\] Levenstein, 110.
Though the committee essentially ignored Rodale’s testimony in asserting the sufficiency of GRS standards and monitoring, a number of Americans made the choice to switch to buying organic when possible. This precautionary measure was substantiated by studies released by the National Cancer Institute nearly a decade later indicating the harmful effects of some GRS additives on lab animals, suggesting their potential to cause cancer in humans. It was not until these studies came to light that the FDA began to fully enforce GRS protocols, additionally passing a ban on all substances that had previously been granted GRS status, but deemed potentially hazardous in further tests.119 It is with the proven lack of sufficient standards and oversight in the case of GRS that we find validation of the counterculture’s assertion that the government was mainly invested in protecting the interests of capital, not citizens—a sentiment that entered the mainstream by the mid-70s with the rise of the Naderist consumer movement.

Concerns over the industrialization and chemicalization of agriculture came to a head slightly over a decade after the GRS hearing with the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962). This text became an invaluable resource for the counterculture, inspiring Mackey and other natural food industry pioneers, as well as becoming a New York Times bestseller that raised popular awareness of the risks associated with chemical compounds used in agriculture, specifically the insecticide dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT)—risks that had been kept from the American public through all-too-cozy relationships between government officials and chemical

119 Levenstein, 112. Dobrow cites the case of cyclamate, an artificial sweetener given GRS status and put into commercial use in the 1950s, which, in 1969, was the first additive banned by the FDA after it was found to cause cancer in lab animals (loc. 697).
companies. A respected marine biologist, Carson was not placed in the same camp as Rodale, who was perceived by many in the mainstream as a fanatical supporter of organic foods. Instead, she was the rational, scientific, and humanistic voice the movement needed to catch the attention of a mainstream audience.\textsuperscript{120} Though the Kennedy administration and the USDA ignored Carson’s claims at the time of \textit{Silent Spring}’s publication, when her work was later substantiated by a study conducted by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) took a precautionary step when it banned nearly all domestic use of DDT in 1972. While there was still disagreement on the long-term effects of DDT, it was clear at the point of this ruling that the chemical was being stored in the fatty tissues of animals and humans. This was proven accurate when, sixteen years later, tests conducted by the University of California found traces of DDT in agricultural soil, showing its persistence and leaving consumers wondering about its possible lasting effects.\textsuperscript{121}

With mounting scientific evidence against chemical agriculture, natural products and organic foods had found their way into the mainstream. With more American supermarket shoppers looking for these products, natural foods production and retailing began to slowly evolve into an industry. Yet, by 1965 there were only 500 for-profit natural (also referred to as “health”) foods stores in comparison to over 27,000 conventional supermarkets.\textsuperscript{122} Still, the growing number of natural foods stores and non-profit cooperatives, which collectively amounted to over 10,000 venues by the early ‘70s,

\textsuperscript{120} Dobrow, loc. 635-662; Fromartz, loc. 475.
\textsuperscript{121} Belasco, 138-39; Fromartz, loc. 759-782.
\textsuperscript{122} Dobrow, loc. 767.
were a cause for alarm in the supermarket industry with food manufacturers taking note of the power of the word “natural” in the consumer vocabulary.\textsuperscript{123} However, the power of the nascent industry paled in comparison to the mainstream food industry and should have posed little concern to prevailing interests if significant cultural change were not in the forecast.

However, with the established industry on the offensive, we begin to see a major shift in the culture of food consumption. As the most desirable demographic, middle class consumers, began trying new foods and conducting at least some of their shopping outside of chain supermarkets, industry leaders knew they needed to make their move to retain the dedication of these lucrative and influential shoppers. Historian Warren Belasco notes that during the ‘70s, while organic producers were pushing for government certification of organics to ensure quality, the media only perpetuated consumer uncertainty by painting successful organic farmers as cheaters and frauds, feeding into the maintenance of the status quo of industrial food production and the reliability of conventional supermarkets.\textsuperscript{124} These efforts to discredit organics throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s, which Belasco deems “largely anecdotal,” appear as the last line of defense for the continued employment of chemical agriculture. With consumers receiving conflicting information, their reliance on and complacency to the industrialized system became apparent as Americans continued to purchase conventionally grown (chemically exposed) produce and processed-foods (loaded with synthetic additives) in between ‘food

\textsuperscript{123} Belasco, 161; Marty, 128-29.  
\textsuperscript{124} Belasco, 158-62.
scares’—reports of specific, exceptional hazards, often citing tragic human illness or death that reassert the detriments of industrialized food commodities. Because of the nature of food scares as exceptions to the norm, the resulting motivation to buy natural and organic products has often been short-lived, inconsistent, and based on the specific conditions of any given ‘scare’.

Sporadic bursts in demand for organics have been problematic for the industry as evidenced by the dramatic increase in organic consumption in 1989 after the news program 60 Minutes aired a segment on the pesticide Alar (diaminozide)—“a synthetic growth regulator widely used on apples to keep them from ripening too quickly.”125 Like all commodity systems, the production and distribution of organic produce is based on the perceived market for these products. Because agricultural products take time to grow and ripen, it is not possible to hastily increase the supply to consumers. The resulting lag-time between onset of demand and release of more produce on the market leads to shortages and thereby increased prices on the commodities available. Unfortunately, during the Alar scare, some manufacturers and, more often, retailers attempted to capitalize on consumer anxiety, meeting the demand for organic products by offering fraudulent products. In this moment the trustworthiness and purity of organic products and production were put under scrutiny, with organics becoming part of the larger

structural problem of regulating the food industry. Demand for organic oversight intensified over the following months, serving as the catalyst for the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA). Passed by Congress in 1990, OFPA established the framework for the National Organic Program (NOP) and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). To ensure that all factions of the “organic community” were fairly represented and in agreement on “the regulatory regime,” it was determined that the NOSB’s fifteen members would be appointed to five-year terms by the Secretary of Agriculture and include “four farmers/growers, three environmentalists/resource conservationists, three consumer/public interest advocates, two handlers/processors, one retailer, one scientist (toxicology, ecology, or biochemistry), one USDA accredited certifying agent.”

The NOSB’s recommendations for the certification criteria for ‘organic’ were subject to a series of negotiations and compromises with the USDA, their overseeing agency, resulting in a decade of lag time between the formation of the NOSB in 1992 and the full implementation of the National Organic Standards in 2002—a situation that I will discuss in depth in the next chapter. This delay in regulation, even amidst uncertainty about the organicness of products, did not, however, dissuade consumers from choosing organics. In fact, during the ‘90s organic consumption grew at about 20 percent per year, with continuing increases in both consumption and land acreage dedicated to organic

---

126 Fromartz, 197; USDA, “National Organic Standards Board (NOSB),” United States Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service, http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateQ&navID=NOSBlinkNOPConsumers&rightNav1=NOSBlinkNOPConsumers&topNav=&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram&page=NOSBHome&resultType=&acct=nosb. The NOSB also serves as representative of consumer interest in organic policy. The board publishes their meeting minutes to the web, opens their biannual meetings to public attendance, and, with advance-notice, members of the public are allowed to present information and concerns to the board.

127 “Growth of the Organics Industry.”
agriculture continuing steadily into 2008, with Whole Foods Market growing “in lockstep with the organic sector.”

As I have indicated, needs cannot be manufactured from thin air, but that does not mean that consumer demand and knowledge cannot be distorted by industry in order to maintain the status quo in the interests of capital. We can see this in the simultaneous vilification of the counterculture’s alternative foods and cooption of the ambiguous term ‘natural’ by mass-produced food conglomerates. Food historian Harvey Levenstein dates this trend back to the mid-1970s with labeling of products as ‘natural’ and the emergence of brands like “Nature’s Own” (commercial whole grain bread products, owned by Flower Foods, the same corporation that produces Wonder Bread) and “Nature Valley” (nationally distributed granola products, owned by General Mills). ‘Natural’ is thus rendered valuable, making the commodity more trustworthy and, therefore, worth a higher price. But when used as a marketing tool, ‘natural’ clarifies nothing for consumers about what the product contains or how it is made. It simply works at the level of affect. The brand and consumer enter a relationship of trust and care based on shared terminology—a buzzword that fills the void left by missing or neglected information. It was ultimately the centrality of capitalist firms within American culture that granted industry the power to shape the popular understanding of what ‘natural’ is and enabled it to profit from its willy-nilly usage on a wide variety of foods and household goods.

129 Levenstein, 121.
But there remains consumer leeryness regarding claims of ‘naturalness’ from the dominant food industry. The rise of natural foods has taken place mainly because of consumer distrust of the industrial food system and a desire for better food. Therefore, once a company has been recognized on the side of industrial methods, it is difficult, if not impossible, to cross over to the natural side. To fulfill the consumer desire for more authentic natural and organic products within the matrix of late consumer society, the makers and sellers of alternative foods would have to meet consumers’ expectations of what food should be, including ideas about how it should be packaged and sold. Because of this, the natural foods industry cannot be seen in diametric opposition to the mass-production standards or capitalist imperatives of the dominant food industry.

At the economic level, the values and missions held by the purveyors of natural foods must be seen as multifaceted marketing tools that serve to convey an investment in care that allows them to offer better products that benefit their consumers, the planet, and serve the general ‘good’ but only in that these ideas are profitable. The importance of brands in guiding consumer choice means that if a natural foods company wants to succeed in the mainstream, it will need to meet the parameters of the existing marketplace—it will need a recognizable name, a package, and a promise, but it will also need to remain distinct from the current industrial offerings. It is here that the natural foods product becomes more than the material realization of an ideology, as it is re-imagined in the popular imaginary as a premium good.

The branding and corporate expansion of natural foods that occurred during the 1980s combined the authentic, back-to-nature ethos of the counterculture, appealing to
those who sought refuge from the potential risks of industrial foods, with the cultural clout of the “yuppie,” a term coined during that decade to refer to the new class of “young urban professionals who ‘combin[ed] fierce upward mobility and strong consumerism with some remarkably progressive cultural and political interventions.””

The yuppie came to see natural foods as an investment in personal health and fitness, as well as a luxury afforded to him by his hard work and financial prosperity. Natural foods, cleansed of the dirt that formerly served as evidence of their origins, became an integral part of the yuppie’s sleek image. In situating the emergence of what she calls “yuppie chow,” Julie Guthman discusses the arrival of organic fare in San Francisco through its use in haute cuisine, as the rising class came to learn that the “best food was made from local, seasonal ingredients.” According to Guthman, during a time when the nation was fed by the heavy hand of cheap, easy fast food, the value of eating differently was as much about better health as social distinction. These consumers wanted to show they cared about their food, but this care was in regards to the status of the individual and the individual body.

Hereafter, the purchase of organic and natural food was often without the social awareness, fellow-feeling, and ecological imperatives that were crucial to the founders and producers of these products. Failing to see that their consumers were not interested in the “consciousness” aspects of production, mission-driven natural foods purveyors overstated or misinterpreted their newfound financial success as indicative of growing

---

131 Ibid., 49.
social awareness and the creation of a more just world. The choice to eat ‘better’ by buying these products was about having the financial ability to do so. Familiar with the costs of high-status living, yuppies easily accepted that ‘the best’ was necessarily expensive, which bode well with the natural and organic foods industry in that it eliminated the need to justify the price premiums associated with their products.

The role of branding was crucial here because the attachment of social status to the commodity takes place in its recognizability. Natural foods companies would have to render their commodities different from others by creating recognizable identities for themselves. Contradictorily, in appealing to affluent shoppers who had been raised on mass-produced foods and dining out, natural foods companies would have to present foods in a similar format—new and improved, healthier and more expensive convenience foods in safe, sterile, uniform packages. Because larger-scale production facilitates both a steady stream of products and the creation of a ubiquitous brand, the evolution of the natural foods industry and the rise of prominent firms in meeting these challenges should thus be seen as no surprise.

This new market should be seen as the driving force in the professionalization and corporatization of the natural foods industry—or, as Guthman claims, its gentrification. As with geographic gentrification (with which Whole Foods is also associated, as I will discuss in chapter four), the gentrification of organic and natural foods meant that grassroots mom ‘n pop companies would have to ‘improve’ or be swept up by those who could deliver the desired results. Guthman locates the destabilization of the ideological objectives of the organic movement with the rise in the consumption of organic spring
mix salad by those outside of the counterculture—shoppers and diners who cared more about the quality of their food than its ecological impact. Yet, this is not to say that this group cared not for the wellbeing of others. Guthman points to the complex interplay between personal status and philanthropic concern for others. I see this dynamic play out prominently in the mission of Whole Foods, as it appeals first to its customers and then to larger societal issues. Placing what is good for their customers at the heart of what is good for society at large, Whole Foods enlists its customers as philanthropic actors in the company’s mission—a role that can be filled simply by shopping ‘better’ at Whole Foods stores.

Though Whole Foods may have been at the forefront of the natural foods trend with its unique ability to create a recognizable and respected brand, the niche for natural and organic products would not remain small for long, with annual sales revenues steadily increasing “from $1.9 billion in 1980 to $37 billion in 2011,” a year in which the overall revenues from the natural products industry hit $91 billion and organic sector sales were posted at $11.6 billion. Initially serving as the primary source of natural and organic foods for those who sought them out, natural foods stores needed to become natural foods supermarkets to maintain relevance, as conventional supermarkets sought to profit off the sales of natural and organic products by integrating a greater number of these items into their inventories. The arrival of the natural foods supermarket was thus

132 Ibid., 52.
133 “NFM Market Overview 2012: Methodology,” Natural Foods Merchandiser, May 29, 2012, http://newhope360.com/nfm-market-overview/nfm-market-overview-2012-methodology. Note: The sales figure for the natural foods industry as given by NFM is based on “the sales contributions of natural and organic foods, dietary supplements and other natural products through such diverse channels as food, drug and mass retailers; multilevel marketing; health care practitioners; mail order; and the Internet.” In these figures, the word “products” indicates both food and non-food items, both of which are typically found in natural foods grocery stores and co-ops.
paralleled by the expansion of natural food production, with these companies responding to the average American’s interest in natural products by increasing their operations and output, as well as developing a greater number of analogues to conventional products—the paradoxical natural-processed foods we see filling the center aisles of Whole Foods and the natural foods departments of conventional supermarkets (boxes of mac ‘n cheese, single-serving snacks, canned soups).

In transitioning from a movement to an industry, natural foods have increased in social relevance and material prevalence through capitalism. Unfortunately, this success has come at the expense of the movement’s ideological underpinnings. In modifying the objectives of the natural foods movement—personal wellbeing, social justice, and ecological welfare—to fit the parameters of capitalism, the natural foods industry lessens some of the most apparent detriments of capitalist production and consumption by facilitating the illusion that people can continue to consume freely by choosing better brands and commodities. Whereas the natural foods movement looked for collective solutions to societal problems that grew from the capitalist industrial food system, the natural foods industry offers individuals the ability to engage with that system in a ‘better’ way through acts of altruism made possible in their spending. By working within capitalism, the natural foods industry presents money as the sole factor in producing positive change and places the interests of the individual consumer over the larger societal goals contained in its corporate mission statements. The ideological underpinnings and capital growth of the natural foods industry must be seen as going hand-in-hand with consumer engagement in ethical consumption.
I see the ethical consumption that takes place through the natural foods industry as a form of trickle-down ‘good’, in which the consumer experiences the ‘good’ of his shopping in his consumption of healthier foods and the knowledge that food was produced using better methods, and as a result, the laborer, the community, and the planet are protected. My claim here builds on Guthman’s work regarding the socio-economic status associated with the consumption of natural foods. Beyond the recognition that the consumer is doing well for himself in his purchase of natural foods, this purchase now indicates that he is doing well for others—a reading that is only made possible with increased public knowledge of the meaning behind natural foods. This meaning has been created through brand campaigns that assert these manufacturers ‘care’, ‘give’, and ‘support’. However, an ethnographic study of Whole Foods shoppers conducted by Josée Johnston and Michelle Szabo indicates that, more often than not, the purchase of the ethical commodities of the natural foods industry should not be conflated with concerted efforts to act altruistically or in the interest of others. According to Johnston and Szabo, the most common reasons for shopping at Whole Foods were benefits to the individual consumer, like access to high quality and luxury products and the pleasing store atmosphere (“the experience”). Citizenship considerations (labor, community, the environment, etc.) appeared lower on the list of determining factors with some shoppers seemingly disinterested or unaware of the possible ethical ramifications of their shopping. Not only does this data confound the rendering of ethics into the

---

natural foods commodity and what it signifies about the purchaser, it also suggests that “Mackey’s philosophy that customer satisfaction is derived from the whole shopping experience—the general ambience, the products, the employees, and the support for the environment and community” is a least somewhat utopian as the individual’s personal satisfaction is the primary motivating factor in engaging with the ‘whole’.\textsuperscript{135}

In the practical realm, Whole Foods appears within the landscape of supermarkets as simply another option for consumers to shop to meet their individual needs. And this is how natural foods products are interpreted within the walls of the contemporary supermarket—as a choice, however loaded with symbolic meaning. It is the exclusivity and distinction offered by natural foods that draws consumers and at the same time renders them prohibitive to less affluent shoppers. Thus while these business have taken many positive steps, those accomplishments are only special in contrast to base-level food industry practices, which must continue for the practices of the natural foods industry to be exponentially more valuable. With the negotiation between capital gains and the production and sale of qualifiedly ‘better’ food, the natural food industry is more interested in appearing different to ‘satisfy and delight’ its customers than effecting larger change.\textsuperscript{136}


**Wholeness, Factually**

Whole Foods accurately sees its customers as the driving force for its business. It is customers’ positive impressions of Whole Foods stores and presentation of the brand outside of the stores’ walls that render Whole Foods a culturally valuable commodity. Without this work on behalf of their shoppers, Whole Foods would lose its footing as the premier retailer of natural foods simply because the products it sells are so abundant in supermarkets at present. With Walmart as the largest retailer of organics and most other food retailers incorporating diverse natural products lines and natural foods departments, what ensures the relevance of Whole Foods is the flexibility of its business model under the guiding light of its mission according to the practice of Conscious Capitalism.  

Branding and brand ideology are the *things* that give Whole Foods stores value when they are no longer offering a different set of products. What makes Whole Foods special is the idea of ‘Whole Foods’, which, much like our cultural conception of natural and organic production, is based on idyllic principles that circulate in buzzwords and symbols. And yet, Whole Foods is only valuable in that it addresses a consumer *need*. It is the Whole Foods ideology of ‘naturalness’ as something that can be realized through the empowering, political, and ethical shopping that takes place in their stores that serves contemporary consumers. The difference of Whole Foods is manifest from the three histories I have presented above but more importantly in the way these histories have evolved side-by-side with the naturalization of consumer choices as *the means* to express personal identity, politics, and social alliances for all Americans.

---

137 Paumgarten.
There are clear facts here that render Whole Foods quite unexceptional in its practices and effects. Whole Foods is a supermarket. It does what all supermarkets do—offers its customers products, primarily of the edible variety, for their choosing. Whole Foods stores are private capitalist institutions. They exist for those who wish to purchase the commodities they offer. Whole Foods does not offer a sliding scale for prices based on customers’ income levels—all customers pay the same prices. Customers are expected to see the value of the product presented and make the decision as to whether or not they are willing to invest in it. There are undeniably certain people who are more willing and/or more able to make this investment—these are the Whole Foods core customers. But they are not Whole Foods’ only customers nor are they the company’s only stakeholders. Whole Foods opens its doors to an entire community, but it is not a charity. Like many other businesses, Whole Foods makes charitable donations and offers other resources to local communities, its employees, and the producers it works with, but these are contingent upon the company’s financial success. First accountable to customers and shareholders, Whole Foods, like all other companies, must prioritize the needs of some (those with money and power) over those of others (those who would most benefit from a more sustainable and equitable food system). Whole Foods indicates that it is doing more than other supermarkets and capitalist firms by working towards a ‘better’ world than that which would result from the continuation of traditional capitalism, but as a business, they are not built to change the existing socio-economic order nor turn back the wheels of time to recreate our nation’s agrarian past.
The lines of demarcation as to what makes capitalism conscious are murky at best. Branding, which is key to the creation of a recognizably mission-centric Conscious Capitalist firm, is in its nature exclusive. It is this exclusivity and difference that draws consumers and at the same time renders the brand restrictive, prohibiting equal access from the get-go. While Whole Foods has many devoted customers, has been recognized as an industry leader in employee satisfaction, and takes many steps to improve the conditions of production and its impact on the environment, the accolades the company receives are based on the base-level practices in an unfair and exploitative system. The ‘higher standards’ presented by Whole Foods therefore come at a cost, which is reflected in higher prices that delimit who can buy into this ideology of ‘wholeness’. In effect, this ideology reflects the interests of those who need to see their shopping as a viable means of social participation, those who have the most to spend and, therefore, can afford to invest in ‘better’ shopping. Whole Foods’ successes and motivations need to be seen within the culture in which the consumer-base is constantly demanding more from food retailers and producers, things that will make their lives easier and better while making them look and feel better about themselves. Mackey and other conscious entrepreneurs have developed their methods within this culture, seeing the potential to meet consumers’ wants by offering not only products but also the justification of why those things are needed at the personal and social level, thereby ensuring demand.

One way the need for ‘better’ has been materialized is through the creation of finite standards that give credibility to the type of production and retailing practices that Whole Foods holds in utmost regard. Through certifications from and partnerships with
governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations, Whole Foods appeals to ethical consumers and natural foods connoisseurs by differentiating its practices from that of conventional supermarket. By staking its claim in the certification process, Whole Foods asserts the unparalleled ethics while, in reality, the proliferation and amplification of standards enacted by the company are only valuable primarily in the economic sense. The importance of certifications and the company’s commitment to transparency is the implication of care for consumers and the planet in a marketplace where care has been given an economic value.

While the cultural importance of value-adding standards and certifications has rippled far beyond Whole Foods, with many consumers seeking labels like ‘organic’ and ‘fair trade’, the company has been uniquely able to draw these different labels together within a single commodity—its brand. Whole Foods uses its history and evolution (or, as Mackey would put it, ‘awakening’) as testament to the authenticity of its brand, and we can see the company’s claim to the title of “America’s Healthiest Grocery Store” tied to the its position as the nation’s first certified organic retailer, as recognized by the USDA’s National Organics Program. This monumental certification placed the company at the foundation and forefront of the natural foods industry because it worked in the creation of the most critical parameters in formally defining and regulating the National Organic Standards. However, we cannot disarticulate Whole Foods’ financial power and influence from its ability to determine the standards to which others would be held and which many more would aspire, a narrative to which I now turn.
CHAPTER 2

Less Processed, More Value

We Sell the Highest Quality Natural and Organic Products Available
Our goal is to sell the highest quality products that also offer high value for our customers. High value is a product of high quality at a competitive price. Our product quality standards focus on ingredients, freshness, taste, nutritive value, safety and/or appearance. While we have very high standards for product quality, we believe that it is important to be inclusive and open minded, and not overly restrictive or dogmatic.138

The platform that sets Whole Foods apart from conventional supermarkets is their commitment to organic and natural foods. Whole Foods presents the choice to buy organic products as a “no brainer,” offering ten reasons why their customers should “go organic” on their website, citing benefits to consumers, workers, and the eco-system, reflecting the counterculture’s ethos while highlighting factors that are important to mainstream consumers such as variety and abundance. But the decision to purchase organic products and to do so at Whole Foods cannot be reduced to these ‘logical’ reasons. It is instead compound by the historical evolution of the food industry and the understandings of organic food that have shaped consumer behaviors—lifestyles, preferences, and habits that are a reflection of class habitus. Because of this, the list

presented by Whole Foods should be seen as an interpretation of a set of material practices that will lead to the best-case scenario according to a specific cultural ideology of consumer-citizenship that necessitates industry in the enactment of socio-political change. In masking the company’s dependence on constantly expanding and intensifying modes of capitalist production to feed their inventory, Whole Foods obscures the fact that the ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ industry it has helped to build is only marginally ‘better’ in what it produces, how it is produced, and the ecological impact of that production. The belief that the products offered by Whole Foods are ‘better’, as supported by corporate claims of the most stringent standards, undercuts the ambiguities surrounding ‘natural foods’ and the detrimental effects resulting from the advance of the organics industry while placing the responsibility for consuming ‘better’ food in the hands of the individual shopper.

In this chapter I will show how Whole Foods has benefited by acting in advance of governmental regulation favor of the private certification of higher standards of production that place private industry over public agencies in protecting the interests of American consumer-citizens. My argument is that the growth and standardization of the natural and organics industry is an effect of the incorporation of the counterculture’s ideals into the capitalist market economics in an effort to mediate and rectify some of the problematic results of industrialized production while maintaining the socio-economic status quo. By looking at the corporate expansion of Whole Foods in correspondence with the development of the natural foods industry, I will show that what consumers are offered through this business is not purely ethical, unadulterated goods, but instead
alternative products that can be seen as different and special because they as marked as such through branding and additional cost. In effect, the privatization of ‘good food’ that is ‘good for the environment’ is at the expense of achieving the social, economic, and ecological goals of the organic and natural foods movement.

It is crucial to understand the evolution of the natural and organics industry and the cultural value of ethically produced and sustainable goods as indicative of overall shifts in consumption based on an awareness of detriments in the conventional food system, and thus difficult to attribute directly to Whole Foods as a company. Yet, in connecting changes in industry and consumer practices to the increased prevalence of Whole Foods stores over the past three decades, the ways in which the practices of Whole Foods reflect, respond to, and help to drive the societal turn against and governmental interventions into the extensive industrialization and chemicalization of the food industry becomes clear. The form of capitalism that takes place through the mission-driven business of Whole Foods is not exceptionally ‘good’, nor the apex of human evolution as presented by Mackey and Sisodia. It is an unremarkable manifestation of specific historical circumstances. Considering their multi-stakeholder approach, which links what is good for their customers to what is good for the planet to what is good for business (shareholders), Whole Foods benefits as a brand because of consumer awareness about the environmental and health detriments of conventionally produced food products but only to the extent that natural and organic foods remain a ‘better’, more expensive and socially desirable, alternative.
The expansion of the organic industry needs to be understood as both driven by and driving the popularization of organic products. Through their financial success and the social status of their brand, the Whole Foods Market Corporation has emerged as industry leader in developing and advancing national standards for organic certification in both the production and retail sectors, implementing their own rigorous standards prior to the codification of the USDA’s guidelines in 2002. In 2003 Whole Foods became the nation’s first certified organic retailer, enabling them to prepare foods in their stores that were certified as meeting the USDA’s organic standards. The company continues to play a key part in the direction of the National Organics Program (NOP), holding a seat on the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), as it has for the majority of time the program’s existence.\footnote{USDA, “Current NOSB Members,” United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateM&navID=NationalOrganicProgram&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram&page=NOSBCurrentMembers&description=Current%20NOSB%20Members. Current as of 18 June 2014. Joe Dickson, who holds the Retailer seat on the board from January 2010- January 2015, is the Food, Organic and Environmental Quality Standards Coordinator for Whole Foods Markets. From 1995-2000 Margaret Wittenberg of Whole Foods Market held this seat. Only three other individuals, not affiliated with Whole Foods have held this seat since the inception of the board in 1992.} Also, as a top investor in the Organic Trade Association (OTA), a membership-based business association for those affiliated with organic agriculture and its products, Whole Foods has shows an interest in working with others to support OTA’s mission to “promote and protect the growth of organic trade to benefit the environment, farmers, the public and the economy.”\footnote{“Who We Are,” Organic Trade Association, http://www.ota.com/about/accomplishments.html.} Yet, Whole Foods most recognizable support of the organics industry has come from the boisterous Mackey who has extolled the benefits of an organic planet-based diet as exemplified by his own holistic wellness journey.
“Whole Foods Market” must, therefore, be inextricably linked to “organic” in the minds of consumers, as the company requires an increase of organic consumption for its continued success.

Founded on growing consumer interest in natural and organic foods based on concerns about the quality and safety of conventionally produced foods since the late ‘70s, Whole Foods has been able to bring natural foods beyond the counterculture with their closer-to-supermarket format and ample offerings. While Whole Foods can be seen as responding to a growing trend in consumption, the company also creates demand by presenting premium goods in an upscale environment for those able to afford them and as such has been able to profit by offering food shopping as a new form of status shopping where the terms ‘organic’ and ‘luxury’ become interchangeable. The business model presented by Whole Foods functions from the paradox that has occurred at turn of the twenty-first century with the rise of ethical consumerism by which the consumer can take advantage of all the best capitalism has afforded Americans—individual choice, value, and freedom as well as a sense of contributing to ecological sustainability and living in symbiosis with the global community. The natural and organic foods industry has come to fruition because of the belief that the enactment of ethics can take place through capitalist ventures.

By blending luxury with the moral undertones of the counterculture, the Whole Foods has claimed an increasing share of the consumer market and has used this power and influence to demand changes in food production in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. As presented on their website and in the CEOs’ letter at the
beginning of their 2013 annual report, Whole Foods sees the growth of the organics industry and their corporate success as based on evolving consumer interests and increasing knowledge of food production and nutrition over the past century. In this, Whole Foods suggests that the growth of the industry and the development of their brand are results of consumer demand—they fulfill a need. However, Whole Foods has worked diligently in the production of their brand as compassionate, ethical, and luxurious, and this has no doubt influenced consumers’ desires to shop at Whole Foods and, more generally, to buy natural and organic foods. The expansion of the natural and organic industry beyond Whole Foods Market is a key to understanding some of the changes that the company has undergone as they must always stay one step ahead of the competition. We can see this recognition in their annual report, which notes:

> Food retailing is more competitive than ever, and with the growing demand for fresh, healthy foods, it seems as if everyone is adding to or expanding their offering of natural and organic products. We believe our industry-leading metrics highlight our ability to innovate and compete in this dynamic marketplace, the unique power of our brand, and the excitement our stores create within their communities.

While Whole Foods claims consumers drive their business and business practices, the company also acknowledges the crucial role their brand plays in setting them apart. The

---

141 “Growth of the Organics Industry.”
Whole Foods brand is distinctly valuable part of the commodity because, as I have noted, the actual products their stores sell can generally be bought elsewhere.

Achieving the status of first certified organic retailer and the first nationwide fresh-format grocer, Whole Foods has been able to acquire a dominant position in this new sector of the food industry, they hold a distinct claim to natural and organic products and have been able to build relationships with their customers based on the authenticity of this commitment as a means to advance of human and ecological wellbeing. This position has granted Whole Foods the ability to facilitate incremental positive changes across the food industry since the 1990s by exerting pressure on the producers who wish to do business with them, retailers who hope to attract upscale shoppers, and even the government with the company demanding more stringent regulations of the food industry. Presenting itself as an intervention into existing problems within the capitalist food system, the Whole Foods brand serves as a call to social and ecological progress through shopping—the fact that consumers can, through the aid of Conscious Capitalists, produce notable, lasting changes across the food system.

However, the integration of ‘alternative’ natural and organic products and production methods into the prevailing food system can be seen as the material enactment of Raymond Williams’ theory of the absorption of divergent emergent and residual social formations into the dominant culture.143 As I mentioned previously, it is through managing its opposition that capitalism maintains its dominant status and appearance as natural to the culture it inhabits. Because corporations are first responsible to the

imperatives of capitalism, ethical missions are negotiated with consideration to profitability. Whole Foods takes the relationship between profit and ethics further than capitalist firms that subscribe to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices, which attempt to offset the detriments of private accumulation by lessening the carbon footprint of business and creating positive social relations. Instead of presenting their ‘good’ acts as repayment for their success as a business, the leadership of Whole Foods presents increasing profitability as the means to achieve positive social and environmental change.

But the production of the gamut of more ethical business practices cannot be read as a trick perpetuated by capitalists to maintain profitability while consumers get nothing in return. Under capitalism the prevailing cultural values place the individual, free choice, and the ability to attain as much as possible at the center of social progress and development. The problems within the food system—including its disposition to produce cheaper and more addictive foods, exploit labor, inhumanly treat animals used for production and consumption, and destroy vast swaths of land and contaminate water—are the result of the actions of companies that are supported by consumer dollars. If this is in fact a consumer democracy in which we “vote with dollars,” our purchases show not just consent of but, also, support for the current productive regime. Large capitalist firms, like Whole Foods, that are able to stake a claim in repairing and improving the current food system are appealing to consumers who seek more ethical and nutritious food while looking to make as little change as possible to their current lifestyle and shopping habits.

Read according to Williams’ theory, the incorporation of less efficient, more kind modes of production into the existing food industry is a way for the dominant culture to
ensure hegemony, gaining consent by addressing the needs and concerns of diverse demographics. What feels like sincere change with the acceptance of opposing views is the calculated integration of cultural values that, if left unaddressed, could result in the disruption of the existing socio-economic order. What we find with Whole Foods and the development of the natural and organic industry is the definition and reframing of the terms associated with the natural foods movement according to the parameters of capitalist growth, along with the fashioning of natural foods products that are able to achieve higher profit margins—the tasty, visually appealing prepared and convenience foods that dominate the shelves of Whole Foods stores.

Problematically, the large scale production required to support Whole Foods as a national chain and the overall popularity of natural and organic food products contradicts the local, small batch methods of the countercultural movement from which Whole Foods hails. Masking this contradiction is a lexicon of vaguely defined terminology that permits the pastoral imaginary of organic farming that overwrites the reality of organic food production and consumption in twenty-first century America. Despite the ideological role of the counterculture’s insights into the nutritional value, purity, and environmental benefits offered by organic agriculture and its products as extolled by Whole Foods and others in the organic industry, much of today’s organic production is a far cry from the small-acreage family farms of the 1970s.

I see ‘organic’ as the operative term in the vocabulary of Whole Foods, despite the fact that its inventory is not wholly organic and that only thirty percent of its
perishable foods sales were from the organic category in 2014. The company’s website explains, “Organic farming is synonymous with ‘clean’ food – fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat produced without conventional toxic chemicals, pesticides and fertilizers,” as well as being “eco-friendly… a responsible form of agriculture that seeks to preserve the health of farmland.” We are also told that organic farming offers “deep meaning and fulfillment for the farmer – and the buyer,” serving in the “restoration of life's value and meaning.” However, this definition is not scientific but ideological, playing on the popular imaginary of organic production as a return to a simpler, more pure way of life that allows humans to live their lives to the fullest in a symbiotic relationship with nature. The word ‘organic,’ which came into use during the late nineteenth century in the sciences to refer to compounds naturally constituted of or from living (carbon-based) organisms, acquired its current definition through the work of J.I. Rodale, who, during the 1940s, first used the term to refer to methods of farming and gardening free from chemical additives. The first organic movement, headed by Rodale and his contemporaries, sought to return to older modes of agriculture that worked with natural ecological cycles and the resources offered by the planet. The movement, as such, never saw itself as a business, instead defying the very logic of profitability by slowing down and demechanizing production during an era in which technological advance and efficiency were held paramount.

Whole Foods re-presents the organic movement’s focus on organic agriculture as necessary for the health of the planet and its people, however the company does so by asserting the validity of organic certification through governmental oversight. Because of this, the proclamation by Whole Foods that “earning” the ‘organic’ label is evidence of a producer’s “proactive practices that prevent soil depletion, water pollution, infested crops, and sick animals” is actually contrary to the trust and collectivity that lie at the center of the organic movement—an ideology based on knowing where and how your food was produced and who produced it. For the organic movement, the validity and certifiability of a product being organic was obviated in the personal relationship between the consumer and the farmer, with these two parties most often existing within the same social network if not on the same plot of land. The reliance of Whole Foods on governmental certification serves as evidence that there is an intermediary between the consumer and producer, which is necessary to reduce the risk of uncertainty that exists because of the distance between the two parties.

Even with the certifiable standard of organic production, the description of this process provided by Whole Foods does not really add much to the consumer’s understanding of what organic production actually entails or requires of farmers. Instead, this narrative reifies the longstanding ideology of true agrarianism, mystifying the relationship between producers and consumers. The general definitions that have shaped the popular imaginary of ‘organic’ thus complicate the consumer’s relationship to the label on their food, which is, in actuality, the result of a financial transaction between the

147 “About Organic Farming.”
private producer and the government. Problematically, the ability to invest in meeting the requirements of certification, including fees associated with applying for and maintaining certification, creates additional divisions between large-scale and small-scale farmers, as organic certification is a *use-value* that can be added to the overall value of the commodity. Only commodities meeting the terms of USDA certification then can carry the “USDA Organic” label, thus the organic *brand*—the USDA’s label—becomes somewhat of a luxury in itself. Because certification indicates to the consumer that a product is ‘better’ because of the way it is produced, it is seen as being worth more. These labels are especially important within the walls of mainstream retailers where shoppers rely on easy to read signifiers when making their choices.\(^{148}\)

Because the concept and cultural importance of organic agriculture has long preceded the USDA’s certification, the specific criteria used in the assessment of organic products does not necessarily produce complete clarity, nor does it limit the casual use of the word or the ways it is conceptualized by different groups and individuals, as we can see in the romantic embellishment of the process by Whole Foods. Though many consumers do not consider or are not aware of the divergence from earlier organic agricultural methods with the development of this industry, there are vocal critics within the organic movement, including smaller organic farmers, who have expressed concerns

\(^{148}\) While very small farmers who gross under $5000 per year are not required to become certified to claim ‘organic,’ these producers are not likely to distribute to large grocery stores and chains simply because their small crop yields cannot meet the needs of those retailers. However, other small farms making over $5000 who still cannot afford the costly certification process will label their goods as “pesticide and GMO (genetically modified organism) free” essentially denoting “organic” to the consumers who frequent the local farmers markets that serve as the major sales arena for these producers. For criteria for organic certification, including who qualifies for certification, see: “Do I Need to be Certified Organic?” USDA National Organics Program, Agricultural Marketing Service, June 2012, [http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5099113](http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5099113).
regarding the intensification of organic agriculture and the mass-production of ‘organic’ food products. Countering Mackey’s belief that the popularization of organics through mass-retailers will democratize the consumption of quality food by offering better products at lower costs, these critics argue that the increased demands of production and the corresponding rise of large corporate firms has meant “that much of the social intent of the original concept is lost,” and that the standards for organic production have weakened in the process. With looser standards resulting from the drive to profit, those within the organic movement claim that the food being produced is not as good as perceived or as good as it could be. Further, contrary to the industrial production methods of capitalism, supporters of the movement see the true potential of organic production as more than its benefits to individual consumers but with the achievement of better social conditions, including fair treatment of farm workers and greater food access for local residents of all income levels.

Though the organic industry claims to hold the original intentions of the counterculture’s organic movement as their motivating factor, its conflicting mission to expand the scale of production in order to profit is a sharp turn from local production and sustainable communities. The organic industry aims to serve the needs of the contemporary shopper who has come to expect almost endless variety, regardless of the limitations of the local growing climate and seasonal weather patterns. Reliance on local farms results in seasonally limited crop varieties, delimiting the choices available to

consumers while reducing retailers’ possible inventories and thus their potential sales. With Whole Foods standing to benefit from the production of the greatest possible quantities of a wide variety organic foods, lowering their carbon footprint (in comparison to conventional production) while still offering their consumers the maximum possible range of options, they are ultimately in opposition to a system based on small-scale independent farmers who cannot offer economies of scale and everything from apples to mangos 365 days a year. Of course, Whole Foods would have a more positive impact on the environment if they choose to only sell products that were grown in the natural climate within the ‘local’ vicinity of specific store locations. However, as a business, Whole Foods must privilege consumer choice by offering the out-of-season and imported products that Americans have come to see as staples. And with the majority of consumers visiting large retailers to purchase their groceries, their dollars are funnel into the maintenance and expansion of large producers, making it increasingly difficult for small farms to survive. Furthermore, with shoppers focused on their own needs and wants, even when choosing to buy organic, the greater issues of labor, food access, and ecology go unaddressed.

While term ‘organic’ comes to be more elusive than educative for consumers, there are other words popular in the natural foods canon that are equally if not more
problematic, including the word ‘natural’ itself, for which there is no official standard held by the government or food industry for its use on product labels or in marketing claims, aside from USDA’s regulation of its use in reference to meat and poultry products. While many within the industry use the same overall exclusionary guidelines as Whole Foods defining ‘natural’ products according to what they are not—containing recognizably genetically modified (GM) ingredients (this is increasingly problematic because of the prevalence of GM seeds and seed/soil drift), scientifically produced/altered/enhanced oils and sweeteners, and synthetic preservatives, colorants, and flavors—the actual criteria for the constitution of a ‘natural’ product is not consistent and this has left consumers uncertain as to what exactly they are buying when the purchase commodities labeled as such. Thus, while 2014 Consumer Reports study indicates of the 59% of Americans who say they look for products deemed ‘natural,’ the majority assume that ‘natural’ products “actually carry specific benefits” though they are unsure of what these benefits are and where they come from. This statistic indicates a gap in consumer knowledge and expectations (i.e., that these foods are in fact held to

151 In reference to meats and poultry, the USDA’s definition of ‘natural’ is: “A product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed. Minimal processing means that the product was processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product. The label must include a statement explaining the meaning of the term natural (such as "no artificial ingredients; minimally processed").” See: “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms,” USDA Food Safety and Inspection Services, last modified October 24, 2014: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/food-labeling/meat-and-poultry-labeling-terms/meat-and-poultry-labeling-terms/.

152 The changing definition of the term “natural” as well as the differing definitions between companies is easily a cause for consumer confusion. For instance, Snapple, which goes by the tag line “made from the best stuff on earth, claimed in the early 2000s that it’s product was “natural” while at the time containing high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), an ingredient that has been shunned by natural food retailers such as Whole Foods. Snapple has since reformulated their products, replacing the HFCS with sugar, allowing them to reassert the products’ “all natural” status and potentially win favor with natural foods retailers (though Snapple still cannot be found in Whole Foods markets).
standards), as well as the reality of the employment of the term as an industry buzzword.  

In analyzing Whole Foods as “America’s Healthiest Grocery Store,” it is important that we consider the vague and contested nature of the terms upon which this title has been built, as well as the cultural value of these terms in creating a lucrative consumer market from what was once a countercultural, anti-capitalist niche. Whole Foods has played a key role in rendering the ideological picture of healthy, natural, and sustainable organic modes of production that have flourished because of capitalism. And yet, what I see in the capitalist interest, including that of Whole Foods, in the expansion of organic production is a different form of masking the realities of production. The industry’s reliance on telling instead of showing consumers what they are buying reproduces a distance between producers and consumers, alienating laborers from their produce, leading to the fetishization of a symbolically inscribed food commodity.

By in large, discussions in the natural and organics industry focus on getting people to make ‘better’ choices by giving them more information on and about products. Yet, riddled with abstractions and romantic ideals, this ‘information’ just obscures the reality that these products are only relatively ‘better.’ ‘New and improved’ formulas of familiar, nutritionally problematic, and ecologically and socially exploitative products are introduced onto the market with the justification that this is actually what consumers want—the familiar but ‘better’—instead of offering fewer options that would actually be

---

incontestably better—namely, pure, unprocessed whole foods. Clearly, the development of a natural and organics industry is not a return to older ways of consumption but creates a new demand for a ‘better’ version of what we have grown accustom to, as made possible by the advance of productive and distributive technologies. It is because of American dependence on marketing and branding as sources of consumer knowledge that companies have been able to inscribe their commodities with additional value through the employment of abstract and contested terms. These terms, despite their intangibility, offer assurance to the consumer. In turn, industry in able to increase its profitability by offering something that consumers see as being worth more money. These efforts by the industry work, at least in part, because consumers are willing to take these buzzwords at face value. These labels and their narratives allow us to feel better about our purchases and even offer us comfort by informing us our ethical shopping choices contribute to the enactment of ‘good’—another vaguely defined term in the dictionary of Whole Foods.

**Forging Higher Standards**

As I laid out in the last chapter, organic food has a long history with the demand for its products based in narratives of fear, scientific study, and the quest for optimal personal health, indicating that the cultural prevalence of organics and the evolution of the organic industry is a reflection of specific historical circumstances and societal shifts. However, the federal government’s formal recognition of organics as an industry with the inception of the National Organics Program (NOP) formalized the notion of organic by defining certifiable standards, giving the term greater credibility as well as greater cultural and financial power. While organic food only composes a very small portion of
food sales in the US, the per capita value of organic products in comparison to conventional food is considerably higher. Because this value is based on how these items are produced, the legitimacy of those products and their additional cost, is contingent upon consumer faith in their rigorous oversight. Therefore, while many food producers and retailers may wish for looser organic standards in order to increase their profit margins (production costs would be reduced, while commodity prices would remain stable), they are forced to find a balance between standards that promote efficiency and those that ensure purity—between capital motivation and consumer demands for protection. Further, looser standards cannot be considered wholly good for industry either in that degraded standards would jeopardize consumer confidence and, in turn, result in lower commodity prices (why pay more for a product that is marginally better at best?).

Taking this negotiation into consideration, it is no surprise that conflicting interests have wrought the National Organic Standards from the get-go. Housed under the USDA, an agency that has been assigned to protect the often opposing interests of the American people and the agricultural industry, the Organic Standards also reflect the balancing of the interests of consumers against that of business. This fact can be seen in the selection of members of the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), which has from its inception been composed primarily of representatives from some of the most financially powerful players in the organic industry. The current board includes not only Joe Dickson of Whole Foods, but also Carmela Beck of Driscoll’s (the nation’s largest distributor of conventional and organic berries), and Harold Austin of Zirkle Fruit Company (subsidiary of Rainier Fruit, one of the nation’s largest distributors of apples,
pears, and cherries). In the past, the NOSB has included representatives from Earthbound Farm (the nation’s largest producer of organic salad mix among other organic produce, much of which is semi-prepared) and CROPP Cooperative (which sells produce under Organic Valley, the nation’s largest farmer-owned dairy cooperative), in addition to leadership from the organic brands housed under well-known corporations with deep roots in industrialization of food, such as Cascadian Farms and Muir Glen (General Mills), Horizon Organics (then under Dean Foods), and Campbell’s Soup. While representatives from these companies extol the importance of standards in guiding their practices and the assurance offered in the oversight of those standards by impartial auditors, these corporate leaders have a strong hand in shaping the standards and oversight to meet their needs, arguably undercutting the impartiality of those measures.

While the board’s recommendations as to what should be allowed and what should be prohibited under the label of ‘USDA Organic’ are weighed towards the interests of business, the National Organic Standards that have been put into policy have been further modified in the fulfillment of the USDA’s duty to ensure the profitability of the agricultural sector. As an advisory body to the USDA, the NOSB’s recommendations “are not official policy until they are approved and adopted by USDA.” Implicitly, the Standards would have taken a different form if the NOSB were a policy-making agency instead of an advisory committee. Despite the fact that I have indicated that both

NOSB and USDA are interested in the profitability of industry, the rift between the two parties’ vision for organic production is illustrative of an ideological difference in the importance of ‘organic’ and the potential profitability of the industry.\textsuperscript{155} This can be seen when, in 1995, after two years of deliberation, the NOSB’s final draft of the National Organic Standards emerged, completely overhauled by the USDA. The document was amended to include the fair-use of genetically modified crops, sewage-based fertilizer, and irradiation in the production of organics—all of which the NOSB unanimously ruled against. The NOSB felt that these practices, all common in conventional farming and in direct opposition to organic agriculture, had been included in the USDA’s Standards to make it easier for the large, politically and economically powerful, corporate farms to receive organic certification.\textsuperscript{156}

As a vocal player in the creation of ‘true’ organic standards, Whole Foods uses their website to illustrate their prominent place in early NOP discussions, with their then Vice President of Governmental and Public Affairs, Margaret Wittenberg, serving as the retail representative on the NOSB from 1995-2000. The company presents their discontent with the USDA’s continued attempts to loosen the NOSB advised Standards. On their “Organic Food Industry Timeline,” the company indicates that during 1998 and ‘99:

Organic food industry members and consumers—including Whole Foods Market supporting the write-in campaign with our customers—send over 275,000

\textsuperscript{155} “NOSB.”
\textsuperscript{156} Fromartz, 198.
comments to the USDA on their proposed National Organic Standards, which included provisions not recommended by the NOSB. These controversial provisions were removed based on these comments.\textsuperscript{157}

Here, Whole Foods positions itself within the natural foods industry on the side of their customers, working with them to do what is in their best interest, and this is typical of the presentation of the brand in general. Whole Foods wishes to be seen as part of something bigger—\textit{as} part of a specific lifestyle demographic, but \textit{with} the ability to effect change, prompting ‘better’ consumer habits across the nation. In the above passage, Whole Foods calls to its shoppers as consumer-citizens, articulating the importance of their customers in steering the company’s practices, and thereby influencing the organic industry and the government. However, by creating a dichotomy where consumers and Whole Foods (and the natural food industry) are placed in opposition to the government (and the ‘big business’ of conventional farming), Whole Foods implies that the government is misguided, if not adverse to consumer interests, whereas their consciously capitalist business is on the side of consumer-citizens. Whole Foods poses itself as the government’s moral compass in the area of food production, suggesting that it can lead the USDA to higher standards by diminishing the agency’s alliance with conventional Big Food; an alliance that has only led to the disregard for and deception of consumers in the name of profit. Federal oversight is written into the book of Whole Foods (as well as \textit{Conscious Capitalism}) as ancillary to industry, not separate or impartial, with governmental policy contingent upon the socio-economic morals and industry ties of its

\textsuperscript{157} “Growth of the Organics Industry.”
political leaders. This rendering barely masks the underlying neoliberal ideology by which the government is good when it falls on ‘our’ side, but always requires the direction of private business in recognizing what is best for the people of the nation.

This is not to suggest that the only rationale for Whole Foods to push for stringent organic standards is to render consumer confidence in their business. Whole Foods was built on, and remains ideologically invested in, providing consumers better, safer, natural alternatives to mainstream offerings. The existence of these standards legitimizes Whole Foods as different and special because of its early and prominent position in their creation, which is important as more and more stores are offering a wide range of natural and organic products. The company’s extremely thorough website serves as evidence of its countercultural authenticity in its commitment to the highest possible level of transparency as well as its confidence in the natural and organic products its stores sell as being the best for its consumers and the planet. This model of transparency and consumer assurance is something that the NOSB, supported by Whole Foods and relatively likeminded individuals, has sought achieve in the labeling of organics. And yet gray areas persist as the label obscures the conditions of production it is supposed to obviate.

On the NOP website the USDA presents a condensed definition of “organic” for consumers based its detailed “regulations and guidance on certification, production, handling, and labeling,” stating:

Organic is a labeling term that indicates that the food or other agricultural product has been produced through approved methods. These methods integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote
ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used.\(^{158}\)

In ensuring the validity of the certification for consumers, the USDA also mentions in brief the oversight of the program by “organic certification agencies”—nongovernmental third party inspectors—with the USDA stepping into ensure the performance of these agencies through audits. While the USDA’s definition is clear in what their label of ‘organic’ excludes, it lacks specificity as to what organic production actually entails—for instance, what exactly are the “approved methods” of production? How do landowners and laborers go about ensuring that they “foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity”? In this, the USDA ultimately suggests that consumers should rely on the fact that these standards are executed to the fullest extent with the highest integrity, simply because have been certified.

Taking for granted that organic certification simply implies one specific mode of production, most consumers do not realize that the term ‘organic’ carries with it qualifications, as revealed in the different forms of organic labels. As A. Christine Green notes in her analysis of corporate influence on organic standards, the NOP’s scheme for the quantification of organicness, whereby products with varying levels of organic content are labeled using different language, marks, and seals, remains “somewhat a mystery to many consumers,” and thus the codification fails to meet its intended purpose of “eliminating consumer confusion.” The three levels of organicness officially

recognized by the USDA are “100% Organic,” meaning exactly that: the product is completely of organic content (excluding any processing with water and/or salt, which cannot be labeled as organic); “Organic,” allowing for up to 5% of non-organic content (for instance, baking soda in baked goods or xanthan gum in gluten free products); and “Made with Organic Ingredients,” for items composed of at least 70% organic ingredients. Only the first two categories are allowed to use the “USDA Organic” seal, whereas all three may display the mark or seal of the certifying agent (i.e., that of the state in which it is certified).\(^\text{159}\) Though information regarding the stratification of organic content is relatively easy for consumers to find on the USDA’s website, Green claims that most people see the word ‘organic’, not all of the modifiers and symbols around it, and assume that they are holding a wholly organic product. Furthermore, additional labels for a variety of other certifications and production claims add to consumer confusion about a product’s content and the conditions under which it was produced. Labels like ‘natural’, ‘free-range’, and ‘no hormones added’, just to name a few, are often conflated with ‘organic’, when they have their own, often vague and unregulated, meanings. With all this terminology to decode, Green notes, “the burden is still on the consumer to educate him or herself on the organic labeling system and the fact that ‘natural’ has no meaning outside of meat and poultry products.”\(^\text{160}\)

I see this information gap in part the result of the parsing of information to communicate the factors that matter most to consumers as efficiently as possible.


\(^{160}\) For the USDA’s explanation of these and other terms see “National Organic Program: Consumer Information.”
However, this selective presentation of information obviously helps in the marketing of products, as complicated or less desirable details are omitted. Still, there need be realistic expectations of the amount of text an average consumer will actually read. Yes, I am going to go ahead and assume that many Whole Foods shoppers do not visit the company’s website unless they are looking for a specific piece of information (i.e., to find a store location or special event), and that the vast majority of people who peruse the site will not take the time to interrogate every single tab and hyperlink. Because the information users interact with is minimal, Whole Foods and other companies must be strategic, presenting the most clear, easily digestible text in prominent locations, and this necessarily requires the parsing of words. Yet what companies may justify as the parsing of words, others in the organic movement read as the watering down of the movement’s mission. For those who see “organic” as something that is being corrupted by its growth, the standards set by the USDA under the advice of the NOSB and the terminology employed by Big Food will never be correct because they are the tools of the marketplace, which in very its essence counters the ideological objectives of the organic movement. Empirical evidence validates concerns regarding the degradation of organic processes with the intervention of the NOSB and USDA.

The Cornucopia Institute, an advocacy group for the small-scale farming community, has waged the strongest publicized criticisms regarding the composition of the NOSB. The group sees this conflict between the interests of consumers and small-scale producers on one side, and that of corporate outfits on the other demonstrated in the voting practices of NOSB members, with those individuals from large firms tending to be
more liberal in the admittance of non-organic substances into organic production. For instance, in 2012 six of fifteen board members who voted for admission of the herbicide ammonium nonanoate onto the National List of permitted substances. Despite not receiving the two-thirds majority ruling to pass, it is worth noting who voted ‘affirmative’: representatives from Cascadian Farms, Campbell’s Soup, Organic Valley, Whole Foods Market, and Earthbound Farms, who held two seats at the time. And this permissive voting trend is not atypical. Since the creation of the National List, the number of acceptable items has grown from 77 to over 250, with only a few items losing their status on the list during one of the mandated five-year reviews. Because items on this list are not organic but also not considered as non-organic in the labeling of organic products, the expansion of this list contributes to industry opacity, depriving consumers of knowledge about the status of what is actually going into their food.

Though the NOSB was unsuccessful admitting ammonium nonanoate to the National List, by voting for the admission of non-organic substances into the production of organic foods, Dickson, as representative of Whole Foods, has illustrated the company’s dubious stance on organics. Far from being based solely on what is best for their health and the planet, the leadership of Whole Foods bases their stance in organics a confluence of factors including affordability, choice, and convenience. In its ideological support of organic production and the benefits of consuming organics, Whole Foods

---


162 Storm. Note: Earthbound Farm held a consumer interest position and a farmer/handler position in 2012.

163 Storm.
facilitates the addition of a greater number of substances to the National List by negotiating between ‘better’ food and too great of a sacrifice, in which organics would be considered too expensive, too restrictive, or too difficult for consumers. This is to say, that Whole Foods would rather water down organic standards than ask its customers to change their consumption habits. Further, by supporting the admission of new chemicals and substances onto the National List, Whole Foods is giving the thumbs up to Big Organics, as the associated agricultural firms that find it most necessary to deploy chemical pesticides and fertilizers in the management of their large plots of land and industrial food manufacturers that most often rely on the use of non-organic stabilizers, thickeners, and leaveners to create palatable convenience foods.

Trying to play the middle and appease all constituents, from the diehard organic shopper to the gourmand to the mom on a budget who wants the best food for her kids, Whole Foods works to maintain local connections, requiring its stores to utilize small farms for seasonal produce and small batch organic goods, while offering a steady supply of corporate organics, distributed through its regional warehouses and purchased using economies of scale, like all other corporate supermarket chains. In reality, Whole Foods would not succeed as a supermarket chain if it were not able to exert some level of control over the content of its stores. As revealed in the history of chain stores as presented in the previous chapter, customers seek consistency and reliability when

164 Carol Ness, “Whole Foods, Taking Flak, Thinks Local,” San Francisco Chronicle, July 26, 2006, http://www.sfgate.com/food/article/Whole-Foods-taking-flak-thinks-local-2515474.php. She explains that, prompted by “stinging criticism” from Michael Pollan, “Whole Foods, which is big and successful enough to pull the rest of the supermarket industry along with it, is taking a few steps to change that—including requiring all its stores to buy ‘out the back-door’ from at least four individual farmers. Most produce arrives from a regional distribution center.”
entering stores of their preferred chain, and this is made possible through centralized oversight ensuring fairly uniform product offerings across locations. The growth of large-scale organic production and national distribution, including the production of name brand organics that parallel conventional name brand food products, was not only necessary for organics to compete in the mainstream, but, moreover, for a store like Whole Foods to gain a national presence.

**Relatively Organic**

The ability to turn from chemicalization and certain forms of mechanization to more natural and organic methods of production is possible only in that efficiency has reached a maxim, making conventional commodities overly abundant, cheap, and indistinguishable. The distinctions of ‘organic’ and ‘natural’, like the distinction of the brand Whole Foods, comes to have value because these terms speak of a difference in the ways the commodity is produced. These terms have a *social symbolic-value* for the user/consumer. For the manufacturer investing in these alternative modes of production, which are considered slower and more labor intensive (though this is not necessarily the case) and require additional overhead costs for certifications, there must a return in the marketplace. Profit is found in the added-value of the commodity’s distinction through its branding as ‘organic’. While some varieties of organic produce are sold at only marginally greater prices than those that are conventionally grown, which, taken out of context, suggest that all people *could* buy organic if they *chose* to do so, other more difficult to grow season and climate specific crops, may cost up to and in excess of twice as much as conventionally grown varieties. As such, the overall cost of organic food can
be a major deterrent to those without considerable discretionary income to make the ‘better’ choice. Yet because there are, on one hand, consumers who are willing to pay more for ‘better’ products and, on the other, people are will to sacrifice quality for variety and price, base-level ‘conventional’ products remain. There must, in effect, be the choice between something cheaper and something ‘better’ to ensure the value of the natural foods industry. The achievement of ethical and sustainability missions is deferred in the continuation of conventional industrial production as the integration of natural and organic food into the capitalist food system has resulted in the primacy of financial goals for the natural and organics industry. Because of this, the production and retailing practices of natural and organics companies cannot be placed in opposition to the food industry overall as there are surprising similarities between Big Food and that of Big Organics, with even some smaller producers employing more conventional-type methods in the effort to expand their distribution (and their brands).

As an industry originally intent on addressing issues of food quality and sustainability, the markets for naturals and organics have been able to blossom over the past thirty years because of the incorporation of industrial technologies and labor management tactics that have been discretely borrowed from, and at times have directly reproduced, conventional production, including large scale mono-crop farming, convenience packaging, and the employment of low-paid labor that is subject to irregular scheduling. These measures have enabled the industry to produce greater surplus-value.

165 Take for example the Whole Foods Market in Washington, DC where one can buy conventional red bell peppers, imported from Canada, for $2.99 a pound, whereas the organic variety, imported from Holland, are $5.99 a pound Price comparison conducted on 5 Feb 2015.
while reducing wholesale commodity prices over time through the achievement of economies of scale. This has occurred through the avoidance of changes to the modes of production that require substantial investments on the part of producers in the form of additional labor, different types of technologies, and/or agricultural retrograding; costs that would trickle down to consumers in an effort to maintain the viability of food as a capitalist industry. Big Organics, like those sold through national and regional chains, come as a compromise to fill the gap between the desire for cheap and the demand for better.

Through economies of scale and centralized management, corporate firms are able to produce and sell in large enough quantities that they can create ubiquitous brands, attracting value-oriented consumers while providing value at the checkout, such as brands I have stated earlier in this chapter like Earthbound Farms and Organic Valley. It is only with more farms transitioning to organic agriculture and more manufacturers using organic ingredients in their products that the price difference between staple organic and conventional products has diminished overtime— to the extent that Trader Joes organic bagged spinach is at times the same price as the conventionally grown variety. Costco and other warehouse clubs have take the cue from supermarkets, now carrying organic products that were only two decades ago considered too highfalutin for their price-conscious shoppers. The sheer ubiquity of organics or the substitution of organics for conventional products has in some cases made the purchase of an organic product less a choice than a default or accident. Yes, an accident. Once, upon returning home from

---

166 Based on personal observation of Washington, DC metro area locations of these stores, July 2014.
Wegmans my mother came to find not only were the carrots in her shopping bag organic, but that, upon surveying the offerings at her local supermarket on a later trip, the store no longer stocked conventional carrots. The price difference had become too minimal to justify giving shelf space to both.

With organic consumption expanding beyond proponents of the organic foods movement, reaching new clientele interested in organic food for more personal and less political reasons, organic production needs to constantly expand. This has led to large companies heading massive, multisite farms and large processing plants and vast distribution networks to meet the demands of national retailers from Whole Foods to Walmart. Large-scale production has thus become an organic industry norm, implying that mass conversion to organics requires a massive production and distribution network and, in this, an organic industry that parallels conventional food production in both scope and market ideology. Yet, according to the doctrine of Conscious Capitalism, there is nothing inherently wrong with this growth. The belief that the free-market offers the best for all people by providing choices (to those who can afford them) in a socially responsible manner, the prevalence of large firms in supplying consumers with abundance and value is guaranteed. Further, American consumers show their support of this growth with their increased purchase of organic foods despite the scale of their production or the distance those items have traveled to reach their shopping carts.

There is no doubt that large companies with vested interests in maintaining organic standards, even if imperfect or incomplete, are beneficial to the planet and its inhabitants by lessening the carbon footprint of agriculture in comparison to those that
continue to employ conventional methods. Through pressure exerted by the likes of Whole Foods in the retail sector and Earthbound Farms in the agricultural sector, many companies have taken notice of the demand for organics and the profitability of including these products in their merchandise lines. However, as a result, the ideology of natural and organic food has become evermore superficial with major corporations making and selling conventional and organic/natural products, and many consumers purchasing these products only if and when they are reasonably close in price to the conventional products they were raised on (going back and forth on the pros and cons of both). The abundance and choice offered in the marketplace of industrial agriculture and production has led to overall consumer complacency with most Americans unwilling to resign their right to access a wide variety of products regardless of natural weather patterns or local soil limitations. Because of this, industry has not found it necessary to make major changes in the modes of production and distribution that could better ensure long-term environmental sustainability and the meeting of the nutritional needs of the global community.

But according to Conscious Capitalists, expansion of the right types of production and business do contribute to a greater good—the consumers win, environment wins, and business wins. We can see Mackey’s vision of Conscious Capitalism as a driving force in the profitability of the natural and organics industries with the (arguably superficial) retention of the countercultural ideals as a means for creating better capitalism.\textsuperscript{167} In this practice, businesses hold a greater goal than profit, taking responsibility for the breadth

\textsuperscript{167} Mackey and Sisodia, 293.
and ramifications of their actions because creating a positive, lasting impact is part of their mission. With of this transparency and sense of purpose, these businesses can be seen as more responsible by consumers and more responsive to the needs of all of their stakeholders. Read through the narrative of Conscious Capitalism, the measure of an ethical society can be assessed through the predominance of ‘conscious’ or ethical businesses that then give consumers the means to act as ethical agents in the marketplace through their support of fair labor practices, environmental stewardship, and community giving through their purchases. Though Mackey and Sisodia claim that a “great business enhances the overall health and wellbeing of society,” they skirt the fact that in a capitalist society business must constantly become more profitable as this is the sole means to do more ‘good’ things.\(^{168}\) As with all capitalism, for Conscious Capitalism bigger is in fact better; it is through bigger, more successful business that societal change occurs, benefitting all people. Therefore, the countercultural values of the organic movement are only effective if they become widespread—making the counterculture into culture. But this culture still requires a price of admission. An individual’s full and active participation, as such, conveys a level of socio-economic status and this allows Whole Foods to retain its brand distinction. The idea of better more wholesome businesses, as expressed through the deployment of narratives of grassroots company origins and salt-of-the-earth leadership, is commodified in more costly products that are seen as materially and socially better. According to Mackey, the fact that capitalism is being redeemed through these new, conscious enactments serves as proof that free-market

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 282.
capitalism works; ethical businesses succeed because of their ability to give consumers everything they want—transparency, happy workers, honest leadership, reasonable prices on quality goods, and respect for the community and the environment.

**Organic Through the Eyes of the Beholder**

In understanding the nature of the market for organic products it is important to recognize not all consumers associate the same benefits with purchasing organics and, perhaps more importantly, that throughout the history of food distribution under capitalism the out-of-pocket cost of food has stood at the center of consumer interest. Studies of consumers of organics indicate the various motivations for and commitments to purchasing organics. According to a survey conducted by the Hartman Group, sixty-nine percent of American consumers purchased organic products in 2008. While this number was a slight drop from the 2006 survey, additional survey criteria reflect growth in the size of the core consumer group—those who spend the most money on the products and often hold strong personal and ethical commitments to organic production. While this group was shown to be buying even more organic products than in previous years, consumption by peripheral consumers had also increased since the last survey, reflecting the overall climb in organic sales during this period.

The difference between the characteristics of these consumer groups is largely in their personal identification with the ideologies of organic consumption. As opposed to core consumers, mid-level and peripheral consumers tend to “purchase organics [from] those categories that resonate most strongly to cues of freshness or health.” Additionally, unlike core consumers, occasional consumers of organic foods put more consideration
into weighing the costs of organics against less expensive options, often opting to avoid products like organic prepared foods and snacks that bear a high cost differential.\(^{169}\) Thus we can see the occasional organic consumer like the occasional Whole Foods shopper—they treat these things as ‘special’, are more likely to shop for sales, and are, in their choice to spend their money on conventional products, less committed to the ecological, societal, and/or social value that has been attached to organic commodities.

In her work *Agrarian Dreams* Julie Guthman asserts the long connection between unadulterated foods and health beginning with the Pure Foods Act at the turn of the last century and solidification of this ideology with the rise of organic farming and the health food movement with Rodale’s publication of *Prevention*, a magazine that asserted the healthfulness of the methods supported by his other publication, *Organic Gardening*.\(^{170}\)

In Guthman’s critique of large-scale industrial organic agriculture in California, she takes into consideration the role of the health food movement in the shift from the agrarian ideal of small-scale socially and ecologically beneficial family owned farms to the intensification of organic farming as a capitalist enterprise manned by wage-labor during the 1980s.\(^{171}\) Whereas California was once the hotbed for countercultural idealism that sought to revolutionize food production, when the 1980s saw significant changes in diet and food taste, generated by a complicated interplay of the growth of a higher income-earning professional class,


\(^{171}\) Ibid., 12-14.
breakthroughs in nutritional science, heightened global travel and migration
(leading to interest in exotic and ethnic foods), and enhanced concern with bodily
health… Organic food became more desirable for its association with health food,
to be sure, but also for its association with gourmet food, thanks to chef-led
advocacy of organics… ultimately imbuing it with more market value as well.\textsuperscript{172}

It is with this concern for the individual consumer’s health and the development of the
sophisticated ‘yuppie’ pallet that we find both the development of an organic industry of
large firms and the need for defined standards that protect those individual consumers
from capital’s compulsion to cut-corners in the maximization of efficiency. While
Guthman claims that “growing acceptance of environmentalism” was a key factor in the
acceptance of organics, she also relates the primacy given to consideration of personal
health to the detriments resulting from the industrialization of organic farming.

Guthman’s analysis leads me to assert that the consumer’s ability to see his own interest
served by the consumption of organic food overwrites any and all other reasons for
choosing organic products. This claim is further evidenced by observations made by
Cheryl Baldwin, a former Vice President of the environmental nonprofit Green Seal, who
notes the driving force behind the consumer interest in sustainability as “the desire to
improve one’s personal and family health and safety” and that “environmental reasons
have remained a secondary benefit, and in many ways unknown to consumers.”\textsuperscript{173}

Guthman and Baldwin’s work is telling of the success of the organic industry despite its

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{173} Cheryl Baldwin, “Introduction,” \textit{Sustainability in the Food Industry}, ed. Cheryl Baldwin (Malden, MA: Wiley-
Blackwell, 2009), xv. Baldwin was Vice President of Science and Standards for Green Seal when this book was
published.
ecological and social imperfections, and can be extended to understand the success of Whole Foods despite widespread complaints about its high prices and exclusivity.

In accessing the consumer interest in organics and the great divide that has occurred in the organics industry, it is also important to consider where products are being purchased. By and large, consumers are not visiting farms or even farmers markets to purchase their organics. Ninety-three percent of organic sales now take place in traditional and natural foods supermarkets and grocery stores—an industry dominated by chains. After the Alar scare in 1989, the majority of Americans seeking organic foods were headed to natural foods retailers like Whole Foods, Wild Oats, and other small chains and independent stores, but only a decade later conventional supermarkets had surpassed natural foods stores in the sale of several categories of organic products, including the two highest demand areas, produce and dairy, and conventional retailers continue to maintain dominance in organic sales.\textsuperscript{174} However, the Hartman Group’s studies indicate that many core consumers prefer shopping at natural foods stores for organic products. I correlate the growth in size of the core group, as well as their increased spending, with the financial success of Whole Foods especially at the onset of global recession in 2008. Further, while the core consumer group is increasing, so are the number of people who ‘occasionally’ shop at natural and organic foods stores, as evidenced in a small-scale Food Marketing Institute survey, and this is reflected in the

\textsuperscript{174} Hardesty. Citing the Food Marketing Institute’s study “US Grocery Shopper Trends, 2005,” which found 55% of organic consumers reported to purchasing their natural and organic products at the supermarket and only 13% indicated they were most likely to purchase them at a natural foods store (A-1).
continued ability for Whole Foods to open stores in neighborhoods once thought to be outside of their target demographic.\textsuperscript{175}

Achieving consistently solid net sales, the profitability of Whole Foods can largely be attributed to the centrality of an abundance of high-quality perishable foods in their stores—the categories from which the demand for organics is the highest. Whole Foods represents the ideology of the organic movement—purity, community, knowledge of products and how they are produced—in a contained and stylized consumer-friendly setting that enables shoppers to feel like they are getting an authentic organic products as they are engaged an authentically organic space. Whole Foods allows for the fetishization of organics by turning them into an aesthetic wonder that helps to ensure that shoppers feel good about what they are buying, and that they are completely free from concerns regarding production or ecological cost. Yet, in reality, the presentation of organics at Whole Foods further obscures the conditions of production. This effect is exacerbated by the company’s imagery and narratives of the happy Whole Trade producers in developing nations, who, in partnering with Whole Foods, have benefitted from the instatement of ‘fair’ labor and social conditions, and of the Whole Planet microloan recipients, who have been able to achieve their dreams in part because of caring Whole Foods shoppers, which I will discuss in detail in chapter six.

As many small farmers and diehard organic supports will tell you, the interest Whole Foods has in the production and sale of organics is not authentic. To these critics, Whole Foods is part of the culture of corporate organics—a wolf in sheep’s clothing—

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
trying to mask the company’s own role in the loosening of organic standards and the
industrialization of organic production as a result of increased demand. Regardless of the
authenticity of Whole Foods, traditional supermarket chains feel a push from Whole
Foods because of the company’s success in the organic sector and its ability to draw
profitable affluent consumers with a beautiful bounty of organics. In this, Whole Foods
appears in between the organic movement and Big Food, as the bastard child of the
counterculture and capitalism. The company, therefore, has the power to influence the
overall state of organic foods, exerting pressure on the oppositional camps from which it
has arisen by contributing to the current negotiated organic standards and the production
and distribution of organic foods that are, paradoxically, of varying qualities and quality.

These negotiated standards, in effect, allow Whole Foods to impose additional
standards to assure their customers that when they shop at Whole Foods they are
purchasing “the highest quality natural and organic products.” The company stands by
the quality of their products and the variety of products they choose to sell, which is clear
in the presentation of an abundance of information on their in-store signage and website.

With Whole Foods we find far more detailed narrative accounts of production methods,
choice of ingredients, sites of origin, health benefits, and even biographical information
on distant producers (often with mention of who Whole Foods has improved their life and
their community) than offered by any other supermarket, including the information
provided by well-regarded outlets that have also drawn from the affluent customer-base,
such as Wegmans and Sprouts Farmers Market. Following the trail of hyperlinks through
the Whole Foods website, the language and presentation of information regarding
organics is even more comprehensive than what is presented on the “Consumer Information” page of the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service website. The ability for Whole Foods to present more information in a more inviting manner—using stylized fonts and images that work at the affective level to convince readers of the company’s authentic countercultural roots—enhances the culture of trust between the company and its customers making the oversight offered Whole Foods feel more sincere and more complete than governmental policy. Though the existence of the National Organics Program should not be slighted, the presentation of a private corporation as going above and beyond the protections offered by the public sector reifies the position of capital in structuring our needs, expectations, and security.

Naturally Different

Regardless of the specific driving rationale for consumers choosing to purchase natural products—be it their personal health, the environment, animal welfare, or fair labor policies—the overarching ideological distinction made by Whole Foods in comparing natural and industrial foods is one of ethics. The rise of natural foods has taken place mainly because of consumer distrust of the industrial food system and a desire for better food. Therefore, once a company has been recognized on the side of industrial methods, it is difficult if not impossible to cross over to the natural side. Because of this, Whole Foods must fight to remain within the natural foods camp, on the side of ethics—a task that has proven increasingly difficult as the company sources many of their staple products from some big name brands and their subsidiaries. Because corporate ties remain invisible in the branding, marketing, and packaging of natural
foods, the culpability of Whole Foods in the advance of Big Food is only partly recognized as many consumers do not realize the extent to which 1) natural foods companies are owned and operated by larger parent companies and 2) large multinational finance firms with vested interests in the continuation of industrial food production hold shares in natural foods companies.176

Even with these connections obscured and out of the minds of most shoppers, Whole Foods has built a buffer for its ethical oversights and missteps. As stated in the company’s “Declaration of Interdependence”:

When Whole Foods Market fails to measure up to its stated vision, as it inevitably will at times, we should not despair. Rather let us take up the challenge together to bring our reality closer to our vision. The future we will experience tomorrow is created one step at a time today.177

Claiming that its will occasionally fail to live up to its vision, Whole Foods grants itself leeway to respond to consumer concerns that could have been addressed proactively. Because the foremost responsibility of Whole Foods is to produce value, the company’s ethical initiatives must have a marketable value. This means that there must be a clear understanding of what consumers want and are willing to pay for to ensure that the expense of implementing a ‘higher standard’ is recuperated on the sales floor. This is

176 While stock ownership no doubt changes over time, one excellent example of the division of interests in the purchase of stock is the Vanguard Group, which as of March 31, 2014 amongst its numerous holdings owns the largest holding in Hain-Celestial (one of the few natural foods companies that is not operated as a subsidiary, but houses many natural foods brands, all of which clearly list it as the parent company on their labels), the second largest holding of WhiteWave, and the third largest holding of Whole Foods Market, as well as the largest holdings in Monsanto, Procter and Gamble, Pepsi Co., and McDonalds, and the second largest holdings of Coca-Cola and Phillip Morris. “Institutional Profile: Vanguard Group, Inc,” NASDAQ, http://www.nasdaq.com/quotes/institutional-portfolio/vanguard-group-inc-61322.
177 “Declaration of Interdependence.”
evidenced in the case of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), which Whole Foods only took a stance against after a consumer uproar.

Once considered a means to feed the world’s growing population, genetic modification (which includes cross-species gene-splicing and chemical alteration of genes, mainly in plants) is now viewed by many global citizens as presenting unknown risks to human health and the environment, and, thus, products containing GMOs are to be avoided. As this negative perception became commonplace, the use of GMOs, regardless of the means of or justification for their modification, was no longer acceptable to many shoppers, even beyond the core group for natural and organic products. The event that pushed Whole Foods to take action on the issue was the 2012 public exposure of the ‘natural’ cereal brand Kashi’s for use of GMOs, followed by the company’s hasty removal of GMOs from all of their products. This incident is telling of the power of consumer consciousness in directing industry. Despite Kashi’s initial PR claims that they have always had the consumer’s best intentions at the heart of their company, which, implicitly would include their choice to use GM soy, their removal of GMOs serves to validate the popular imaginary of natural foods as different by further distancing them from practices that have been foundational to the reign of mass-produced food commodities with the industrialization of the food industry.

The revelation of Kashi’s practices caused a ripple effect across the industry, prompting responses from not only Whole Foods, but other respected retailers of natural foods like Trader Joes and Sprouts, with all companies promising to provide greater transparency going forward. Though Whole Foods has never swayed on their decision to
sell Kashi, they have since taken the largest step of any retailer or even governmental institution in regulating GMOs by promising that all products in their stores will be labeled with their GMO status by 2018. Note that while Whole Foods has stated their commitment to ending GMO use and offering consumers information about the status of products, the company will not place an outright ban on GMO-containing products. The implication is that a product bearing the stamp “contains GMOs” will carry negative connotations for many consumers, leading to decreased sales of these items, and that, overtime, these products will change or Whole Foods will eliminate them from their inventory. This seemingly middling stance is comparable to Whole Foods inclusion of conventionally grown produce despite the desire that shoppers consume only organics.

Committed instead to educate consumers to make ‘better’ choices, Whole Foods presents ample information regarding GMOs, including definitions, standards, and shopping tips, on their website and in their stores. This offering of information allows consumers to freely make their own choices, instead of the company coming off as being ‘preachy’ about the choices consumers must make. Arguably, the passive presentation of information is the company’s compromise between customer satisfaction at present against and their long-term ethical goals. And yet, by merely offering this information and their support of more natural methods of production, it appears that Whole Foods does more than other large supermarkets to support the shift to natural and organic

---

178 While this compromise may seem to undercut or hinder the fulfillment their mission, Mackey believes that by placing the consumer as central agent and giving her the knowledge to make informed choices amongst the offerings at Whole Foods, that consumer will over time come to make better choices—to stop buying GMOs and start buying organic. Mackey and Sisodia, 78-79. See also, Paumgarten; A.C. Gallo, “Three Month Update on GMO Labeling,” Whole Story: The Official Whole Foods Market Blog, June 18, 2013, http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/blog/three-month-update-gmo-labeling.
products, and, because of its position as the eighth largest grocery chain in the US, the company is able to direct the market more in ways that smaller natural foods retailers cannot.  

Whole Foods plans to realize its mission of a ‘better’ food industry through this model of gradual consumer enlightenment, but for Whole Foods. By effecting changes in consumption patterns, Mackey sees Whole Foods as pushing others in the food industry to become more ethical to meet consumer demands or parish as a result of their inadequacy. Whole Foods might comes not through their scale in comparison to other supermarket chains; their sales only account for less than one percent of the total grocery sales in the US. Instead, the influence held by Whole Foods is because of the value of what the stores’ sales. With the highest sales revenues per square foot in the grocery industry, Whole Foods has proven that there are consumers who are willing to pay more for perceptibly better products, which makes high-quality, natural, ethical retailing a valuable business endeavor. Because Whole Foods is able to sell certifiably better commodities at notably higher prices, many local and national brands look to meet the company’s standards to gain access to their stores. For example, based on Whole Foods stores’ impressive sales of organic bananas, by 2006 Dole was able to convert of large amounts of land to organic production, and because of the increased demand for

organic milk and eggs by Whole Foods, Organic Valley was able to accept new farmers into their cooperative.\textsuperscript{181}

On the GMO front, the company’s labeling initiative has influenced many food producers to approach the Non-GMO Project for verification, requiring the expansion of that program to meet the surge in demand for certification and oversight.\textsuperscript{182} The larger effects of the GMO labeling can be seen when we consider that, as companies work diligently to create non-GMO versions of their products for sale at Whole Foods, they will likely eliminate the previous GMO-containing recipes, whether to avoid the expense of producing two varieties of the same item or in order to assert their commitment to the non-GMO movement. Over time, with an increasing number of manufacturers distributing only non-GMO products to retailers, there is the potential that the use of GMOs in food products will be ended altogether, making it difficult for the agricultural sector to even source non-GMO seeds, animal feed, and ingredients. Supporters of Whole Foods’ initiative are debating if the company’s efforts could prompt federal regulation of GMOs, in the same way the company influenced the creation of organic standards. But there are those who ask if government regulation even matters. If Whole Foods can be seen as the “market-based solution” that promotes the self-regulation of the food industry by illustrating that the most effective means to offering better foods is in the simultaneous pursuit of “profits and a higher purpose,” is governmental regulation simply an empty

\textsuperscript{181} Singer and Mason, 181.
\textsuperscript{182} Gallo.
gesture that comes as too little, too late? Further, it is likely the regulation of GMO products would be in the labeling of non-GMO products as different, not the elimination of those products wholesale, as the government continues to subsidize GM crops, like corn, soy, and cotton. In effect, the governmental regulation of GMOs would be no different than what Whole Foods already does, and their effort would just add another logo and label to the existing array of certifications available for shoppers to wade through.

While governmental regulation serves to protect Americans and help ensure they can make knowledgeable choices, it is much less stringent than the standards created by Whole Foods—standards that notably evolve to always be one step ahead of the government. Because of this, there are some things Whole Foods simply will not offer in its stores. Despite implementing a variety of standards that empower shoppers to determine what is right for them, Whole Foods sees many foods and ingredients in foods to be unfit for human consumption. The company’s rather extensive list of “Unacceptable Ingredients for Food” can be found in plain text on their website, giving the specific names of each and every artificial sweetener, colorant, preservative, chemically processed ingredient, and ethically irresponsible product that it refuses to carry in its stores. All of the ingredients deemed unacceptable by Whole Foods have been approved by the FDA as safe (with the chemical additives in the GRS category) and

---

183 Main cites Ken Cook of Environmental Work Group as noting that the GMO labeling deadline set by whole Foods could cause the Obama administration to act on promises made regarding GMO regulation in his campaign, where as Doug Foreman, founder of non-GMO chip brand Beanitos, sees the action by Whole Foods as negating the need for federal law; Paumgarten quotes Mackey’s reference to Whole Foods as a “market-based solution.” I am juxtaposing this term to government regulation, which is not how it is employed in that article.

many could even be considered natural, like carmine (red colorant made from crushed bugs), foie gras (goose liver), and high fructose corn syrup (altered corn sugar), while it is notable that some of these ingredients allowed by the FDA, such as aspartame, have been proven to have adverse effects on human health, and while the effects of many of the others are “hard to know with complete certainty.”\textsuperscript{185} These gray areas in the FDA’s rulings create an opening for Whole Foods to assert their ‘higher standards’ and ‘higher purpose’ are a necessary precaution, implying the care the company offers exceeds that of the public agencies that have been created to serve the interests of the American people. Showing their commitment to the ‘whole’ consumer and the planet, Whole Foods also extends this care beyond the food products in its strict guidelines for health and beauty aids and household cleaners, which can also be found on their website.\textsuperscript{186}

While many of the higher product standards Whole Foods is known for have been integrated into the natural foods departments of supermarket chains—like that of Wegmans, Safeway, and Kroger, which also produce their own brands of organic and natural products—they are not applied broadly by any conventional supermarket. The natural foods departments of larger retailers can therefore feel like mini-Whole Foods that attempt to attract Whole Foods clientele by offering easy access to the products in the context of ‘regular’ grocery shopping. Yet the departmentalization of natural foods implies its difference and, in that, the importance for distinction in the way that Bourdieu


proposed—as a marker of social class and status, and as a reflection of acculturated lifestyle practices and ideologies. Inclusion of natural and organic foods within the conventional supermarket also offers peripheral shoppers access to those items that they may not consider buying if they had to go to a separate store to obtain them. However, by setting these items apart from ‘regular’ foods, customers who not looking for them may altogether skip that section of the store believing there is nothing there that they need.

Like Whole Foods itself, the natural food department mimics the surrounding supermarket, broken into small sub-departments (cereals, condiments, refrigerated items, etc.), at the same time it serves as an internal juxtaposition to the supermarket, reinforcing the dialectical difference between natural and conventional and the predominance of conventional goods, appearing as a miniaturized world of lesser more expensive options for those with extra money and/or discerning taste. Most importantly, the natural foods department, like the certification offered in the regulation of organics and GMOs, is additional. The base-level practices and offerings remain. In this case, the conventional supermarket continues to offer the consumer all of the industrial food products that have become staples in the Standard American Diet. In this, the choice by traditional supermarkets to carry both ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’ products allows them to reach the greatest possible number of consumers and profit from a more diverse inventory. As I showed in the previous chapter in my discussion of the history of supermarkets, having an extensive inventory has been proven to increase a store’s profits by increasing the number of items a consumer will leave with and, because of this, most retailers attempt to include as many products as possible, regardless of their nutritional
value or the ethics of their production. Additionally, because retailers can garner significant revenues from vendors in the form of slotting fees, which are paid by vendors to secure prime retail space, and allowances, which are granted to retailers to promote products and offer sale prices, supermarkets tend to promote high-profit margin snacks and convenience foods that have the greatest profit margins for both producers and retailers.\textsuperscript{187}

Unlike most other supermarkets in America, Whole Foods does not accept slotting fees. The only possible way for a company to get its product on the shelves of Whole Foods stores is to comply with the company’s standards, and even that does not guarantee a product will make the cut.\textsuperscript{188} Part of what makes Whole Foods unique is the fact that they have many products that cannot be found elsewhere, and priority is given specialty, artisanal, and local products that will delight their customers and keep them coming back. On the practical level, most shoppers shop at Whole Foods because they want something other than what is offered by the conventional supermarket, and because of this, there is no need to carry those recognizable Big Food brands. There is no need for Whole Foods to accept slotting fees and vendor allowances because what it sells is already worth more. But this does not mean that everything Whole Foods offers is healthy or indicative of the highest degree of ethical commitment or sustainability. Whole Foods, like all other supermarkets, draws the highest profits from foods that are in an advanced state of preparation, whether this be mass-produced snack foods and drinks,

\textsuperscript{187} Nestle, 20.
\textsuperscript{188} Singer and Mason, 182.
like bottled water and soda, or in-house prepared items, like fresh fruit that is cut and packaged in the produce department, the bakery department’s cookies and pies, or ready-to-eat pizza and sushi offered in the prepared foods department. Through their consumptive choices, most shoppers indicate that they are willing to pay more for what they want than what they need, and because of this Whole Foods would fail as a business if they were to omit the unhealthy and wasteful, but convenient and tasty, products that American consumers open their wallets for. Whole Foods profits off of the popular conception of their commodity as ‘better’—an interpretation that is based on the brand the company has constructed, which serves to ensure the profitability of the company, not to offer what is truly best for human health or the planet.

With the motto “Whole Foods, Whole People, Whole Planet,” Whole Foods has set the expectation that it is executing its business with the highest level of ethics and integrity, and this means offering the best possible foods for people and the planet. Its success as a “mission driven company” has resulted in intense scrutiny of its corporate actions, with the company making headlines across the nation on a regular basis as seemingly every step and misstep is up for critique. Consumers base their opinions on what Whole Foods does on the impression that Whole Foods gives, the ideology the company presents, and the feelings their stores evoke—a totalizing brand impression that undercuts the reality that Whole Foods is just a supermarket and it is within that context that the company’s actions must be understood. Considering the history of grocery retailing and the evolution of the supermarket, there are innumerable ways the supermarket industry has improved over time, giving consumers an abundance of choice.
at reasonable prices. But the supermarket is still not held up as a paragon of virtue. Sometimes it does good things—the cashier may ask us to donate a dollar to cancer research at the checkout or ask if we have brought our reusable bags—but mostly it is seen as a place to obtain one of life’s necessities—food. Whole Foods is no different. Its leadership has simply found another means to compete.

In its mission, which carries contradictory promises for profitability and altruistic care for people and the planet, Whole Foods takes on more responsibilities than other supermarket chains and because of this there are many more ways for the company to fail to live up to their vision. By drawing discerning shoppers and asking them to think about how their food is produced, who produces it, and how their purchases impact the world around them, Whole Foods has facilitated the rise of concerned consumers who make ever-greater demands for transparency and ethics. Whole Foods has in effect planted the seeds of its own critique. But the continuation of criticism and evolving consumer demands facilitate the possibility for Whole Foods to do more, thereby ensuring the future value of its commodity. In this way, discontent about what Whole Foods does is always-already part of the brand—the evolving mission that is constantly deferred in its achievement. By combating criticism with a steadfast commitment to incremental betterment, Whole Foods preserves the integrity and the profitability of its brand while doing very little to change the way Americans consume or the detriments of the industrial food system. This problematic yet necessary ineffectiveness through a constant deferment to a ‘better tomorrow’ extends to the company’s commitment to “Environmental Stewardship”—the topic of my next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

A Shade of Green

*We Practice and Advance Environmental Stewardship*

*We see the necessity of active environmental stewardship so that the earth continues to flourish for generations to come... We are committed to greater production of organically and bio-dynamically grown foods in order to reduce pesticide use and promote soil conservation... We promote and participate in recycling programs in our communities. We are committed to re-usable packaging, reduced packaging, and water and energy conservation.*189

As Conscious Capitalists and part of the natural foods industry with roots in the natural foods movement, Whole Foods sees the environment as having a stake in its business. In *Conscious Capitalism* Mackey and Sisodia explain: “Conscious businesses think caringly, creatively, and strategically about the environment. They consider it one of the company’s key stakeholders and treat it with the same respect and attention they give to others. The environment is the only stakeholder that is silent.”190 Whole Foods, therefore, presents itself as able to speak for the interests of the environment as stakeholder, presenting the company as not only accountable for the ecological

190 Mackey and Sisodia, 139.
ramifications of its operations but also, and more importantly, as philanthropic caregiver to the earth, showing that capitalism can have a positive impact on the natural world.

Whole Foods must always weigh its mission in relation to capital and this means the company has to divert energy and resources away from meeting its goal of ecological sustainability. Ultimately, the least profitable and most costly environmental causes must fall by the wayside, especially as the company increases its scale and the oversight of materials usage and waste is delegated among team members. Contradicting the company’s ecological ethics, the need to expand in the name of profit requires that Whole Foods contribute to greater and more intense use of land and water for agricultural production, animal rearing, aqua farming, and food processing, as well as in breaking new ground or renovating old land plots for retail sites. While I have shown that environmental betterment and sustainability have been vague, future-oriented projects throughout the history of the natural foods movement, what it means to care for the planet is further complicated when capitalism enters the equation. Because capitalism demands surplus, it requires endless possibilities for growth and exploitation, and this simply does not bode with any realistic or honest definition of ‘sustainable’.

The compelling marketing and branding of modified ethical missions can help bring new customers into the ideological camp of Conscious Capitalism, as Mackey notes of Whole Foods: “The challenging art of our business is to educate customers to want what’s good for them, but at the same time to give them the freedom to still choose the products they want even if the choices aren’t good for them. If we do well, over time
customers will start to choose differently.”191 But getting consumers to actually change their shopping habits is more difficult than the presentation of compelling information. Studies indicate that only about ten percent of consumers surveyed are “well informed and driven significantly by values [whereas] the majority of purchasers comprise a more moderate perspective and aim to balance convenience, cost, and making a difference.”192 Because of this, as Mackey indicates, there is still work to be done before *all* people see the need to convert to organics, which is only one step towards the more difficult task of getting them to commit to a more sustainable and ethical lifestyle—of making them fully ‘conscious’. Holding a moderate stance on raising consciousness allows Whole Foods to continue to carry conventional produce, meats and seafood, and excessively packaged convenience foods. The choice of where to hold higher, more restrictive standards and where to grant shoppers greater freedom belongs to Whole Foods and, though malleable and contingent, the company’s decisions always reflect what is found to be profitable. Because Whole Foods dismisses the detriments of the underlying capitalist system, they affirm that, when perfected, industrially harvested and factory assembled foods will not fail us, and that, on the contrary, can help ‘heal the world’.

The environment as rendered within the Whole Foods mission is an ideology in itself—one that has been written through the history of consumer capitalism and the American understanding of the natural abundance of the land, which has facilitated the splendor offered by the supermarket. In this cultural narrative, the environment and

191 Mackey and Sisodia, 78.
planet, while vital to human existence, become tools that have the potential to better human life when properly manipulated. Because the planet is seen as ‘where we live’ and not requisite for the existence of life, being ‘kind’ to it can be interpreted as a ‘good’ act, not a necessary one. As long as we see an investment in care for the planet as something atypical for businesses and individual consumers, and as long as this investment can be considered even in part a financial one, we can view moderately better or less destructive practices that maintain the status quo as ‘the best’.

My argument is that by presenting itself as unilaterally aligned with the interests of the environment while continuing ecologically detrimental practices in the name of profit, Whole Foods embellishes and overstates its contributions to ecological betterment and, thereby, benefits from what has become known as “greenwashing.” However, I am not claiming that Whole Foods is tricking their customers or prospective customers. In presenting the positive effects of its business in order to differentiate its practices from the rest of the industry, Whole Foods is addressing the perceived concerns of consumers—concerns that have been proven ambivalent when it comes to putting them into action in the marketplace. In this chapter I will show how Whole Foods presents its vision for Environmental Stewardship along the commodity chain and how the realities of production, consumption, and waste disposal at and for Whole Foods contradict the company’s stated commitment to ecological sustainability.

A Whole Lot of Waste

It might seem odd to begin an interrogation of the commodity chain with waste. However, waste has become a common ingredient in agricultural production, as matter
that facilitates life and growth. Problematically, because waste disposal is often inexpensive, most companies have little interest in considering the amount of waste they produce or the possibility of recovering and reusing the byproducts of production.\textsuperscript{193} On the contrary, Whole Foods took an early stance on waste reduction, instituting effective recycling programs, composting food and biodegradable waste, and donating acceptable items that have been deemed not in sellable condition (i.e., close-dated foods and dented canned goods), and has evolved their waste reduction program as facilitated by new technologies and waste processing programs. By acting responsibly in regards to waste, Whole Foods lessens its carbon footprint in relation to other supermarket chains and even contributes to the communities that surround its stores by offering surplus food to those in need. In theory, by considering the full ramifications of its operations, from the production of the commodities it sells to the disposal of its waste, Whole Foods can fully address the mission and ideology of the natural foods movement by acting in the best interests of individuals, communities, and the planet. However, the natural foods movement is not concerned with profit, unlike the natural foods industry of which Whole Foods is part, which must weigh their ecological mission against their financial goals.

Even though Whole Foods presents itself as accountable for what occurs inside its walls and Whole Foods selects producers based on ‘higher standards’, it does not take full accountability for the waste those outside firms amass or consider every detail of the methods of production used by those firms, which are tangentially tied to Whole Foods’

ecological impact. This fact is important because the industrial production of food results in a tremendous amount of waste throughout the commodity chain. As I have explained, the vast majority of natural alternatives carried by Whole Foods are still the outcome of energy intensive large-scale agriculture and factory-based mass-production that must transform and/or transport large quantities of raw materials. It must be understood that even relatively simple processing, like the separation of curds from whey the making of cheese, results in unused material that must be deposited somewhere “and frequently the natural environment is serving as the recipient of all kinds of wastes.”194 The detrimental effects of the release of waste onto land and into water are well known and include the destruction of natural ecosystems and adverse effects on human and animal health. For instance, the practice of factory farming—the large scale processing of animals into food, whether meat or dairy—releases harmful pathogens into the water and the air that have negatively effected the health of humans working on these farms and living in the surrounding communities. The prevalence of pathogens has resulted in the spread antibiotic resistant bacteria to humans, making the medications use in the treatment of health complications less effective.195 Aside from finding the residues of the synthetic chemicals used in plant agriculture and the medical treatment of farm animals in food production waste, this waste is often treated with chemical agents to reduce the presence of biological contaminants before being released into the environment. In the end, food processing waste is far less organic than chemical in its composition.

194 Ibid., 24-25.
Waste, whether the result of runoff or proper disposal, largely ends up flushed down drains. Funneled away from human sight, massive amounts of sewage are rarely thought of, as the problem appears to take care of itself. However, the land use of sewage on land has been essential to keeping waste levels under control since the EPA banned the dumping of sewage into the ocean. Instead of incarnating or burying waste in landfills, treated sewage can employed as fertilizer, as according to “a 1993 Clean Water Act rule designed to protect public health and the environment, sewage sludge can be applied to land if it is sufficiently treated to limit concentrations of certain chemicals and reduce disease-causing pathogens.” Referenced with the euphemism “biosolids,” sixty percent of the nation’s sewage is converted into fertilizer that used not only in landscaping but, also, conventional agriculture—yes, the growth of the fruits and vegetables Americans are buying at the supermarket. The use of chemically treated waste is only prohibited in the production of certified organic crops. While the EPA assures citizens that biosolids are “nutrient-rich organic materials” that when “treated and processed… can be safely recycled and applied as fertilizer to sustainably improve and maintain productive soils and stimulate plant growth,” the National Research Council has advised the EPA to revise their risk assessments of biosolid and insure regulations are being followed. Other researchers are far more critical of the agency, indicating the EPA has not been stringent in their application of standards for biosolids allowing for high

levels of mutagenic and neurotoxic chemicals, heavy metals, carcinogens, and common
prescription and over-the-counter drugs.\textsuperscript{197}

Consumers have also rallied against the use of biosolids in agriculture, placing
Whole Foods under fire for its complacency in the practice by selling produce under a
“don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.\textsuperscript{198} In 2012 customer-turned-whistleblower, Mario Ciasulli,
“insisted that management address his concerns about potential contamination of non-
organic produce, price barriers to organic produce for those who are concerned, and the
difficulty of finding out what non-organic produce may have been grown in soil fertilized
with sewage sludge without labeling and accountability.”\textsuperscript{199} Ciasulli implies that the
company’s commitment to transparency and to offering its customers the highest quality
healthy foods is contradicted by its decision to ‘not know’ the origins of the produce its
stores were selling. There can be no doubt that consumer action headed by Ciasulli
inspired Whole Foods to rise to its stated mission, proving its commitment to consumer
knowledge by drawing up new agricultural standards. Unveiled in late 2013, the
company’s “Good, Better, Best” rating system for produce and flowers was developed to
“help shoppers make informed choices” in the produce department, as the company’s
earlier “5-Step Animal Welfare Rating system and Aquaculture Standards” has helped
guide shoppers’ choices in the meat and seafood departments.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. See also David Lewis, “How EPA Faked the Entire Science of Sewage Sludge Safety: A Whistleblower’s
\textsuperscript{198} Rebekah Wilce, “Under Pressure, Whole Foods Agrees to Stop Selling Produce Grown in Sewage Sludge,” \textit{Center
stop-selling-produce-grown-sewage-sludge#sthash.5gt1fbtk.dpuf.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
Access to information was however only part of Ciasulli’s demand.  The standards and rating system do nothing to address the greater institutional problems with the production of safer foods for all people and preservation of the planet when waste is indiscriminately used as a fertilizer. This system allows Whole Foods to phase out suppliers who cannot provide documentation indicating that at minimum their agriculture practices meet the ‘good’ level, which includes taking “major steps to protect human health and the environment” and that no biosolids, irradiation, or pesticides banned by Whole Foods have been used. However, this practice has no direct impact on commodity prices or increasing individuals’ access to safer foods at present. 

In the long-term, the produce and floral rating system created by Whole Foods has the potential to make conventional agriculture slightly better by further delimiting the types of chemicals that can be used by agricultural firms wishing to partner with the company. As with the company’s work to label GMO-containing products, this initiative could have positive ramifications across the industry, as these agricultural firms work to discontinue the use of biosolids all together. This could mean that over time the produce being distributed to other retailers would also be free of these potential contaminants.

Problematically, however, the elimination of biosolids as fertilizer has not been met with a countervailing initiative for the use or disposal of sewage or the chemical-laden remnants of industrial food production process. With the elimination of the use of biosolids, an ecological and societal problem appears to be solved—potentially hazardous

---

material is no longer being used leading to the contamination of the earth and its inhabitants—but without the elimination of waste, the questionably toxic material must still exist somewhere, whether festering on land, underground, or in water. Waste does not simply disappear. Responsibility is complicated as the ‘responsible’ company that acts as an Environmental Steward by demanding the end of waste usage without offering solutions for waste reduction along the commodity chain only displaces the responsibility for waste. In order to produce, the food industry must continue to produce waste. In this, Whole Foods masks its role in the creation of excess matter that necessitates the very creation (and agricultural usage) of biosolids in an attempt to balance the ecological costs of the overproduction associated with advanced capitalism.

Bio
solids are an infrequently discussed example of extremely complex and conflicted practices that continue alongside the ‘better’ practices upheld by Conscious Capitalists as prompted by their ethical consumers. What occurs in the presentation of higher environmental standards of production is the redirection of consumer attention away from the persistence of detrimental practices. Unaware or failing to acknowledge that their individual choices result in little to no systematic change, shoppers seeking brands who uphold higher standards only add to the profit margins companies who can afford to invest in and advertise their use of more eco-friendly means of production.

Recognizably Green

The governmental regulation of sustainability claims and corporate ‘green missions’ should afford consumers the ability to know which companies are actually taking tangible steps towards better ecological practices. But, as with the National
Organics Program, governmental standards and oversight, even when present, are not completely transparent to consumers and the realities of certification can be overwritten in the cultural realm where popular (mis)conceptions are often held as truths. Sometimes governmental regulation can serve as little more than comforting reassurance that corporations are held accountable to a higher authority. This essentially the circumstance surrounding the development and execution of the Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) “Green Marketing Guides,” which give general guidance that claims must be “appropriate, accurate, verified, and informative.”

Guidelines, whether set in place by governments or non-governmental organizations, often do more to support the market than actually protect consumers or the environment. In discussing “the transformation of the global agrifood system,” Lawrence Busch and Carmen Bain explain the importance of the inception of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the development of the myriad of private standards and third-party certifications such as Fair Trade, Marine Stewardship Council, and Rainforest Alliance, which have allowed retailers to compete based on quality instead of price. Busch and Bain argue that a shift in consumer interest to “issues such as food safety, food quality, and environmental sustainability” has resulted in a Post-Fordest neo-regulationist capitalist regime in which the private sector has placed itself at the apex of food regulation in order to meet the demands of a fragmented marketplace for food where, at

---

one end, we find traditional mass-consumables and, at the other, high-quality niche commodities that require additional criteria beyond the WTO minimums.\(^{204}\)

My argument here follows Busch and Bain who assert, “the private sector has jumped ahead of the public sector, substituting consumer demand for citizen demand, market accountability for government accountability.” The authors offer supporting evidence that even activists, consumer groups, and NGOs have shifted from pushing for changes in public policies to “focusing their actions and demands directly at those businesses that they perceive to be responsible, rather than the government.”\(^ {205}\) However, unlike Busch and Bain, I argue that the government even serves the interests of business, as it is business that prompts the government into action while the government appears content to retain a backseat to business in the development of the ‘highest’ standards. My reading of business at the helm of governmental regulation and policy is clear in my example of the role of Whole Foods in the creation of National Organic Standards, as detailed in the previous chapter.

The clearest way at present for consumers to identify products is through the recognizable logos used by third-party certifiers—certification brands that serve to validate the producer or retailer’s brand and the credibility of their claims to ‘greener’ commodities. In the certification process, the collaborating brands gain utility and, thereby, value in their connection. This is a mutually referential system, wherein the certification is to some extent validated by the companies that hold its standards in high

\(^{204}\) Ibid., 323.
\(^{205}\) Ibid., 341.
regard. We can see this connection in Whole Foods’ work with the USDA in the establishment of the National Organics Program, and the USDA’s recognition of the company as the nation’s first certified organic retailer. This partnership added both authenticity and value to Whole Foods as a company and Organics as a governmentally legitimated industry.

Another example of the powerful confluence of brands is the partnership between Whole Foods and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) in the sale of sustainable seafood. The trustworthiness and care embedded in the Whole Foods brand is enhanced by their decision to carry predominantly seafood sourced from the MSC’s certified fisheries. These independent fisheries have been recognized as upholding responsible practices for sustainability of the aquaculture and, in doing, so are permitted to carry the organization’s blue and white “Certified Sustainable Seafood” label. The early partnership between Whole Foods and MSC has rendered a connection between the two brands, adding value to both—when people want good seafood they look for the MSC logo, which they know they can find at Whole Foods. The profitability of this partnership has prompted other retailers to try to attract the Whole Foods-type seafood connoisseur to their stores by carrying MSC products. However, with a quick increase in demand for their seafood, intense pressure has been put on the MSC to quickly certify large and questionably sustainable fisheries. As a result, conservation groups and other watchdog organizations have begun to question the stringency of the certification standards and

In fact, some environmentalists have gone as far as to assert that the MCR’s eco-label is tantamount to ‘greenwashing,’ whereby companies overstate or misrepresent their practices in order to lead consumers to believe they are having a (greater) positive impact on the planet. Accusations of greenwashing have grown in accordance with the growth of sustainability initiatives. With Whole Foods leading the industry in the development of ecological programs, taking on more causes as their company expands, the brand and has been charged with greenwashing on multiple occasions. However, once a brand is seen as ‘green’ it becomes easier for mainstream consumers to take its claims as truth, thus opening the possibility for the company to take advantage of this trust by embellishing on its environmental contributions.

Brands play a crucial role in Busch and Bain’s account with “branding substituting for more detailed information about quality in retail stores.” Because store brand commodities are seen as a direct reflection of the company, “retailers who use their own brand are likely to be particularly conscious of production standards,” as a high-quality private label “can be a means of enhancing customer loyalty, even while increasing the share of value remaining at the retail level.” In the case of Whole Foods, the quality of its 365 store brand and Whole Trade products serves as tangible proof of the nexus between quality and higher standards. While there may be additional information about the production of the product on the label, it is the presence of the ‘Whole Foods’

---

209 Busch and Bain, 332.
brand that stands in for detailed information regarding the product’s quality. Whole Foods commitment to working with third-party certifiers is, thus, written into its brand. Unlike many other private companies that produce and self-verify their own ‘higher’ standards of production and sustainability, Whole Foods stands by the importance of impartial oversight of its suppliers and practices, adding credibility to its claims to transparency.

Certifications that promote sustainable practices have a value in that they provide an assurance of ‘better’ practices. However, these practices are in some cases only marginally better with conventional practices. Most consumers do not know exactly what standards are being upheld, the additional costs certifications involve, or how the higher prices associated with sustainable products are factored and, therefore, there is room for producers and retailers to capture additional profits at various points throughout the commodity cycle. Even in the case of Whole Foods, which sells some fair trade products at the same price as other retailers charge for traditionally-sourced commodities (for instance, bananas), it is difficult to know if the farmers are compensated ‘fairly’ for their work and the surrounding community and lands are being cared for to the highest extent or if conditions are just marginally better than that of other agricultural sites. Most often it is the idea of what the certification is that validates the consumer’s purchase—the certification, even without definite meaning, simply can make them feel as if they are doing ‘better’.

With value attached to certifiable difference, it becomes the responsibility of business to use its authority in not only ensuring the creation of high standards and the
enforcement of those standards but, also, to make it easy for consumers to recognize green products and see the value of buying those items. Sharing Mackey’s sentiment that business must educate customers on the merits of shopping ‘better’, a number of articles in business management journals over the past decade have indicated the critical responsibility of businesses in the promotion of green consumption. Many authors go on to explain the integration of greenness as a profitable venture with “sustainability as a revenue driver” able to “confer a competitive advantage.” While green and ethically sourced products may still only account for a small share of the market, the success of corporations like Whole Foods and Hain Celestial (the largest independent producer of natural and organic products) is evidence that there is a lucrative and growing market for sustainable goods.

Because the potential to profit has been obviated in these success stories, in their business strategy piece “Helping ‘Green’ Products Grow,” Shelia Bonini and Jeremy Oppenheim indicate that the lag between consumer interest in green consumption and the purchase of green products is not the result of ambivalence, but instead “stems from the failure of businesses to educate consumers about the benefits of green products and to create and market compelling ones… removing the hurdles between intentions and actions.” Like Mackey, Bonini and Oppenheim see the importance of mission over profit in bringing sustainability to a broad audience, stating that business must “first see itself first as an educator, not a sales machine… explain[ing] not only their own products

---

but also the larger issues of pollution, climate change, overfishing, and other environmental problems.”

The authors’ claim is substantiated by the increase in sales of Brita water filters after the company embarked on a marketing campaign to educate consumers about the detriments of bottle waste and the ecological benefits of using a Brita filtration system. For Brita, a key part of the marketing and labeling of their product is in the scientific evidence that proves Brita filtration systems are better for the earth. In this, we can see scientific proof as a value-adding measure, with quotable facts, figures, and statistics rendering authenticity into the brand. But, in that the point of marketing and labeling is to sell a product, it is beneficial to only use information that presents the commodity in a positive light. In this case, because we are prompted to think about the water bottles we are not using by using a Brita pitcher, we are distracted from thinking about how those products are produced or what becomes of them once we dispose of them.

**Plastic is Not Elastic**

The emphasis Whole Foods places on getting its customers to ‘do their part’ in waste reduction is best exemplified on the company’s website, which gives tips on “Doing the Green Thing,” including supporting responsible packaging and buying products with less packaging by buying in bulk, buying recycled products, and using reusable water bottles and shopping bags. Whole Foods makes the claim that by incorporating these green practices one by one, they easily become second nature. It is

---

212 Ibid., 2-3.
not that I see these eco-suggestions as anyway invaluable, the problem is in that when ‘green’ habits are enacted within the current marketplace of commodities based on convenience and disposability, there is simply too much waste being created in the first place. Whole Foods stores present shoppers with options that reinforce the naturalized consumption habits of our society with aisles lined with conveniently packaged mass-produced disposables. In effect, Whole Foods gives their customer knowledge and then gives him or her the choice of if and how to apply that knowledge, thereby, offsetting the company’s role in the maintenance of a wasteful system by placing the responsibility on the individual shopper. Whole Foods in effect absolves itself from the detriments resulting from its conformity to its customer’s need for convenience, which it does by selling natural and organic prepared and packaged goods.

Despite the fact that packaging is in excess of the actual commodity use-value as explained by Marx, it is necessary based on the social construction of needs within capitalism. Convenience aside, with the integration of industrially produced food into the American diet, packages became the way for consumers to familiarize themselves with the makers and contents of their food. By offering visual cues and text that work both affectively and cognitively, food packaging is a use-value in itself. What the physical package renders opaque, package text and aesthetics elucidate. Giving more information about its contents than can be discerned about food by the naked eye, the package ensures quality, safety, and purity, while also connecting the food within to a large cultural discussion about eating and enjoyment, diet and nutrition, and/or production and sustainability. The American cultural understanding of food is then based on the ability to
recognize packaging and branding traits that signify the foods that fit into our personal lifestyles and ideologies, which makes Whole Foods request that shoppers “avoid products with a lot of packaging” more difficult than most even realize.

This eco-friendly suggestion is further complicated by the fact that Whole Foods is a supermarket and, as such, has allocated a large percentage of its stores’ real estate to packaged foods. As I indicated in the first chapter, since its inception, a key role of the supermarket has been to serve as the venue to display an abundance of recognizable goods for consumers to make their selection. The supermarket has been essential in the advance of the food industry through the development of a proliferation of food products while, in turn, the vast array of brands and diverse product lines have allowed supermarkets to increase their profits. The two industries feed each other, with both requiring the distinction that is rendered onto packaging. The aesthetic coherence of Whole Foods as a re-imagined supermarket that draws consumers into a world of natural and environmentally friendly delights is contingent upon the existence of an industry that shares not only its mission but also its visual language—most obviously, rustic earthen hues, ample educational text, and images of natural bounty and diverse people. And yet, as ‘green’ companies work increase the profitability of their brands and offer the next new and improved easy-to-use food products, acting in the interest of the environment is always a negotiated, if not drastically compromised, ideology.

In the successes of corporate green missions, it appears that what consumers seek are not actual solutions as much as the assurance of the positive potential that lies in their consumption in order to absolve them from the social and economic exploitation of
others and degradation of the environment that occurs with mass-production. This complacency in consumer culture under the guise of ‘better’ shopping is the enactment of docile, inactive consumer-citizenship. The fact that there are no demands for evidence of the results of Environmental Stewardship by Whole Foods indicates that its customer’s feeling that ‘good’ is being done takes precedence over what is actually done. The signification of doing ‘better’ is offered by the appearance of minor shifts towards greater environmental sustainability that serve to preserve the underlying unsustainability resulting from the growth of capitalism. Realizing the potential value of sustainability initiatives means giving a clear visual, commodifying the ideology by encasing the product in a package that represents more than is realized in its purchase. The ability to call to specific values through images and typeface is dependent on the formation and circulation of a visual code that employs affect to convey the ‘authenticity’ of natural foods and environmentally conscious companies—agricultural bounty, agrarian purity, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and the earth through the consumption of natural foods. By roughing the edges—overlaying images of natural landscapes and folksy people with rustic logos—and giving detailed, poetic narratives of company origins and missions on their packaging natural foods companies present themselves in contrast to the packaging of industrial food while mimicking that packaging at the same time.
Figure 1: Comparison of the back panels of boxes of Annie’s Homegrown Bunny Grahams and Honey Maid’s Teddy Grahams

We can see this difference exemplified in the back of the box design of two brands of honey graham crackers one carried by Whole Foods, Annie’s Homegrown Bunny Grahams, and one excluded from the company’s inventory (though containing none of their company’s unacceptable ingredients), Honey Maid’s Teddy Grahams (Figure 1). While both products call to consumer interest in the healthfulness of the product, Annie’s employs an earth-tone color palette, discusses the connection between humans and animals, and even briefly states the company’s mission and commitment to “simplicity, care, and goodness”—all relics of the counterculture that have become profitable in the ethical marketplace. Unlike Teddy Grahams, which are simply presented as “wholesome fuel,” with some key nutrition facts, accompanied by an image of a cartoon bear to engage the child consumer, Annie’s provides a more encompassing
narrative in ‘her’ signed letter, which works to engage shoppers by justifying their purchase of the natural and sustainable snack as not only being ‘better’ product but also one that was created by ‘real people’ who are interested in the consumer’s well-being.

As evidenced by its packaging, Annie’s brand—what it stands for and what it purports to do—is in line with the mission of Whole Foods, making them a vendor that Whole Foods wishes to conduct business with. This argument can be extended to the vast majority of brands carried by Whole Foods. It is the signification of difference that occurs at the level of branding that justifies the presence of the product at Whole Foods, with its presence within those stores’ walls serving as further testimony to the product as worthy of purchase. This collaborative ‘green’ branding presents environmental consciousness as a means to an end, as if awareness that the environment needs to be cared for is care in itself. Because of this the consumer is not bothered to interrogate the fact that the processed food products sold at Whole Foods are composed of the same amount of packaging as their conventional counterparts.

This omission is important for the continuation of Whole Foods’ financial success and the success of the natural foods industry overall. Not only do single-serving processed foods have the highest profit margins in the food industry, the underlying notion that we should produce less garbage by buying less undercuts the capital’s demand for constant growth. The seemingly endless product diversity that can occur in the area of convenience foods is perhaps the sole avenue for food product innovation, which facilitates companies’ abilities to capture new markets. Whole Foods is thereby caught in a contradictory position, refraining from the sale of many national brands that contain
ingredients that they have deemed unacceptable, while lining their shelves with processed natural and organic convenience foods and snacks (boxes containing pouches and bags, single-serving rations, food pouches for toddlers, and even in-house cut and packaged produce), as well as other products that end up in landfills such as plastic bottles from beverages, plastic wraps and garbage bags, paper towels and napkins, and disposable baby diapers—many of which are even produced under the Whole Foods 365 brand name.\textsuperscript{213}

While the packaging of these products and the composition of the packaging products Whole Foods sells may be ‘better’ than that of traditional Big Food corporations in that they are made from less materials, from recycled materials, and/or are recyclable—a fact that is proudly proclaimed on packages—this does not change the fact that packaging, especially in numerous layers, is wasteful and, further, that this waste is made possible through industrialized production methods that Whole Foods ideologically challenges but in actuality supports. Further, food manufacturers’ innovations in incorporating methods of ‘source reduction’, minimizing the consumption of non-renewable materials, mainly through the use of thinner packaging, fewer layers of packaging, and utilizing bio-based materials, serves to mask the large ecological cost: that ninety-five percent of the environmental impact of packaging takes place in the production of packing material not its disposal, with some of the lightest weight packaging materials use the most energy to produce.

\textsuperscript{213} As per the statement on Whole Foods 365 Brand baby diapers: “Keep baby dry and comfortable when you’re on the go. Our convenient disposable diapers are never chlorine bleached, and they don’t contain latex or artificial fragrance” (accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/products/365-everyday-value%C2%AE-diapers-size-4). Note however, no diapers are made from recycled materials or recyclable.
We can see this play out with the proliferation of lightweight plastic, which saves money and materials and, by reducing packaging weight, reduces the amount of fuel required in the transport of the finished products, while the production of this material not only requires fuel but, also, releases toxic gases into the atmosphere. The packaging of liquid products is especially of consideration, as according to Aaron Brody in his contribution on packaging to the collection *Sustainability in the Food Industry*, packaging of liquid products requires up to ten times more energy and proportionally greater environmental degradation than the average solid food, mainly because of the use of non-renewable resources like plastic in containing them for retail.

The amount of waste, thus, increases exponentially with the packaging of goods into smaller vessels, as with single-serving containers, making the sale of these products in itself a practice that hinders the state of the environment. Whereas one could possibly argue for the production of the single-serving cup of yogurt because, though more ecologically costly, a consumer may only want or will use eight ounces and will not pay more for a greater amount of product (regardless of it being sold at a lower unit price and with a lower carbon footprint when mapped by volume), the argument for the single-serving bottle of water, whether spring or purified, is less compelling. Bottled water is the brainchild of an industry gone flat (excuse the pun)—created by sparkling mineral water companies that were looking to boost their sales beyond this niche market. By convincing the public that bottled water is safer and even better for their health, bottled water sales

---

have steadily increased since the introduction of bottled water on to the market in 1976 with the support of supermarkets that are willing to dedicate whole aisles to this highly profitable, unnecessary commodity.\textsuperscript{215}

Only a few small, independent natural foods stores have taken a stand against the bottled water industry, meaning that all other stores, regardless of their stance on sustainability, are promoting the exemplar of unsustainable products. Bottled water is emblematic of the pervasiveness of the commodification of food as well as the financial and ecological costs people are willing to pay in order to feel assured of purity and quality. Though nothing short of a manufactured necessity, the perceived need for bottled water is not rendered any less real, which is why in “Doing the Green Thing” Whole Foods first makes the recommendation to recycle water bottles before suggesting that consumers use refillable bottles, and why Whole Foods continues to sell its own 365 brand bottled water. Even on the part of Whole Foods, little to no attention is paid to findings that show that water bottles, aside from being made from plastic that is mildly toxic to humans, frequently do make it through the recycling process. The US only has a twenty-three percent recycling rate for plastics and that process is in itself detrimental, resulting in the release of toxic gas into the environment.\textsuperscript{216} Instead, the fact plastic \textit{can}


\textsuperscript{216} “Americans used about 50 billion plastic water bottles last year. However, the U.S.’s recycling rate for plastic is only 23 percent, which means 38 billion water bottles – more than $1 billion worth of plastic – are wasted each year.” Refers to #1 PET plastic specifically. See “Bottled Water Facts,” Ban the Bottle, accessed September 11, 2015, http://www.banthebottle.net/bottled-water-facts/. “In 2005, that meant approximately 2 million tons of water bottles ended up in U.S. landfills, according to the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC)... Plastic bottles take centuries to decompose and if they are incinerated, toxic byproducts, such as chlorine gas and ash containing heavy
be recycled is promoted and this fact leads consumers to believe that plastic packaging is without ecological fault if taken care of properly. This obscurification leaves the production and reproduction of plastics uninterrogated by the majority of consumers.

Whereas plastic has its own complex pros and cons, the use of multilayer, mixed-material pouches and aseptic cartons is even more problematic. Aseptic cartons, most commonly associated with the classic ‘juice box,’ have been around for decades and have since become a preferred method for containing liquid products, such as non-dairy and stabilized milks, soups, sauces and broths, and, of course, juices. In the last few years, aseptic packaging has been added to many more recycling programs, though there are high costs associated with the intensive process of separating the material components, which include plastics, metal foiling, and paperboard.217 Another form of mixed-material packaging that has gained popularity since its arrival on supermarket shelves in 2010 is the flexible single-serving pouch, which allows for an easy snack that toddlers can feed to themselves while parents are able to control portions and mess. This extremely light and malleable material allows for more product to be shipped with less extraneous costs, but is completely impractical to recycle and not biodegradable. Made from a fusion of polyester, aluminum foil, and polyethylene—a process that in itself releases toxic gases into the environment—recycling would mean the extraction of these materials from their compound product, which, if possible, would be highly energy-intensive, inefficient, and result in the release of more toxins into the environment. Additionally, made for

---

217 Brody, 103.
operation by young children with minimal dexterity, pouches are topped with a chunky plastic re-sealable cap—a feature that, while recyclable, only adds to the overall wastefulness of such products and puts the task of conservation in the hands of the consumer, who must remember to recycle the cap before disposing of the rest of the package.²¹⁸

While Whole Foods sells pouch products, like Plum Organics baby and toddler foods, the company offers no solutions for how to dispose of the pouch, instead focusing on the fact that most (other) things, like the cap, can be recycled or repurposed in someway. This focus implies to the customer that sometimes things have to be thrown away, but this is ok as long as we all do our part in recycling when possible. Here again Whole Foods focuses on the positive effects of its Green Mission and what its customers can do to be ‘greener’ without sacrificing convenience or the things they love, in this case simply by recycling—a task that is really no harder than placing used materials in the right bin. The importance placed on recycling is evident by the space allocated to recycling stations in the company’s stores. Found alongside the store’s compost bin, categorically labeled recycle bins enlist customers in ‘doing their part’ by sorting out their disposables, knowing that in doing so they are helping the planet and that those materials can be used to make new products. This action renders the commodity chain a perfect circle in which the discarded package gains new life and can be transformed again and again.

This vision of a holistic commodity cycle is explicitly represented in the branded recycling initiative “Gimme 5,” a partnership between Whole Foods and Preserve, a company that produces house wares and personal care items from recycled #5 polypropylene plastics. Preserve uses only #5 plastic because, as noted on their website, “is a benign plastic and does not leach any chemicals” and is durable and safe for human use when left untreated by chemicals such as BPA.\(^{219}\) Unfortunately, however this type of plastic is excluded from many communities’ recycling programs. Looking for a way to keep reusable plastic from ending up in landfills, Gimme 5 came about when, serendipitously, both a Whole Foods Green Team Leader in Northern Virginia and representatives from Preserve thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool if more people could recycle their #5 plastic? They could just fill up their reusable shopping bags and drop off their #5s every time they go shopping at Whole Foods Market.”\(^{220}\) In Gimme 5, Whole Foods houses separate bins for #5 plastics, which are then sent to Preserve to use in the making of new products, some of which are then sold in Whole Foods stores, completing the cycle.\(^{221}\) The founding role of Whole Foods in the Gimme 5 program adds legitimacy to its promise to act as environmental stewards, serving as the catalyst for the recycling of the plastics produced by fellow conscious companies. Whole Foods uses its position as supermarket—the liaison between producers and consumers—to close the commodity cycle, returning the remaining material from the consumer to the producer.


\(^{221}\) In addition, for those who do not live near a Whole Foods store, Preserve also accepts #5 plastics for recycle by mail, even selling their toothbrushes in packaging that, if saved, can be used to send the worn brush back to Preserve, where the plastic can be cleaned and repurposed into new toothbrush handles and other products. See “Recycle,” Preserve, https://www.preserveproducts.com/recycle.
Preserve accepts any #5 plastics for recycle but its partnerships with specific brands highlights the recyclability of those products and thus the sustainability of the companies that produce them. Preserve’s current partners—Burt’s Bees, Stonyfield, Plum Organics, and Brita—all use a substantial amount of #5 plastic in the production of their products and packaging and present the Gimme 5 program as a means to “make it easier to drop off and recycle [#5 plastics], and spread the word so more people participate.”222 All of the partner brands have demonstrated their commit to sustainability while relying on non-renewable materials that are essential to the usability of their products—Burt’s Bees uses plastic applicators for their cosmetics, Stonyfield uses plastic cups for their yogurt, Plum Organics uses plastic caps for their pouches, and Brita filters and pitchers are made completely of plastic (less the organic carbon material used for the actual filtration); even Preserve employs new plastic in their toothbrush bristles. The use of virgin plastics by these companies is justified financially and socially. Because new materials remain relatively abundant and inexpensive, there are food safety concerns associated with the sterility of recycled plastics, and the structure integrity of plastic degrades over progressive uses, Preserve’s partner companies still employ or integrate virgin plastic into their products and packaging.223 In effect, Gimme 5 mitigates the continued use of #5 plastics by the partner companies, increasing their recyclability and turning the waste plastic into new consumer goods that have a lower-carbon footprint than those made of virgin plastic. However, Gimme 5 as sustainability initiative defers a

223 See Brody, 110.
large portion of the responsibility on the consumer, who must not only recycle their plastics but, also, prove the validity of such efforts by purchasing products made from recycled materials.

Packaging poses a unique problem for Whole Foods, as emphasized in its 2012 *Green Mission Report*, which states:

Packaging is an area where we know we have quite a bit of work ahead of us and where we’re keeping a close eye on the packaging marketplace for truly better solutions. The up side is that many of our vendors are willing to partner with us to come up with better solutions. A few of our vendors are very serious about taking responsibility for the entire life cycle of the packaging they use for their products.\(^{224}\)

The importance of Whole Foods imploring vendors to hold themselves accountable for the full composition of their products through their entire lifecycle cannot be understated. The ability to move the responsibility for waste upon producers enhances the image of Whole Foods as Environmental Stewards for the industry; it imposes rules and regulations its vendors and, in doing, so relieves itself of some of the pressure to create more sustainable shopping. Though presented as a solution to the problem of packaging waste, less packaging and packaging recyclability reduce a complex social problem to a simple consumer-based answer—buy better and recycle more—without consideration of the importance of the package and thereby its waste in the first place.\(^{225}\)

\(^{224}\) Ibid.

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 113. Most bottles don’t even find their way into recycling bins and even the recycling process has detrimental effects: Plastic bottles take centuries to decompose and if they are incinerated, toxic byproducts, such as chlorine gas
The Cost of Freshness

And yet, even without consideration of the mass-produced packaged products in its stores’ inventory, the company’s focus on the selling of fresh whole foods, like produce, bulk goods, fresh bread, and meats does not completely absolve Whole Foods of its role in the production of unnecessary waste. Supermarkets all produce a substantial amount of waste in setting the stage for consumption and, here, Whole Foods, with their focus on perishable foods and garden utopia aesthetic, is certainly no exception. For most Americans, visual perfection is the key signifier of freshness, flavor, and safety of unprocessed foods and, because of this, supermarkets are unable to sell a significant amount of less-than-perfect edible food. A 2014 report by National Public Radio describes this freshness/waste dilemma, stating:

With consumers demanding large displays of unblemished, fresh produce, many retailers end up tossing a mountain of perfectly edible food. Despite efforts to cut down on all that waste, in the U.S., the consumer end of the food chain still accounts for the largest share. It comes down to shoppers demanding stocked shelves, buying too much and generally treating food as a renewable resource. But waste is a huge impediment to both sustainability and human health. Not only does most wasted food end up in landfills mixed with inorganic packaging and processing material, slowing the rate of decomposition, the practice of over-producing food and

and ash containing heavy metals, are released into the atmosphere” and of those that do the U.S.’s recycling rate for plastic is only 23 percent, meaning only a very small fraction of water bottles ever make it through the process despite their recyclability. See Didier and Ban the Bottle.

‘staging’ food abundantly to encourage consumer spending means that more food is being produced than consumed (actually consumed, as in eaten). This over-production is an even greater waste of resources considering that much of this unsold food ends up being discarded instead of being distributed to those who are hungry. The waste of food in its distribution through capitalism is therefore not ecologically, socially, or financially sustainable and, yet, because capitalism is compelled to over-production people must be compelled to constantly need more, increasing both their spending and their waste. Things cannot simply be given away simply because there is too much.

As indicated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*: “the epidemic of over-production” is a result of “too much civilization, too much subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce.” Marx and Engels assert that this crisis is managed in the “destruction of a mass of productive forces” as well as through “the conquest of new markets and the more thorough exploitation of old ones.”

The creation and appropriation of new markets has always been of interest to the consumer industries, while the circumstances of advanced capitalism have enabled the relative stability of productive forces. This consistency has ensured hegemony to the market-economy through the continued availability of wages and, at the same time, has resulted in the saturation of the market of consumer goods. The destruction of the products of industry through the creation of waste has taken the primary role in mediating the effects of over-production. This means that labor is producing a glut of products for the food industry

that will ultimately serve no consumer but instead function to stabilize price and ensure
the continuation of need and desire by serving as the physical evidence of abundance
available through consumption. Thus, the argument can be made that the financial
sustainability of the food industry is contingent upon the production of waste and,
thereby, the industry necessitates ecological degradation. Because of this, Whole Foods
cannot eliminate waste altogether; it must instead act as Environmental Stewards by
managing it ‘better’. To do so, the company must enlist the faith and help of its
customers, ensuring that its environmental initiatives appear to adequately offset the
waste produced in the name of the company’s financial sustainability.

For customers, the commitment that Whole Foods makes to the reduction of
packaging is most evidenced in its stores’ promotion of bulk foods. However, as I have
shown, shoppers are most likely to consider their immediate needs, disregarding or
minimizing the larger, long-term impact of their choices, consumers will still buy for
convenience, even if they try to do it less. In my observations at both Whole Foods and
other smaller natural foods stores in the DC metro region, there are very few people who
buy only bulk items, let alone buy bulk and fresh items exclusively. Additionally, even
those who focus their shopping on bulk items pack them in the disposable produce and
bulk plastic bags and containers offered by the store instead of bringing reusable produce
bags and jars from home. Simply put, it would not be financially wise for Whole Foods to
discontinue carrying packaged products or offering disposable packaging materials for to
its customers.\textsuperscript{228} And yet, even the choice to offer thin plastic bags and plastic containers in their bulk section is a cost-effective and customer-friendly measure. Currently, there are companies that produce biodegradable bags and containers made from corn fiber that Whole Foods could choose to use instead of plastics. Even the choice to use recycled paper bags and glass jars would be far more environmentally friendly than plastics.

However, as I noted earlier, while still abundant and cheap, plastic is the preferred choice for the packaging of foods because of its transparency and durability and, therefore, the of the majority of companies, regardless of their stance on its environmental impact, will offer it to their shoppers.

Furthermore, while bulk is a cost effective option for consumers, the packaging food is a value-adding measure that allows retailers to increase their profit margins by providing convenience. As businesses it would be unwise for supermarkets to eliminate all foods produced for easy transport or in an advanced state of preparation, whether this be industrially-processed and packaged food or food prepared in-store, like packages of fresh cut fruit and deli items. The processing of food is a use-value for the consumer as it saves time in food preparation, but the profit margin is by far in excess of the added cost of production. The fact that prepared food is worth exponentially more than the ingredients that compose it should be considered the prevailing reason why many supermarkets, including Whole Foods, now offer meal amenities like catering, heat-and-

\textsuperscript{228} As of 2008, Whole Foods only offers paper shopping bags, while encouraging the use of reusable shopping bags, which they also sell for a nominal cost (the most basic model being 99 cents as of July 2015). For details on the decision of Whole Foods to eliminate plastic shopping bags see Andrew Martin, “Whole Foods Chain to Stop Use of Plastic Bags,” \textit{The New York Times}, January 23, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/23/business/23bags.html?_r=0.
eat meals, ‘authentic’ sushi bars, and sandwich stations. The profitability and desirability of prepared foods is further evidenced by a figure from Whole Foods Market’s 2014 Annual Report, which indicates that over nineteen percent of the total sales of the company’s stores came from prepared foods and bakery items.\textsuperscript{229}

The promotion of bulk foods in Whole Foods stores is thus not assertive and, upon scrutiny, reveals an ambivalent stance in the desire for customers to actually shift away from packaged goods. Unlike most supermarkets that place the bulk department in the back of the store where it is likely to receive little shopper or staff attention, the prominent placement of the bulk section at Whole Foods, usually near the front of the store to one side of the produce department, creates greater foot traffic past well-stocked bins and attractive signage. However, while Whole Foods presents an appealing, abundant display and clear information on the benefits of buying bulk—such as sparing the excess waste associated with pre-packaged goods and the savings associated with only buying what you ‘need’—bulk commodities are always placed near their pre-packaged counterparts, leaving the consumer to debate the pros and cons of each, including the fact that the unit price of the bulk commodities is often the same as or very close to those items packaged in-store or by Whole Foods. Further, the shopper is faced with another dilemma based on the cultural perceptions of food safety and quality. Open food containers that are accessible to all are a source of concern for many because of the stock American society has placed in food packaging for sanitation, freshness, and certainty of contents. This concern is to some extent legitimated by my own observations

\textsuperscript{229} WFM, 2014 Annual Report, 3.
of many people from all walks of life snacking out of bulk bins, retrieving chunks of
dried mangos and handfuls of cashews with disregard to the scoops and tongs provided,
let alone the fact that these items are not intended as free samples.

But the fear of unsanitary or un-fresh food does not deter customers from
purchasing from the prepared food departments at Whole Foods, including the stores’
popular salad and hot foods bars, which, priced around nine dollars per pound, are not
cheap even relative to the lunch specials offered by fast-casual restaurants. But bulk and
prepared foods are different in value because of what they require of their consumer.
Outside of perhaps trail mix and granola, bulk foods necessitate the consumer packing the
product for himself in the store and then preparing it once he returns home, whereas
prepared foods offer instant gratification, with most stores even offering seating for
shoppers to enjoy their salads and hot food items before even getting in their car. We can
see the profits created by these two departments reflected in the operational choices
across the supermarket industry with a greater number of stores offering a variety of
prepared foods stations along with nearby café seating, but little initiative has been taken
in using bulk foods as a means to raise store sales. Notably, regardless of the primary
consumer demographic being served, it is more common to see a salad bar or a case of
prepared foods than a bulk foods section in a small supermarket, which is a clear
indicator of what customers value and what creates value for a store.

And while the success of prepared foods in Whole Foods stores does not in itself
undercut the company’s Green Mission, the way these items are served leads to the
production of excess that does. Surprisingly for a company concerned with waste, most
Whole Foods stores opt to offer customers recyclable food containers and utensils (which regardless of their recyclability have a tendency to end up in the trash) instead of presenting reusable dishes and flatware as an option for those customers who wish to eat in.\textsuperscript{230} Stores also present an abundant offering of pre-packaged cut fruit and veggies, salads, and sandwiches for customers who would rather just grab something out of the cooler (similar to the placement of pre-packaged goods near the bulk section) than serving themselves off of the buffet.

Just the offering of unpackaged prepared foods in the open-air format, specifically the buffet, is wasteful. Once prepared and placed in heating or cooling trays or under heat lamps, food has a very short life. Whole Foods however presents prepared foods as a means to reduce its disposal of useable food. In a presentation on the company’s composting program, Matthew Toavs, a Green Mission Specialist for Whole Foods, explains the process by which the company reduces the amount of food waste it produces through its composting system (Figure 2), noting that because of its focus on perishables, Whole Foods has “a slightly higher percentage of compostables” than other supermarkets.\textsuperscript{231} Composting, the final step in the process, is an excellent ecological measure in that it not only decreases the amount of waste being sent to landfills, but also

\textsuperscript{230}Of the Whole Foods stores I have visited in various states, the only one in which I have seen reusable dishes was in Salt Lake City, UT. And while Whole Foods presents segregated bins for recycling, compost, and trash, I have noticed that the contents often end up co-mingled by users (image available). I have not seen reusable dishes at any other supermarkets’ hot bars and despite a lack of findings on their prevalence, I am not quick to assume that there are no other stores that offer reusable dishes. While many supermarkets have come to model their gourmet salad bars and Mediterranean olive bars off of Whole Foods, those stores seem to also have less concern for the ecological impact of the containers they offer alongside them, for example Wegmans offers Styrofoam takeout containers.

\textsuperscript{231}Matthew Toavs, “Collaborative Composting: Creating Composting Systems for Whole Foods Market” (presentation at the USCC 20\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conference and Trade Show, Austin, TX, January 17-20, 2012). PDF of presentation available online at: http://compostingcouncil.org/admin/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Toavs.pdf. Emphasis added. He states 65% of the waste produced by Whole Foods is compostable whereas the industry average is 50% or less.
because it contributes to soil vitality by turning food scraps and other plant-based products into nutrient-rich fertilizer. In some regions Whole Foods has compost compactors, enabling stores to have much smaller trash dumpsters. In these cases, compost is then donated to local community and school gardens and sold in the floral departments at Whole Foods stores. In other locations, stores send their compostables to area facilities or local farms.

![Training: Cull > Community > Compost](image)

*Figure 2: “Collaborative Composting” chart presented by Matthew Toavs of Whole Foods Market at the US Composting Council Annual Conference in 2012.*

For Whole Foods, another important step in the elimination of waste is the culling process that takes place prior to composting, ensuring that as much edible food as possible is able to reach people. In this process, produce that is aesthetically imperfect or past its prime is offered to the prepared foods, meat, deli, and bakery departments to be
used as ingredients and garnish. Afterward, the remaining product is offered to local food banks and anything that is not claimed goes to compost.232 The use of edible but unsellable food in the prepared foods is a move that increases the company’s ecological sustainability while contributing to its financial sustainability. According to Toavs, ability of Whole Foods to reduce waste begins with knowing how much produce to order in the first place. But, as he notes, over-ordering still occurs, which implicitly ensures a steady flow of less than premium but good food for use in its prepared foods departments.

Scott Crawford, prepared foods coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic region of Whole Foods, says that high volume stores can salvage between 100 and 200 pounds of produce per day by incorporating those ingredients into food for their hot bars.233 Further, by heating foods in small batches and gauging demand, stores can minimize the amount of food waste resulting from operation of the prepared foods departments. However, despite best efforts in waste reduction, there is always still some food leftover at the end of the night—food that is thrown out. As Washington Post reporter Tim Carmen explains in his article “Hot-bar leftovers: To trash or not to trash?”: “Part of the issue for the chain is food safety. If Whole Foods donated leftovers to hunger groups and the like, the company couldn’t be certain the food would be handled properly. There are too many opportunities for food to enter a dangerous temperature zone before being served.”234 In this same article a representative from Wegmans, another chain with a highly regarded hot bar at

232 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
the same per pound price-point, indicates that quality assurance is the reason their stores do not donate food leftover from their hot bar—they don’t want reheated food to reflect poorly on the company and prefer to take a financial loss than risk creating a poor perception of their brand. Whole Foods is posed against Wegmans here. Instead of weighing the cost of over-production against the benefit of preserving their brand image, Whole Foods’ attempt to avoid over-production of prepared foods is in part a reflection of its commitment to the environment through waste reduction, as Crawford states:

“Being wasteful wouldn’t line up with that.”235

In its attempts to minimize waste Whole Foods must remain mindful of guidelines regarding how long food can be kept in open-air before it must be deemed unsafe. Nearly all states have regulations in place regarding how long a food can be kept and at what temperature in order to ensure consumer safety. For instance, to elaborate on the example given in The Washington Post, in Washington, DC, food must be held either at 41 degrees or lower (salad bar) or at 140 degrees or above (hot bar). Because of the temperature fluctuations that occur in the open-air environment, staff must monitor the temperatures of the food, pulling trays that have surpassed their life span.236 This means that there may be more waste at some times or during some days as it is nearly impossible to gauge the supply and demand of specific items on a buffet of constantly changing options with complete accuracy. Crawford does not account for how much food the prepared foods department pulls throughout the course of the day in compliance with

235 Quoted in Carmen.
local regulations, but the combined totals of a expansive prepared foods department like that of Whole Foods on P Street—a location that Crawford mentions in specific—is surely significant. Crawford uses the example of one dish, saying that if the staff throws out a pound at the end of the day it is not an incredible loss. However, considering the number of items on the hot bar and the fact that trays must be pulled throughout the day for temperature and quality control, the amount of waste is increased exponentially. Once food drops below or exceeds either end of the temperature range, it must be consumed within a couple hours according to DC’s health code. Even if hot bar leftovers were properly refrigerated and held for use by soup kitchens or shelters, the assurance of food safety is diminished in the change of hands and transportation of pre-cooked food.237

Because of the amount of unsalable and unusable waste resulting from buffets—food that could have been more democratically allocated if shoppers did not expect abundance and variety from those convenient warming trays from which they can serve themselves—Whole Foods is not just acting in ecologically unsustainable ways, it is acting in socially irresponsible ways to meet the demands of its customers. With prepared foods, convenience and profitability outweigh the social and ecological cost, whereas, with bulk foods, the potential ecological benefits are not realized because these products lack in convenience for the individual shopper. Because of this, the best Whole Foods can do as a business is attempt to balance its interests, promoting the company’s efforts at sustainability as a mediation in the reproduction of excess that is necessitated in meeting the perceived needs of its shoppers.

237 Carmen.
Greenwashing or Greenwishing?

The reality behind the promotion of eco-friendly consumption is that the majority of consumers are only moderately or slightly interested in the ecological impact of their purchases.\textsuperscript{238} A 2007 McKinsey survey that found though eighty-seven percent of consumers “worry about the environmental and social impact of the products they buy” less than thirty-three percent of those individuals said “they are ready to buy green products or that they already do so.” These findings suggest that consumer will not seek out information on what products are most sustainable and what certifications are most credible and, moreover, that consumers are generally more ambivalent about green shopping in practice than in theory.\textsuperscript{239} With a fair-weather interest in the ecological ramifications of their shopping, most consumers place their trust in companies’ claims regarding the ‘greenness’ of their practices despite evidence indicating the common nature ‘greenwashing’, which, as I explained earlier, is the overstatement or misrepresentation of sustainability efforts on a company’s behalf. Though greenwashing can take place because of a lack of clear information about specifics of corporate practices, which may not indicate the direct intention of misleading consumers, the problem is that, in most cases, greenwashing does occur because most consumers do not work to verify corporate claims and because there are few legal standards for making claims about ecological sustainability.

\textsuperscript{238} Sahota, et al., 161.
\textsuperscript{239} Bonini and Oppenhiem, 1.
Obviously, with the more grandiose a corporation’s sustainability claims, the more likely it is that these claims will look like an embellishment of actual efforts, especially in the case of large-scale businesses, as these firms are culturally perceived as uncaring, seeking profit by any means. It is thus no surprise that Whole Foods has been regularly accused of greenwashing, whereas smaller scale natural foods retailers can make the same promises and more and still be accepted as earnest. But this acceptance is based in real, notable differences in the execution of ‘green’ initiative by large firms and small businesses. Take for example MOM’s Organic Market, a chain of thirteen natural and organic foods grocery stores in the mid-Atlantic region. MOM’s proclaimed purpose is “To Promote and Restore the Environment,” and the family that owns the company sees themselves as environmentalists, placing dissemination of ecological knowledge at the center of their work. MOM’s shares many of the interests of Whole Foods, but it more thoroughly executes measures that show its commitment to its mission, for instance, offering only bio-sourced and recycled paper packaging for bulk and in-store packaged items, refusing to sell bottled water, and selling exclusively organic produce.\textsuperscript{240} With more direct oversight and a commitment to the environment \textit{over} and not ancillary to profits, MOM’s is more similar to a co-op than it is to Whole Foods and, yet, the company still profits because its customers value and are willing to pay for the extra measures the company takes in ensuring its mission is executed to the fullest extent. Yet, in this, shoppers seem willing to overlook the fact that MOM’s, like Whole Foods, sells

mass-produced over-packaged natural and organic convenience foods (as long as they meet its ingredient standards, which are even more stringent than that of Whole Foods).

Accusations that Whole Foods has engaged in greenwashing have mainly been waged by the core group of ethical consumers—the type of shoppers who would prefer to make their purchases at a store like MOM’s, even if it costs a bit more than Whole Foods. Pointing out practices that simply contradict the very essence of environmental sustainability, such as the aforementioned sale of bottled water, Whole Foods appears to contradict its own purpose, winnowing away its own corporate integrity. The issue is not that Whole Foods does nothing positive for the environment in comparison to base-level capitalist practices; it is that its actions are not as beneficial as we are led to believe in the company’s enthusiastic promotion of its Environmental Stewardship. Whole Foods’ practices, which is a balance between ecological exploitation and reparation allows its business to sustain itself by allowing consumers to feel that by consuming at Whole Foods they are consuming ‘better’ but, importantly, this ‘better’ is not the best a company could do.

The success of Whole Foods as a green business lies in its authenticity and transparency, as Gregory Unruh and Richard Ettenson note in the *Harvard Business Journal* these are the “important elements in the long-term success of any green strategy.”241 But for critics of the chain the idea that Whole Foods is authentic and transparent is itself a problem. Because Whole Foods renders its own vision of care and greenness and, thereafter, acts as enforcer of the standards it has created, it is able to

241 Ibid.
paint a green-tinted image of its practices—an image that appeases most middle of the road consumers because of the company’s image as a respected premium retailer. Because of the prevalence of Whole Foods stores across the nation, the company is what many shoppers have come to associate with the positive potential of greenness, instead of places like MOM’s—small chains and independent retailers that appear as remnants of the counterculture or niche grocers that have a more limited variety and higher prices.

Whole Foods’ prominence in the supermarket industry shows American consumers that a ‘better’ business can succeed, which also serves as evidence that Americans do care about the planet and the effects of their consumption. The underlying issue is that Whole Foods cannot confront that its claims to sustainability are a bandage on larger industry-wide problems that resonate throughout the global commodity chain. These claims, while perhaps true in that they are illustrative of better-than-standard practices, detract attention from the continuation of detrimental aspects of the status quo—excessively packaged commodities, the production of animal products, the quest for greater value—leaving the consumer to believe that industry will solve the problems it has produced and that all he has to do is look for the ‘right’ labels and purchase from the ‘right’ companies. However, it is generally recognized that there is a cost to ‘better’ practices, though not all consumers are unwilling to shell out the cash to show their alignment with these practices. Because of this, companies that cater to budget conscious consumers believe that a necessary step in asserting their ecological commitments is decreasing the premium markup associated with green products in order to meet the demands of consumers who consider ethics in relation to cost.
In contrast, the correlation between ecological sustainability and lower price does not necessarily bode well for knowledgeable consumers. A field experiment conducted by Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences in large retail store in New York City found that sales of products carrying certification labels increased when those products were sold at a higher price point. This study indicates that consumers make a positive correlation between the label explaining specific details of ‘better’ practices and the additional cost associated with the execution of those practices. In this case, there was a “substantial positive response to brands among consumers in terms of actual sales at higher price points.” This type of positive association of brand and ethical practices is an enduring perception that renders some brands more valuable than others based on their contribution to society as evidenced by their higher prices. Unlike companies that use green marketing as part of a business agenda to address evolving consumer concerns, companies like Whole Foods are generally able to fetch higher prices for their goods because those brands indicate greater value to the consumer by showing the positive impact of their dollars on the commodity chain.

Yet, an important cultural fact illustrated by the Harvard study, which goes unspoken by its authors, is that the ability to spend more for what is perceived to be a more ethical product is based not only on the consumer’s knowledge of certifications and corporate commitments but, also and often more crucially, that individual’s financial standing. The choice to buy green (or Fair Trade, or organic, or Marine Stewardship

242 See Bonini and Oppenheim’s claim vs. evidence provided in Michael J. Hiscox and Nicholas F. B. Smith, “Is There Consumer Demand for Fair Labor Standards?: Evidence From a Field Experiment” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 2011).
243 Hiscox and Smith, 2-3.
Certified) is a *constrained choice* based on socio-economic status. Because sustainability is something that has been seen as worth an investment, it can therefore become a symbol of socio-economic status, reflecting ethical values as the property of higher socio-economic classes—those who have the discretionary income, time, and knowledge to make ‘better’ choices. And yet, with environmental awareness reflected in commodities produced, sold, and exchanged in the global marketplace of mass-produced consumables, these commodities never escape the irrationalities of that system. In the end, they are the result of or contribute to some level of unnecessary waste and exploitation. This is greenwashing as complicated and masked by new and ‘better’ business ideologies like Conscious Capitalism.

The vision Whole Foods provides Environmental Stewardship is a utopian one. Its vision is what I call *greenwishing*—the overstatement of the company’s green practices to present a world it and its consumer wishes for *if it were not for the expense or inconvenience associated with it*. In this construction of a consumptive fantasy, Whole Foods stores act as the site of greenwishing—they are oases that offer reprieve from the injustices and inequalities resulting from advanced capitalism, within which everything is fair, good, and natural. However, this construction only works in that the stores are decontextualized from the realities of their cultural existence, including stores like MOM’s that show the creation of a better world is *actually* requires us to be a bit more restrictive then we might like. Setting aside issues of socio-economic class, capitalist business practices, and urban and suburban expansion, Whole Foods can present itself as
more than a supermarket with its stores doing more ‘good’ than can be contained within those walls.

The goodness that radiates out from Whole Foods stores is realized in the company’s promotion of its commitment to renewable energy through its purchase of Renewable Energy Credits (RECs). Whole Foods sees itself as an industry leader in renewable energy, stating: “In January of 2006, we made our first landmark purchase of renewable energy credits (RECs) from wind farms to offset 100% of the electricity used in all of our stores and other facilities in the United States and Canada,” proudly proclaiming, “In 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, we did it again!” The initial purchase by Whole Foods was the largest RECs purchase by any company at that point in time, earning it recognition by and a partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) during that year and on several other occasions over the course of the next six years. Whole Foods has no trouble asserting the benefits of these purchases giving the following example of the scale of their impact: “Our investment in wind energy supports the clean energy industry and helps us avoid nearly 551,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide pollution. That's an environmental benefit equivalent to not consuming 1,200,000 barrels of oil or avoiding the annual electricity usage of 65,000 average-sized homes.” However, I would like to draw your attention to the asterisk at the end of this statement,

246 Ibid.
which on the Whole Foods website is followed by a link to show the calculation of this figure according to the EPA’s criteria.

The crucial factor to consider when assessing the benefits of RECs—a factor that is rendered out of the company’s self-affirmation—is the fact that RECs offset energy use. In purchasing RECs Whole Foods does not stop consuming oil and electricity, the company invests in the equivalent creation of wind power. To be clear, for the most part, Whole Foods is not running their stores off of alternative energy. The only locations that utilize alternative energy are those that have installed solar panels, which, as of 2012 accounted for sixteen stores and one distribution center with plans for the building of twenty more locations with solar paneling. Even in these cases, solar power only accounts for a percentage of the total energy used; for instance, the greatest utilization of solar power mentioned in the company’s Green Mission Report is that of their store in Brentwood, CA, which “uses solar energy for 24% of its power needs.”

In the presentation of Renewable Energy Credits by Whole Foods the ideological packaging RECs of overwrites the reality of what RECs actually do. The purchase of RECs funds the development of wind power, not so much its use at present. The underpinning logic here is to support wind power in order to make it more economically competitive with fossil fuels that are finite and detrimental to the environment in their usage. In its purchase of RECs, Whole Foods is able to show their support for alternative energy without having to convert to its use. In her thesis on Whole Foods Market’s form of green capitalism, Samantha Kanofsky goes into great detail on the pros and cons of RECs and energy offsetting more generally, showing that for these purchases Whole
Foods deserves only qualified praise. For Whole Foods, RECs are a step in ensuring long-term sustainability as alternative energy becomes more abundant and efficient, while the company is cognizant of their inability to convert to its power sources at present. When seeking to mediate its energy consumption, it became clear to the company’s leadership that RECs were the most ecologically and financially sustainable option for greening the company’s energy profile as the purchase of enough REC’s to offset “the entire electricity load of the company country-wide” for one year had a smaller price tag than installing two solar panels on a single store.  

RECs thus appear as the best long-term strategy for holding to Whole Foods’ commitment to sustainability as well as a value-creating measure for the company as RECs are *investments* much like stocks, as Kanofsky explains:

> the REC purchase was justified to shareholders as an investment in certificates that not only contribute to environmental health and national energy sustainability (indirectly ensuring that Whole Foods will have a more stable source of power in the long-run), but can also be resold for a profit should compliance markets drive up the price of REC’s.  

These financial concerns were not ancillary to the company’s decision to purchase RECs. When interviewed by Kanofsky, Michael Besancon, a Senior Global Vice President for Whole Foods, speaks candidly about the financial considerations of the purchases, noting, “You can be incentivized by doing the right thing, or you can be incentivized by cost.

---

247 Ibid.
248 Kanofsky, 92.
The end result is the same, no matter your motive. I don’t care how you get there.” His matter of fact statement regarding the financial motivations for ‘doing good’ may seem surprising in that they undercut what many see as Whole Foods bottom-line commitment to the planet—unless we are reminded that that mission is completely contingent upon the financial success of Whole Foods as a business.249

RECs are an investment for Whole Foods. They add value to the company by increasing its holdings, but they also add ideological value; RECs as a commodity add value to the Whole Foods commodity. In the same way that an USDA Organic certification adds value to its stores in illustrating its authentic commitment to healthy sustainable foods, RECs add to the value of the Whole Foods brand by providing evidence that the company lives up to its promise of ‘doing good’ with their customers’ money by investing it in Environmental Stewardship as supported by customers who choose to invest their money in Whole Foods. In this way, RECs enter the branded lifestyle web of ethical consumption as another commodity: another brand or thing that can be purchased in the enhancement of capitalism’s ability to solve the ecological problems it has created. RECs are a greenwish, presented as wonderful image in the present, but with a reality that only exists at some future point.

Taken at face value, RECs are a wise investment in ‘better’ energy, but the commodification of sustainability that takes place in offsetting must be considered in full. For this to take place, all stakeholders should be aware of the motivations of Whole Foods in purchasing RECs and how RECs are actually used in relation to the stores’

249 Ibid.
energy consumption. Problematically, for a business based on transparency to ensure consumer confidence, the less altruistic motivations pursuing certain sustainability practices do not appear in the ideological packaging of ‘greenness’. Because of this, when less than altruistic intentions are discovered customers (and other stakeholders who are not receiving stock dividends from Whole Foods) questions are raised regarding the company’s integrity and authenticity.

Whole Foods commits to creating ‘better’ instead of suggesting alternatives that may be less financially viable for their business. Because of this omission, we are given the impression that the sustainability practices taken up by Whole Foods have the power to repair damage already done to the earth while, at best, many of these measures simply serve to balance the ecological cost of conducting business. Yet, as Whole Foods proclaims and as food industry surveys indicate, the ideological packaging of sustainability does create awareness, as evidenced by more people expressing concern about the state of the environment and seeing natural and organic products as a means to decrease their carbon footprint. This enthusiasm for awareness masks the reality that concern has not translated into substantial change. The US is still dependent on non-renewable energy sources and few people are laying out the cash to invest in existing alternatives or fund the development of more efficient technologies. We have not slowed the process of global warming. Shoppers still ask for disposable bags and people still ‘prefer the taste’ of bottled water. It is based on a changing cultural ideology about consumption, not an actual change in consumer practices or habits, that Whole Foods is able to enforce the notion that people are ‘doing the green’ thing by shopping ‘better’—
by buying more unprocessed organic and bulk foods, by recycling, and by choosing products ‘made with the earth in mind’. With the material effects taken left uninterrogated, the idea of sustainability serves as an adequate substitute for the effort and sacrifices that are required to address ecological degradation, and, in this, Whole Foods is allowed to profit from the constantly deferred positive effect of greenwishing.

Whole Foods is able to overstate their contribution to creating a better world because there need be no tangible evidence for the effectiveness of initiatives that are presented as having cumulative long-term effects—any potential positive effects are exactly that, potential. Fortunately, other facets of evidence of the Whole Foods mission have more immediate effects, enabling the company to illustrate the practical results of ‘good’ deeds. One such way ‘good’ is made clear is in company’s promotion of the positive impact on the neighborhoods their stores inhabit. As a source of revenue, jobs, and philanthropic goodwill, the opening of a Whole Foods store is presented as more than just the arrival of green business and venue for more ethical shopping—it is envisioned as opportunity for the social and economic betterment of an entire community. But, as with the environmental initiatives enacted by Whole Foods, the representation the company offers contradicts reality. As I will show in the following chapter, the company’s responsibility to shareholders and customers also hinders its ability to realize its vision for inclusive of community betterment.
CHAPTER 4

The Community That Gives is the Community That Spends

Part of the Neighborhood

As a company, we are set up very uniquely for a large business. Our stores are not cookie cutter big box-type stores with directives from “corporate” about how to run the business. Each of our stores has a lot of latitude in deciding the best way to operate that individual store to meet the needs of the local community. That makes community giving really special and fun. Overall, our community giving well exceeds 5% of our total net profits each year.²⁵⁰

Whole Foods places the above text at the top of the “Caring for Communities” page on its website, which calls attention to the prominent place of the local and independent business in the alternative food movement (which they of course see themselves as a part of) and in the American cultural imagination, generally. In America, the notion of community is tied to a national ideology of independence and democracy, with business as an integral part of community: business sustains the citizens; it knows and responds to their needs. This shared national ideology suggests that people work together best when they interact face-to-face. Personal interactions strengthen affective ties between people, enabling them to come to understand each other’s positions,

establish shared needs and values, and act in the best interest of the whole; this is the very essence of community.

The small business of America’s ‘Main Street’ plays a key part in this vision of community, as independent local entrepreneurs have insight into what their friends and neighbors need from the marketplace. Moreover, local businesses tend to see the people in their communities as more than just customers. Local business owners are often valuable contributors to social and political life, serving as representatives in neighborhood organizations, donating to charity and school drives, and sponsoring recreational sports and annual events.

At the onset of the 2008 economic recession this vision of local business became the counterpoint to the profit-motivated, homogenizing practices of national and multinational corporations, or Wall Street, which had been charged with creating economic instability in the relentless pursuit of profit. A popular view of Wall Street developed: it was robbing communities of their unique identities and the social relationships created through the network of small, area businesses. The view holds that it at the turn of the twenty-first century corporate chains came to prevail through power and force.

But as I have shown in the first chapter, chain stores have long been part of the American landscape and, in many cases, something that Americans have welcomed to their communities. Therefore, when situated historically, this Main Street versus Wall Street dichotomy is more ideological than realistic. Corporate chains—specifically supermarkets and big box stores—offer mass-produced goods and designs that maximize
efficiency, which often makes them feel homogenous and impersonal. But these retailers appeal to a broad intersection of consumers, and by playing to the middle they have enjoyed success. But the chain store is hardly a community space. It is a place for individual shoppers to conduct the business (and commodified leisure) of shopping. Of course, you might run into a friend or coworker while shopping, but these stores are not community spaces—their intended use is not socialization.

As a corporate chain that works to retain a unique local appeal through its individual stores, Whole Foods attempts to bridge Main Street and Wall Street. While Whole Foods would like to see itself on the side of small business, this is clearly is not always the case. But Whole Foods is not exactly a homogenous monolith like Walmart or Target, either in its practices or scale. Whole Foods has structured its operations through regional offices that allow the company’s stores to respond to the specific interests and tastes of a community in ways that other chains cannot. Faced with real people instead of numbers on computer screens, the store leadership at Whole Foods is able to see communities as individuals—as ‘stakeholders’ with needs and to whom they are accountable to. Through this approach, Whole Foods shows its stores as having an important commonality with small business. The company both sees the community as having a vested interest in the success of their local Whole Foods store, as well as its success being contingent on the satisfaction of that community.

The mission of Whole Foods to “share in common a commitment to creating meaningful livelihoods and contributing to the well-being of the community in which they are located. [Wherein profit] is more a means more than end,” indicates that the
company sees those who share the neighborhood as more than customers. As a Conscious Capitalist firm, Whole Foods testifies that its leadership sees the bigger picture, which includes the importance of preserving unique communities and ensuring the health and happiness of those citizens. However, with Whole Foods position as a premium natural foods retailer there are questions regarding how the company defines the community of its store.

What I am claiming in this chapter is that businesses, as privately owned institutions, are indicative of who and what a community, as a public, is or should be. When these businesses are national chains that are easily recognized by their corporate brands, the once unique aspects of a community are subject to being overwritten by the ideologies and cultural meanings associated with those brands. With Whole Foods earning popular recognition as the symbol of gentrification and an influx of wealth, news of the opening of a Whole Foods store in a community is a forecast of good things to come—a ‘better’ place to live because there are ‘better’, more expensive, and more luxurious places to shop, as the opening of a Whole Foods often brings with it the appearance of other high-end shopping and lifestyle ventures. By discussing specific cases of new and prospective sites of Whole Foods stores I will show the way that the arrival of Whole Foods impacts neighborhood residents even before the store opens.

The genius of the Whole Foods Core Value to “Serve and Support Our Local and Global Communities” is that, unlike smaller businesses with less cultural cache and

economic influence, the company has the ability to help shape who belongs to a
community, and it can do so in ways that other supermarkets cannot. In this aspect of its
mission, Whole Foods shares the same guiding social, moral, and economic goals of
gentrification as a project of community “revitalization,” which its stores have been
closely associated with in the neighborhoods of Gowanus in Brooklyn, Midtown in
Detroit, and Jamaica Plain in Boston—cases which I will discuss in depth in this chapter.
Further, I will show how the effects as seen in these cases have led investors, journalists,
and residents in the cities of Buffalo and Rochester, in Western New York State, to
herald the arrival of Whole Foods to their communities as evidence of revitalization.
However, as these narratives will reveal, the “Whole Foods Effect” is not without
casualties. With the revitalization of the community tied to the success of private firms,
the community becomes exclusive for those who can afford to participate in an
increasingly expensive marketplace. While Whole Foods claims to embrace the whole
community, its demands for profitability result in the pushing less affluent individuals out
of the picture. In effect, this chapter will show that Whole Foods-facilitated gentrification
displaces the lower classes and welcomes higher-income consumer-residents who benefit
from the individualistic marketplace of the gentrified neighborhood. This ultimately
results in the loss of the democratic aspects of community by excising the political
opposition: those who seek interactive democracy over individualistic consumerism.

Gentrification and Its Discontents

Whole Foods is one of the most frequently cited markers of gentrification and
their stores often act as concentrated sites where existing racial and class tensions—
exacerbated and obviated by the gentrification process—play out. The trouble with gentrification and Whole Foods is not in that people have nice places to live and shop, it is that in order for Whole Foods to ‘care’ for and ‘help’ communities they must ultimately change who and what those communities are, as the ability to ‘do good’ is directly dependent on ‘making money.’

Once again, while Whole Foods talks about meeting the needs of multiple and interlocking stakeholders, the interests of those stakeholders who contribute financially to the company are held paramount. Because the stores must be successful for the company to enact its mission, it is logical for Whole Foods to take up residence in communities where there are or will be individuals who have the financial means to shop at the store and shop liberally. And yet, the presence of citizens who need aid from Whole Foods is essential to the perpetuation of altruistic acts—there must be someone to ‘save’. This someone is always recognizably different from the Whole Foods shopper: in urban cases this may be individuals residing in a shelter at the community’s periphery, in suburban cases this may be not so distant inner city youth, and, in both contexts, the company presents the poor laborer in the global South as the ultimate cause for community giving, which I will discuss in detail in chapter six. The company’s mission to “serve communities” thus takes on multiple meanings as applied to and understood by the various stakeholders, but foremost works through a trickle-down model. The benefits of having a Whole Foods in a community are felt most by those at the top of the socio-economic ladder, as the benefits to the lower classes are residual and lessen incrementally as they descend the ranks of stakeholders.
Because shelter is a fundamental human need, the argument over the right to or necessity for gentrification is especially embittered. In discussing the effects of gentrification I would like to consider the definition given by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development “as a process by which a neighborhood occupied by lower-income households undergoes revitalization or reinvestment through the arrival of upper-income households.”252 In this conception of gentrification as formulated by the state, there is no mention of what happens to those lower-income households or the existing business community with the arrival of new wealth. Gentrification, in this vague definition, seems to be a neutralizing process in which the combination of lower-income and upper-income equates to the most livable urban circumstance. Here, gentrification is simple: monetary reinvestment creates revitalization. Other definitions of gentrification, like that provided by urbanist Benjamin Grant, complicate the process. Grant claims, “the effects of gentrification are complex and contradictory, and its real impact varies,” noting that the gentrified neighborhood can becomes a ‘victim of its own success,’ driving out longtime residents and those who were attracted to the community’s previous character and lower cost of living.253

Yet, as illustrated through its multiple definitions and cultural imaginings, gentrification is not a specifically concrete practice or project, instead taking many forms and evolving over time. However, the typical analytical method of breaking gentrification into ‘waves’ is problematic in that it dismisses the privileged socio-economic position of

---

‘first wave’ gentrifiers over a community’s existing residents. By considering first wave gentrifiers as marginalized in their own right, this group of ‘creative types’—artists, students, and members of the LGBT community—is granted a certain level of authenticity that allows them to be read as exempt from the cultural homogenization that is determined to take place in later waves of gentrification. Scholars like Sharon Zukin and Japonica Brown-Saracino, who define first wave gentrifiers as those who, drawn by the allure of diversity and ‘authentic’ culture, move to a divested urban area, which is able to not only counter the perceived artificiality of suburban life, but also, and moreover, offers cheaper housing than more polished areas of the city—“the good life at a moderate price.”254 These newcomers aid in the revitalization of the urban area, making it more attractive to others, specifically those of an even higher socio-economic status, who will pay top dollar for the “nicely restored houses and apartments” with “historic and hipster charm.”255 According to this narrative, the changes in cultural and physical landscape that are put in motion by early gentrifiers pale in comparison to those enacted with the middle- and professional-class individuals who follow, bringing with them not only cleaner, safer streets but also businesses and institutions that reflect their tastes—cafes, yoga studios, private schools, etc.—significantly changing the existing environment.

The fact that gentrification is a socio-economic process that carries with it distinct class markers should not be overwritten or displaced in the choice to shift the focus of

255 Ibid., 8-9.
gentrification on to an imagined creative class, as presented at the turn of the millennium by Richard Florida. This class of white-collar technological, creative, and administrative workers has become more financially powerful and culturally influential over the course of the twenty-first century, owing its influence to its economic clout as facilitated through the nation’s shift from an industrial economy of manual laborers to a service economy of knowledge workers. Florida’s theory of the creative class centers on its values—what he calls “the 3 T’s” for Talent, Tolerance, and Technology—as foundational to economic growth.\textsuperscript{256} These values are enacted on the ground, in the neighborhood, through the labor people perform and their individual acts of consumption. This is not merely about creativity as abstract ideas; as we know, economic growth is always contingent upon having money, and thus ideas must be valuable and their value must be realized on the market. Based on financial stability as a means for social interaction, the diversity promoted by the creative class exists only within neighborhoods that are constrained by class-based parameters. We see the confluence of diversity and status in scholarship that considers the role the mainstream LGBT community, namely white gay men, in neighborhood betterment. As rehabilitated areas become desirable places to live, the members of the marginalized group that enacted these positive spatial changes are increasingly seen as socially acceptable, if not valuable. Christina Hanhardt points to this conflation in her work Safe Space when she writes about the “selective reinvestment in central cities,” as “policy-makers and political pundits [have declared] that (white) gay populations might hold the key for rejuvenation of struggling metropolitan areas. In the

\textsuperscript{256} Richard Florida, Cities and the Creative Class (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.
1970s, gay men were extolled for saving declining cities as vanguard members of the vaunted back-to-the-city movement; in the late 1990s and early 2000s, gay populations were invoked as enticements for the creative class of workers to settle in, and thus revitalize, restructured urban regions.  

For Zukin, the most detrimental manifestation of gentrification occurs in what Neil Smith refers to as, “gentrification generalized,” wherein “the city loses its soul” as long-standing local businesses are replaced by banks and chain stores, and swaths of housing are leveled to make room for new luxury condos. This is the bad gentrification. It is not the reinvestment in an urban region to ‘save’ historic property or to engage with those of different cultural and lifestyle backgrounds. It is the whitewashing of the urban environment in the name of consumption, resulting in “not just an economic division but a cultural barrier between rich and poor, young and old.” This shares common ground with Brown-Saracino’s claim that gentrification comes to exclude longtime lower-income residents, as well as less affluent first wave gentrifiers, as the neighborhood becomes incrementally better and more sterile over time. But, in arguing that the current state of gentrification is pure cultural homogenization in the interest of upper-income consumption, these scholars fail to adequately recognize the privilege afforded to the artists, students, and academics that have been identified with the early phase of gentrification. In contrasting the present to the more ‘authentic’ gentrification that took

258 Zukin, Naked City, 9.
place during the 1980s and 90s, academic critiques of gentrification undercut the argument regarding the importance of capital (both economic and cultural) in the ongoing production and changing definition of a ‘good’ community. Trapped in the fundamental contraction of gentrification—that the creativity it facilitates has always been destructive—these scholars render certain cultural and minority groups as lacking agency or outside of the socio-economic power structure. They largely ignore the driving factors behind the movement of capital and political interest into gentrifying areas prior to the arrival of the professional class or “the superrich.”

The simple reality of gentrification is a financial one. Gentrification takes place because people who have (often considerably) more money express interest in inhabiting an area. Because these individuals choose to spend and invest their money differently than the existing community, their interests as manifest through their financial power change the identity of the neighborhood, whether this be the choice to patronize natural foods retailers, high-end clothing stores, yoga studios, or gay-friendly bars, or in their investment in the historic restoration of brownstones and Victorian homes, and their (financial or physical) participation in neighborhood beautification projects that were previously non-existent or underfunded.

With the success of gentrification based on the financial revitalization of the neighborhood, those who have nothing to offer economically are seen as an impediment to the process. More often than not, and with varying degrees of subtlety, lower-income populations are displaced to peripheral regions. This has been the case throughout the
long history of urban betterment and beautification projects, despite a desire to retain a sense of the ‘authentic’ communities that have historically inhabited these spaces.\footnote{260}{See Zukin, \textit{Naked City}, 9-18.}

For example, David Wilson shows the appearance of “two contradictory drives: local desires to upgrade the quality of life for current residents and governance aspirations to gentrify,” in discussing the redevelopment of Chicago’s historically black South Side neighborhood through the demolition of public housing.\footnote{261}{David Wilson, “City Redevelopment and Black Exclusion,” in \textit{Race, Space, and Exclusion: Segregation and Beyond in Metropolitan America}, edited by Robert Adelman and Christopher Mele (New York: Routledge, 2015), 98.} Using age-old “race-class anxieties about poor black populations” and the economic and cultural betterment of the city as motivating factors, city planners and officials have presented these housing projects as “a government failed monstrosity… that has destroyed people [inhabitants] and neighborhoods.”\footnote{262}{Ibid., 97; 99.} According to Wilson, the poor become “caricatures” of ghetto life, who want nothing more than to leave the projects, despite many residents expressing dissatisfaction with losing their homes, going as far as staging protests and engaging in press conferences.\footnote{263}{Ibid., 101.}

And yet, the destruction and transformation of the neighborhood has gone on according to plan with the number of low-income units diminished in the creation of mixed-income and mixed-use properties. Importantly, Wilson notes, “Public housing is typically mandated to last for 40 years and affordable housing for 30 years,” meaning the South Side’s slow conversion to the private housing market, which has the potential to leave the city’s most vulnerable residents out in the cold. Sharing the frustration of South
Side resident Gist Gilliam, who explains, “In a capitalist society… He who buy[s] the $300,000 and $400,000 townhouse for the full price is the one who gets… to determine [the] environment,” Wilson indicates the transformation that has already taken place with the appearance of a tell-tale sign of gentrification, a Starbucks, as well as a Treasure Island Foods (with the tagline, “America’s Most European Supermarket”). The anxieties over the changing landscape of gentrification are likewise expressed in concerns over the 2016 opening of a Whole Foods Market in Chicago’s South Side Englewood neighborhood. This Whole Foods, like the store that opened in 2013 in Detroit, which I will discuss at length later in this chapter, is meant to serve as a resource for the whole community, helping to offer residents healthy, fresh food options that have, up to this point, been absent from the area, as well as bringing a number of new employment opportunities for those interested in becoming part of the Whole Foods team. But the city has invested $10 dollars into infrastructural improvements just to get the company to open a store in Englewood. Based on the outcome of the Detroit store, this investment may actually be going to benefit a minority of residents and commuters (those who will shop at Whole Foods), not the majority of residents in the immediate area. The question as to whether city money could be used in more equitable ways is fair especially considering the notable increases in local property values with the opening of a Whole Foods.

The unease caused by gentrification is not a result of the physical rehabilitation of an area, but in that it changes the social and commercial landscape as lower-income communities slowly move out and more affluent individuals move in. Whereas scholars and casual observers have often associated the commodification of the urban environment in the process of gentrification with a rise in superfluous boutiques and cafes, the ideology of gentrification has shifted in its association with Whole Foods. Food, which is more of a necessity to human life than shelter, has become central to the discourse of changing socio-economic demographics: gentrifiers tastes and nutritional inclinations have come to dictate the food available to area inhabitants. If we then consider the underlying moral justification for gentrification—to make areas safer and more inhabitable, and to save heritage sites and historic architecture—we see an even greater connection between the food offerings that become available during gentrification and the overall mission of gentrification. As gentrifiers make value judgments regarding the site of gentrification (that this area needs to be fixed), the same moral imperatives are placed on diet and consumptive habits of the preexisting community. Both gentrification and Whole Foods serve as ‘better’ alternatives to what the neighborhood currently offers. The notion of choice is essential to this ideology, however, paradoxically, choice is always limited to what the wealthy newcomers see as valuable and desirable. Thus, it is first and foremost the mere presence of affluence that sparks a change towards community and individual betterment. The gentrifier carries with him not only the moral imperative to save the community, but the notion that he can use his financial power to
save it. Problematically, the lived-reality of the community and its actual needs rarely if ever enter into the discourse of gentrification’s communal improvement.

The Chicago scenario, in which lower-income residents struggle to remain in the communities they once dominated but are denied the benefits of the region’s newfound prosperity, is by no means uncommon. Moreover, even in cases where low-income residents are able to retain or relocate to new (and improved) affordable housing within mixed-income communities, ethnographic studies indicate that poorer residents often feel isolated and scrutinized, often treated as suspect by their wealthier neighbors. These more covert forms of discrimination can be cause for long-term residents to weigh the possibility of leaving the improved conditions of their gentrified neighborhood in order to regain the sense of community and social support they lost in the transition. However, with the reconfiguration of affordable housing units into mixed-income units, the choice to leave, when made by those receiving assistance, must be understood as motivated by a push. Whereas affluent gentrifiers can choose to move into a space and claim it as their own no matter the length of their tenure or dedication to the specific local—acting as, according Zygmunt Bauman, privileged “tourists” of society and space—low-income residents cannot choose to retain their way of life, nor do they have the means to follow suit. Instead they become the by-product of improvement—they are what he calls

\[266\] See Jeff Spinner-Halev, “The Trouble With Diversity” (107-20), James DeFilippis and Jim Fraser, “Why Do We Want Mixed-Income Neighborhoods?” (135-47), and Edward G. Goetz and Karen Chapple, “Dispersal as Anti-Poverty Policy” (149-64) in *Critical Urban Studies*, Jonathan S. Davis and David L. Imbroscio, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), all of which provide similar insights into the complexities and contradictions of dispersal and relocation as a strategies of communal betterment and betterment of the circumstances of low-income individuals. These scholars show that while, by-and-large, people support the idea (and ideal) of integration, they remain most comfortable with those who are of similar socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. And that, when given the choice, as through the purchase of property, individuals will choose to live in more homogeneous than diverse neighborhoods, where the value of their investment and their perceived safety can be ensured.
“vagabonds,” who are “on the move because they have been pushed from behind.”\textsuperscript{267} Bauman explains that “the vagabond is the *alter* ego of the tourist,” indicating the dialectical relationship between the tourist and vagabond.\textsuperscript{268} The existence of the lower-income resident, who serves as the personification of urban decay, is necessary to the construction of the affluent gentrifier as the facilitator of urban renewal.

The community altruism of Whole Foods works according to the same dialectic by placing the financially capable and caring shopper in contrast to those who are recipients of philanthropy and in need of care. And we see this even with the company’s desire to move into lower-income neighborhoods, to educate those communities, and provide them with ‘better’ food *options* that they were previously unaware of, or that were out of their reach. Without the lower class, there is no justification for the altruistic actions of the upper class, yet gentrification results in the displacement of those that serve as the reference point for the mission of communal betterment. Thus, while the neighborhood appears to be bettered by the influx of creativity and wealth, what really occurs is a change in demographics. The neighborhood is only better in that it is fundamentally different. The revitalized neighborhood serves as testimony to the ‘good’ that can be done through private investment by pushing those most dependent on public services and the promise of democracy (based on citizenship, not wealth) to the periphery.

\textsuperscript{267} Bauman, 92.  
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 94.
Sociological studies of poverty dispersal and mixed-income housing development indicate that these efforts “may disrupt patterns of daily life, including place-based social networks on which families rely for social support and access to jobs” and disband pre-existing institutions and public forms of assistance. In effect, inequality is only perpetuated in the privatized-democracy of the gentrified neighborhood, as the poorer residents are further disenfranchised with the loss of social services that had previously been extended to them. The clean, safe, privatized public space of gentrification, like the community space within Whole Foods, claims to be open to all, but is maintained through the costs of membership. Because of this, Whole Foods externalizes those it claims to help—those who cannot afford to be there, those who need more from a community than consumer choice. The gentrified area speaks: “Look at how beautiful this neighborhood is. We helped it. Now we can move to help others in the same way.” Lower-income citizens are continually pushed outward, but never disappear. They serve as a constant reference point for the ‘others’ who need help, those who are not the middle-class ‘us’, while the successes of gentrification and the masking of poverty through its dispersal allow for the continuation of structural inequality.

**Of Money and Morals**

While I would not go as far as to say that gentrifiers move into an area with the intention of displacing or damaging the preexisting community and its cultural practices, the acts that are perceived as improvements by gentrifiers are ultimately one-sided. By

---

269 Goetz and Chapple, 151. See also DeFilippis and Fraser, 141-44.  
270 DeFilippis and Fraser, 144.

233
focusing on the way that gentrification brings a neighborhood in line with the mainstream bourgeois version of acceptability, it is possible to ignore the erasure of the preexisting community that had previously shaped the landscape. Gentrification does not disrupt the status quo, but instead brings the urban community closer to the normative ideal. By inserting wealthier, educated, white residents, gentrification implies the ability to elevate the status of pre-existing lower-income ethnic and racial minorities (or, more accurately, the dispossessed silent majority) by association. This gesture is reiterated in the ethical and nutritional ideology as extolled by Whole Foods, by which the community becomes healthier as there are more people buying healthier foods, regardless of whether the habits of the lower-income residents remain the same.

If we believe that capitalism and private markets are the best means to meet the needs of all people, providing the knowledge and the options that consumers desire, the low-income resident’s inability to shop at Whole Foods need not be considered to be a result of the greater cost of products at Whole Foods and can instead be attributed to personal choice and/or the ineffective prioritization of funds. Shopping, or not shopping, at Whole Foods is the responsibility of the individual. And while the choice of where to shop and what to buy belongs to the individual consumer, Whole Foods offers its shoppers the opportunity to give back to their communities, a gesture which re-links individual choice with the greater good. Whole Foods creates a positive food culture and gives back to the community, enlisting shoppers’ help in enacting their mission. It presents them with the merits of purchasing fair trade and locally produced products that ensure the vitality of producers globally and locally and asks for small donations to
support their philanthropic endeavors—one example being the “Nickels for Nonprofits” program in which cashiers ask shoppers who bring in reusable bags—an action that entitles customers to a five cent refund—if they would like to donate the nickel instead of having it taken off their bill. Whole Foods presents its customers’ choice to ‘do more’ and consider others when shopping as a viable alternative to inadequate government funding for community groups and schools, justifying the upscale supermarket in that it attracts affluent consumers and puts their money to ‘good’ use for the community.

As I noted in my discussion of the push by Whole Foods for the setting of national organic standards, the company presents itself as a necessary supplement to a government that is unable to act innovatively, as it lacks in resources and knowledge of what people need. Because, in Mackey’s conceptualization, capitalism exists in the best interests of people, government must work in the creation of value by facilitating the growth of (conscious) capitalism in order to best provide for the citizenry. And yet, as the government is necessary as an “impartial umpire… to make sure that businesses follow the rules and apply them fairly to ensure a level playing field,” it is also a stakeholder in business. 271 In Conscious Capitalism Mackey and Sisodia state, “There is no doubt the government plays an important role in society; the main question is how significant that role should be.” Mackey and Sisodia warn of the coercive power of government in comparison to the restrictions placed on businesses because of the competitive market wherein stakeholders always have the ability to choose not to patronize a business.

271 Mackey and Sisodia, 163.
Mackey and Sisodia’s conscious free-market logic parallels the argument for the privatization of housing and communities through gentrification and specifically the development of mixed-use spaces such as those occupied by Whole Foods in many communities: if people did not want gentrification/Whole Foods, it wouldn’t find its way into a community. What supporters of housing privatization see as the ‘failure’ of government to provide for low-income residents, and what Mackey sees as the failure of government to create adequate food production standards and nutritional resources, are actually effects of the divestiture of the public sphere. Citizens, as consumers, have come to believe that private companies can best meet their needs, including acting as centers of public knowledge. In rendering the government unable or incapable of providing citizens with what they need—housing, food, knowledge—Whole Foods as Conscious Capitalists can step in to serve those residents who fall outside of its core consumer base. For instance, by offering shopper education programs, which help people understand how to select nutritious and budget-friendly foods from their inventory, Whole Foods indicates that once taught how to make the right choices, everyone has the means to do so. Whole Foods even goes a step further for those who still cannot meet their needs shopping at Whole Foods by having their stores donate excess, close-dated, and aesthetically imperfect products—food that is still good, just not good enough for their discerning consumers—to food banks.

As presented on the company’s website and as facilitated through their decentralized backend operations, individual Whole Foods stores have a great deal of agency to provide for their communities. Here, the ideology that Whole Foods is a unique
‘community place’ appears as part of their larger mission to bring the commodity cycle full circle. This suggests to consumers that their choices of where to shop have a major impact, beginning at the local level and rippling outward. But in reality, individual stores have little ability to do a great deal for their communities, and the greatest philanthropic endeavors by Whole Foods are conducted through their corporate headquarters—as with the Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP) and Whole Trade partnerships—and the company’s affiliated nonprofit organizations: Whole Planet, Whole Kids, and Whole Cities. To maintain local relevance and offer the appearance of communal care, Whole Foods places emphasis on their team members’ willingness and desire to take their personal time to invest it in their communities. And while the company does offer scheduling flexibility for team members to engage in service, this is essentially free time that becomes reclaimed as work time. The company reaps the benefits of employing civil-minded, caring individuals and allowing these individuals the time (away from work) to participate in their communities. In effect, Whole Foods is donating their laborers’ work to the community simply by giving their labor ‘free time’ to volunteer. In the case of promoting employee volunteerism, Whole Foods is doing nothing as a company, while benefitting from appearing as more active in the community than less-conscious businesses, and thus adding to their value by both increasing the unpaid labor time of their employees and exploiting those individuals’ goodwill as company property.

What Mackey sees as the key element in the ‘local citizenship’ practices of Whole Foods are the company’s “5 Percent Days,” which its stores are ‘empowered’ to engage in three to four times a year. According to Mackey, “The team members and local store
leadership decide which nonprofits within the community to support,” with the selected organization receiving five percent of that location’s gross sales (“not merely profits”) for that day.272 By encouraging the recipient nonprofits to ask their members and supporters to shop at Whole Foods that day as a means of not only contributing to the nonprofit, seeing Whole Foods as a source of community support and engagement but, also, as a way to “create goodwill with the members of the nonprofit.” These days are a way to draw in new shoppers, who “may come in and shop our store for the first time, decide they like it, and begin shopping with us regularly in the future.”273 Goodwill in this case requires the linking of community action to individual shopping practices as conducted in Whole Foods.

The promotion of the nonprofit in Whole Foods has the potential to bring the organization and its cause to residents who may not be aware of its work within the community, but support of the organization is made as easy as individualistic shopping. Further, Mackey cannot disassociate the notion of ‘goodwill’ from the value these events create for all stakeholders, noting that they “also create value for investors in the long term through increased sales and profits,” tainting the altruistic intent with the imperatives of capitalism—to enhance capital accumulation.274 As with gentrification, the project may help lower-income residents, yet it is as an ancillary effect of providing for capital. Again, the ultimate interest is in keeping affluent consumers in close proximity to

272 Ibid., 126.
273 Ibid., 126-29.
274 Ibid., 130.
consumptive sites, meaning that ‘lower-income residents’ must be peripheral to the core community, both in their geographic location and the prioritization of their needs.

**Location is Everything**

The specific and unique qualities of a place and its historic communities are essential to the rehabilitative transformation that takes place in the gentrification project. And yet, because historic preservation and contemporary upgrading requires capital investment, a place must have, or potentially have, financial value in addition to cultural value in order to become a site of revitalization. In short, the local culture must be capable of being transformed into a commodity that can fetch a price on the market, over and over. And there are a variety of ways in which this commodification can take place, from shopping districts to independent brewpubs and coffee shops to locally made artisanal goods. This commodification is even found in real estate, with homebuyers seeking the ‘authentic’ charm of brownstones and row houses, paying a premium for a view of a historically important park or cemetery. These aesthetic and consumer trends, however, transcend the local and are embedded in the global consumer culture, in which the vast majority of goods are produced *en masse* with minor variations that add unique flair. Even artisanal small-batch goods have come to closely resemble those of major producers, as consumers have become acculturated to perfect, homogenized, easily recognizable and categorized wares. The state of consumer culture leads me to follow Zukin’s claim that this restructuring of urban space is “a process that seems to reassert a purely local identity [as it] represents downtown’s social transformation in terms of an
Local identity becomes commodified to meet the market logic of (inter)national capitalism as locally produced goods or mass-produced products with local flair that are put on the gentrified Main Street for the choosing of individual consumers, overwriting the needs and desires of the community as a whole.

A clear example of this is in Wilson’s analysis of the preservation of the historic jazz and blues clubs of Chicago’s South Side, in the name of embracing black identity and revamping the local economy. Problematically, support of this project has been gained through the employment of a nostalgic imagination of the local black artistic community that must be ‘saved’ from contemporary ghetto culture. Notions of what is culturally valid and authentically local overwrite black residents need for less glamorous amenities, like affordable housing and socio-economic support systems. The local plays an important role in gentrification as the idea of a unique or ‘authentic’ neighborhood is what makes the choice to move to previously uninhabitable territory appealing. But this too is ideological, as the neighborhood and the community become imaginary relationships that exist through individual consumer acts of participating in local cultural events and buying local goods. It is this idea of community through shopping that makes it possible for Whole Foods as a national retail chain to become a ‘community place,’ as evidenced by their desire to reflect the aesthetics of the community in their individual store designs and offering performances by local performers, as well as drawing attention

---

to their sale of products from local farms and small-batch producers with special signage and displays.

This more specified understanding of gentrification as based on unique localities is also market-based as the decision to (re)invest in certain communities is driven by the notion that those areas have distinct attributes that can be capitalized on. For instance, the choice of Whole Foods to open a store in the Gowanus neighborhood on the yet-to-be-gentrified outskirts of Brooklyn seemed questionable to many. However, as real estate costs continue to climb, the company’s decision to grab a sizable chunk of land that would enable them to house a 56,000 square foot building as well as a parking lot covered with solar panels and a roof top garden and restaurant “offer[ing] indoor and outdoor seating overlooking the Gowanus Canal, surrounding neighborhoods, and the Manhattan skyline” is justified in the creation of a store that one Yelp reviewer refers to as “One Whole Foods to rule them all.”276 This location has not only been profitable for the company, but has also won over naysayers by offering both a surprisingly “vast assortment of locally sourced offerings from some of Brooklyn and the tri-state area’s most highly-regarded local artisans,” and a variety of hip non-food items and amenities, such as vinyl and record players and amenities uncommon to urban supermarkets like wide aisles, free parking, electric car charging and bike repair stations.277 Meeting the needs of the Brooklyn community, Whole Foods Gowanus appears as an asset to this still underdeveloped part of town. Yet, it can also be seen as a form of urban colonization as

277 “Third at 3rd, Brooklyn”; for more reviews that include these amenities see “Whole Foods Market: Gowanus,” Yelp.
the high-end supermarket has attracted residents to the neighborhood who would not have found themselves there otherwise, leading some to claim Gowanus is the next SoHo.\textsuperscript{278} As articulated by Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge, gentrification is related to “the growth of an international professional managerial class and new or rehabilitated residential enclaves which they choose to colonise.”\textsuperscript{279} By understanding gentrification as a type of colonization that creates new loci of consumption through structural revitalization, assertions regarding the possible benevolence of the gentrification process become increasingly questionable. The work of Atkinson and Bridge, as well as that of many urbanists and Marxist scholars, stands in contrast to the cautious optimism offered in studies of neighborhood “succession”—the process by which lower income residents move out of an area at the same time middle-income residents begin moving in—conducted by researchers from Colombia University, University of Colorado at Boulder, University of Pittsburgh, and Duke University.\textsuperscript{280} Despite these studies that offer the best-case-scenario of gentrification, in which neighborhoods are rejuvenated through reinvestment without the physical displacement of the preexisting residents, I see the structural changes that take place within the community as detrimental to those long-term residents, negatively impacting their sense of community and its existing institutions. My argument is that gentrification is a form of what David Harvey refers to as “creative

According to Harvey’s reading of Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of economic progress though the termination of previous practices, creative destruction is resoundingly detrimental to those lacking political and economic power as it renders them less valuable than the space they occupy, which is then advantageously co-opted in the name of capitalism, benefitting those with wealth. Additionally, discord and even hostility arises between those newcomers, who believe they are creating a better neighborhood, and longtime residents, who are seen as both needing economic and moral aid and as impediments to the thorough ‘betterment’ of the area. Herein, gentrifiers come to believe they are giving their all and getting nothing in return from the stagnant existing residents, whereas the preexisting community can come to feel that they have no recourse as their community is being overtaken by a project that fails to benefit them.282

Creating the Creative Community

By placing the needs of some community members above the needs of others, Whole Foods gives shape to who is included and excluded in not only their community of shoppers, but also the community their stores inhabit. This in part occurs through the development of the area surrounding Whole Foods according to a specific set of interests and lifestyle practices, either simultaneously with the installation of the Whole Foods store or shortly after its opening. But it is the idea of Whole Foods—its brand—that necessarily precedes the store’s appearance in the community, serving as a catalyst for the formation of a certain type of community. Looking at the criteria by which Whole

282 DeFilippis and Fraser, 138.
Foods chooses the sites for its stores, which I have previously discussed at length, we can see distinct parallels between the target demographic of Whole Foods and the socio-economic group that Florida has deemed “the Creative Class.” The Whole Foods customer is culturally knowledgeable and financially well off, seeking innovation, excitement, and diversity, but also status and security. And yet, while urban planners and academics have taken interest in the Creative Class and its positive economic impact on urban areas since the late ‘80s, in both scholarship and popular media, Whole Foods shoppers have been stripped down to be defined mainly by their high-end shopping habits with considerations of lifestyle, morals, and values only referenced as justification for elite consumer practices. Though consumption has always been of crucial importance in the discussion of urban planning and renewal, specifically in the ability to attract new industries and business, which require not only workers but also consumers, discussions of Whole Foods and gentrification have focused more intensively on newcomers as consumers with distinct and distinctive preferences—preferences that must be accommodated a priori to ensure their arrival. The change here is in what and who attracts Creative people to the city.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Florida developed the “bohemian index,” which statistically correlated the presence of bohemians (artists, musicians, designers), and their corresponding cultural institutions and lifestyle amenities, to the concentration of human capital and high-tech industries. 283 This work served as evidence that knowledge and technology workers—those in ‘creative’ professions—were drawn to

areas that showed high levels of “diversity, tolerance, livability, and creativity.” Florida’s work has been influential over the past decade with “urban planning [becoming] a nationwide competitive game to attract those businesses and industries that promised high employment, low ecological impact, and steady revenue,” and city planners looking for insight on how to increase the allure and value of their neighborhoods. In his book *Weird City*, Joshua Long discusses the connection between Florida’s theory of the Creative Class and urban policy in Austin, Texas, explaining that, while Florida “conducted extensive research in Austin for his 2002 signature work, *Rise of the Creative Class*… his ongoing research and publication is continuing to influence the decisions of Austin policy makers.” Important to Long’s analysis of urban development in Austin is the fact that the city was essentially a blank slate for industry and habitation, lacking the environmental pollution and many of the social and economic problems of both booming and floundering cities.

But the successes of Austin, in its ability to attract and retain the Creative Class and increase its economic base, through the use of its Smart Growth Initiative have drawn the attention of cities that have lost cultural and industrial prowess over time, suggesting that, with proper infrastructural investment, they too can attract the best and brightest workers and their consumer dollars. The notion behind Smart Growth is that land and transportation can be developed in a manner that reduces sprawl and preserves the environment, improving the quality of life for residents as communities. Here, the natural

284 Joshua Long, *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 48
285 Ibid., 48; see also 52.
286 Ibid., 49.
world and the urban space come together, and are cared for, to benefit humans.\textsuperscript{287} But Austin’s Smart Growth works, at least in part, through privatization, most notably seen in the redevelopment of the downtown area according to a plan for “walkable, high-density living”—mixed-use properties that, unfortunately, carry very high price tags. One measure taken by the city has been the mandate that developers reserve a proportion of units as affordable housing. The other tactic has been the promotion of the “economic advantages of downtown living.”\textsuperscript{288} You may pay a lot for a condo, but you are so close to everything you need—mass transit, trails, shops, bars and restaurants, and, perhaps most importantly, Whole Foods’ flagship store.

Austin has only increased its status as a financially successful and livable Creative City since Florida’s first book on the subject, which implies that there is a course of action that can be taken to facilitate the growth of the Creative Class within an area, and that, regardless of the current state of a city, if the signifiers of creativity are supplanted upon it, creative people will come. Of course there is some civilian discontent over the upscaling and commodification of the Austin landscape, which is the focus of Long’s project. However, this is inconsequential in the bigger picture envisioned by city planners both within Austin and in cities that aspire to its level of success. With (re)development and economics as essential to creating a ‘good’ place to live (a city that people will move to instead of from) the fact that some residents feel culturally or economically displaced is a negative externality in the creation of something ‘better’—a better city inhabited by

\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid., 61.
better people. What is key to the development of new Creative Cities is the desirability of the lifestyle held by the Creative Class, but for this lifestyle to have a broad appeal it must be widely recognizable and widely available—it must have a brand. That brand is Whole Foods.

The reputation of Whole Foods in shaping the Creative Community is evidenced by the (yet-to-be-approved plans for the) projected 2017 opening of a Whole Foods store in Rochester, New York, which has Anthony Daniele, property owner of the anticipated store site, feeling confident in his decision to end the long term residency of several local businesses to make space for the natural foods supermarket. This is clearly indicated in his interview with the local ABC network affiliate in which he states: “the people will ultimately decide where to go and what they want. I think there is certainly a buzz about Whole Foods. There’s been a buzz about Whole Foods for years now.” Based on the promise attached to Whole Foods, Daniele also plans to add to the existing retail plaza, not to welcome back those who were vacated for construction, but to rebrand the property as a “luxury retail plaza,” which will include “luxury stores that are new to Rochester, another Starbucks, and a bank.” With Whole Foods having yet to take up residence in Western New York—its nearest location to Rochester being over 250 miles away in Toronto, Ontario—the actual effects of building a shopping center around the retailer are unknown.

Another important factor is the loyalty many locals hold to Wegmans, a hometown company with their flagship store within a mile of the Whole Foods site. Further, Wegmans is increasingly seen as competition to Whole Foods. A fellow in Conscious Capitalism (as indicated by Mackey and Sisodia), Wegmans stores offer many of the same luxury items as Whole Foods as well as conventional supermarket product lines (you can buy everything from black truffles for $999 a pound to Cheetos). But what Daniele sees in the “competition” that this prospective Whole Foods will offer is something distinctly different from Wegmans as a more traditional supermarket chain. His claim that this new shopping experience and the related street renovations “will redefine this important corridor and bring a revitalization to a segmented portion of Monroe Avenue” is based on the ideological nature of Whole Foods brand distinction. That it will gentrify—it will create a new type of community for the area.

What Daniele foresees with the development of this plaza is appealing to area residents more generally with easier to navigate streets and safer crosswalks—things that Florida links to the arrival of the Creative Class. The hesitation in welcoming Whole Foods is also found in what it represents, which can be seen in the online comments regarding the Whole Foods store set to open in early 2016 in Buffalo, New York (about an hour drive from Rochester). Here, we see many Buffalonians connecting the opening of a Whole Foods to the ‘gussying up’ of a city or neighborhood, for better or worse. The opposition ranges from the qualified praise offered by one commenter, who states,

290 See Mackey and Sisodia, 32, for mention of other Conscious Capitalist companies.  
“Although in general I'm not a big fan of national chains, whole foods has proven to be unique in that they actually help upgrade neighborhoods rather then downgrade them”; to the blatant disgust of another, who adds to the discussion, claiming, “I live in Williamsburg, NYC. And there's a new Whole Foods moving in on Bedford Ave. It’s just going to further douchify the hood and will do the same in Buffalo.” 292 What is clear in these reactions is that there is a commonly held notion regarding the effect that Whole Foods has on a region and that this perception effects the decisions people make whether or not to shop at Whole Foods or move to a neighborhood that has a Whole Foods store. It is in this cultural imaginary of what Whole Foods does that we see the resonances of the Creative Class and the way it has transformed the American (sub)urban landscape, reifying class distinctions while creating new forms of aspirational consumption for those on the fringes of its socio-economic boundaries, including those bohemian artists and hipsters that paved the way for its rise. 293

The members of the Creative Community of Whole Foods share in a certain knowledge of consumption as supplied (or in the very least supported) by the company in its mission and values, which are promoted through its marketing materials and in-store signage. This imagined community is then both local to the specific Whole Foods store and national, with the brand’s iconography and ideology traversing neighborhood, city, and state (and even national borders with stores in the UK and Canada). Whole Foods

292 “Whole Foods Coming to ‘Buffalo,’” Buffalo Rising, May 7, 2014, http://buffalorising.com/2014/05/whole-foods-coming-to-buffalo/. Spelling and grammar corrected for clarity. From the context provided in the comment thread “douchify” (spelled “dooshafie” in original) is the verb form of the word “douche” used in a derogatory sense.
293 See Long’s discussion of Florida’s “overly broad categorization of the Creative Class” and neglect of the actual differences in the economic circumstances of those he places in that category (52-55).
also has the ability to increase its community of shoppers, because, as many commenters note, people will drive longer distances to get to Whole Foods than other supermarkets. Generally customers will only drive two miles to shop for their groceries at traditional supermarkets. Whole Foods, on the other hand, attracts customers from a twenty-five-mile radius, indicating the desirability of the product for the health conscious and other discerning consumers. Whole Foods takes this difference into consideration when choosing their store locations. Their criteria for site selection include that there are “a large number of college-educated residents” with “typically, 200,000 people or more in a 20-minute drive time,” as well as “abundant parking available for our exclusive use” to accommodate shoppers traveling from a distance.

However, it is arguable that with the expansion of the chain, as more and more stores are placed nearer to each other, individual stores will see a decline in the number of shoppers coming from a distance. This could result in a decrease in the number of shoppers to a given location, and, potentially, a resulting drop in per store revenues. While it is important to note that twenty-five percent of customers account for seventy-five percent of the stores’ total sales, we cannot disregard that most shoppers do not shop exclusively at Whole Foods and that “splurges” on the luxury items that draw people from greater distances to shop at Whole Foods will likely decrease as the number of

stores increases and the occasional customer’s shopping trips become at once more frequent and less special.\footnote{Percentage of sales from Harbin and Humphrey, 4.}

It remains, however, that the Creative Community of Whole Foods is necessarily limited. So, even though Whole Foods continues to expand its operations and through it the aspiration to become a Creative Consumer, the company still needs something and someone beyond its community. This Other appears in a variety of forms: those residing in neighborhoods that have not been chosen as store sites by the Whole Foods corporation, the individuals who do not have a Whole Foods in their immediate neighborhood and choose not to make occasional trips to a regional Whole Foods, the individuals who choose not to shop at Whole Foods even though there is one in their community, and lastly, those who, despite the company’s efforts to appeal to budget-conscious consumers, feel they cannot afford to shop at Whole Foods.

Functioning within the (ideologically) free market, Whole Foods and its community is open to everyone who enters their stores, but, as I have previously mentioned, membership in that community is to some extent cost prohibitive and, moreover, reflective of individuals’ choice as expressed through consumptive behaviors. As according to (neo)liberal economic theory, which Mackey whole-heartedly subscribes to, free markets are considered to be inherently democratic and ultimately self-regulating. Therefore, the community of Whole Foods does not create limits on who can be a member, and instead individuals opt not to belong. Accordingly, those individuals who choose not to belong are expressing themselves as citizens and consumers. Regardless of

\footnote{Percentage of sales from Harbin and Humphrey, 4.}
their motives, they serve as evidence for supporters of free markets that capitalism is
democratic and provides freedom through choice, because there are ample other
supermarket chains and independent retailers for where these people can do their
shopping. While Whole Foods aims to increase its presence in the food industry and the
American landscape, its choices not to carry certain product lines and ingredients, to
place limitations on what consumers can buy and how they can buy it (for instance, not
offering plastic bags at checkout), and to sell luxury items that carry higher price tags, the
company knowingly limits its community, as any or all of these practices (among others)
can be off-putting to some consumers.

Further, neither one’s residence in a community that houses a Whole
Foods nor the decision to shop at Whole Foods guarantee one’s equal status in that
community, which is evidenced in the hierarchal ordering of stakeholders by Whole
Foods as I have discussed. Another result of considering consumer choice as community
participation is that, the more an individual can spend, the more relevant that person is.
This is to say, if we do in fact ‘vote with our dollars,’ those who have more dollars can
purchase more votes. The importance of consumers who choose luxury items compels
Whole Foods to continue to broaden its line of high-end commodities at the same time
they fight to improve its price image by lowering its prices on produce and other grocery
staples, including its store brand products, to make them more in line with those of other
supermarket chains. Co-CEO Walter Robb has explained the deliberate choice to price
“ubiquitous” items “right” in order to remain competitive, implicitly in the eyes of
average shoppers. At the same time, he maintains a firm stance on the fact that some
products are simply worth more, for instance those “foods that people value knowing the origin of, like meat and fish.” In this maneuver, Whole Foods through Robb acts in the assurance of hegemony by presenting something that appeals to the broadest demographic while still serving the best interests of those who have the most cultural and economic sway.

However, despite the company’s stock taking a massive hit during the 2014 fiscal year, with shares losing nearly half their value, Whole Foods sales were up 9.9% over the previous year. With the company achieving a record $14.2 billion in sales, I believe that some critics are missing the mark in claiming that “customers [are] tiring of high ‘whole paycheck’ prices” and that the fact that “mainstream groceries stocking once-elusive foods like quinoa” are detriments to the retailer’s business. In fact, the company’s consistent sales growth suggests that the decision of Whole Foods to lower prices on some items is at least partly to improve their corporate image in the eyes of the stock market, not the consumer market. My argument is, therefore, that the efforts of Whole Foods to appear more “price conscious” are contrary to what consumers and communities actually desire from the retailer. This claim is legitimized by the ever-present cultural references to Whole Foods as a “coveted retailer” for those with “expensive tastes” as well as the recognition of its presence as a sign that an area is doing well or on the rise.

---

I have yet to hear one newscast about a new Whole Foods store breaking ground that states anything like, “The region is looking forward to the opening of this competitively priced national retail store.” The brand of Whole Foods still holds the same meaning as it did when its stores were few and far between. It is this meaning that both creates demand for Whole Foods stores in order to put neighborhoods on the cultural map and attracts shoppers from near and far looking for the Whole Foods experience. The notion remains that the Whole Foods shopper can and, within his individual financial parameters, will buy those specialty items that make critics roll their eyes. This also means that, contrary to what appear to be sincere attempts by Whole Foods to create healthy and affordable options for all community members, this simply is not what happens.

Creativity Unbound

We see the growth of the Creative Class and the proliferation of the consumptive habits in the case of the Whole Foods in Detroit, which opened in June 2013. This store was the company’s monumental move to the second-tier market in an effort to draw from a new customer-base and bring healthy food to underserved areas. It was, in part, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack who prompted the arrival of Whole Foods in Detroit by deeming the city’s lack of healthy food options to be a public health issue. Believing that the opening of a Whole Foods Market would best address this crisis,

---

Vilsack put Robb in touch with Detroit city officials. Excited by the prospects of bringing the retailer to the economically devastated city, its officials ended up helping to subsidize the opening of the Whole Foods store by coordinating “$5.8 million in public subsidies and private grants for the developer Whole Foods had selected to build the store.” These financial incentives were no doubt appealing since Whole Foods was taking a chance on an unknown market. With the subsidy for their business, the company’s rent would be significantly lower than the market for the area, so, even if the store were to flop, they would still be able to turn a modest profit. Finances aside, Robb saw this as a great social deed. Setting out to solve the Detroit’s racial tensions and “growing dietary gap between rich and poor” in the Conscious Capitalist way, Whole Foods would open in Detroit. By focusing on more of the lower-priced staple groceries and store brand products, as well as local and regional fare, Robb hoped to attract the widest intersection of Detroit shoppers, healing the community through their shared engagement in healthy, ethical consumption. But this is not what happened.

The site chose was on the border of the Midtown neighborhood, which has shed its reputation as one of the city’s roughest and now houses three college campuses, a medical center, and a symphony. Only a stone’s throw from the freeway, the location was also convenient for suburban commuters. This was the ideal location within the struggling city if it wanted a chance at attracting the Creative Class. As journalist and author of The American Way of Eating Tracy McMillan explains, this was a strategic

---

301 Ibid.  
302 Ibid.
move on the part of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation (DEGC), “a quasi-public agency in charge of overseeing economic strategy for the city,” who “saw Whole Foods as a way to not only serve its longstanding middle class, but to expand it. In short, they wanted the store to serve as a catalyst for gentrification… helping the city as a whole.”

Of course, the problem lies not in the desire to aid in the city’s overall economic growth by bringing new business, but in the potential effect of gentrification in exacerbating the class divide. The motivations of DEGC conflicted with the altruistic mission set by Whole Foods’ Detroit store, making the company’s efforts a failure from the get-go. What Whole Foods set out to do in creating a “Detroit community store” could not be fulfilled as planned because the community they imagined was not the community that imagined itself as Whole Foods shoppers. And while Whole Foods did its best at creating a diverse community, working with nutritionist Dr. Akua Woolbright to educate the non-Whole Foods shoppers of Detroit (mainly black, lower-income individuals) about the benefits of spending slightly more for quality foods, this advice was hard for people to follow as they walked through the store overwhelmed by delicious, expensive gourmet foods, ultimately unable to commit to dietary change or becoming regular Whole Foods shoppers.

Slowly, Whole Foods Detroit has become more like other Whole Foods, as according to McMillan:

---

303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
Indeed, [in 2013], when all the numbers had been crunched after the opening crush of business, the store found itself considering selling more expensive items, not cheaper ones. The top seller in the bakery department had been a single cupcake, baked in a half-pint jar. It sold for $6. Customers had been asking for more lamb, better cuts of meat, and higher quality wine. The busiest time at the store, Banks told me, was lunch hour, when office workers flooded the store—it is one of the few places for quick take-out within walking distance of the medical complex next door. Last November the store added a breakfast bar with $5 breakfast burritos. By autumn, bottles of wine topped out at $42, and meats at $30 per pound, instead of $20. This slide toward higher prices suggests that Whole Foods was having more success with its traditional customers than with lower-income ones.\(^{305}\)

Whole Foods Detroit may have defied the odds in attracting a large number of the city’s black residents, yet the socio-economic class dynamic of Whole Foods is not distinct—it is the typical Whole Foods community. This type of community is indicated by local blogger Aaron Foley’s commentary on the store’s opening day. Here, he dismisses both the claim that black people can’t afford to shop at Whole Foods and Robb’s claim that Whole Foods would “combat ‘racism and elitism’” as ridiculous. He notes instead that what was more striking to him than the racial makeup of the crowd was the number of people (“black, white, whatever”) knowledgeable of the local food producers and agricultural initiatives. While Foley may have been surprised to find this community, \(^{305}\)Ibid.
Whole Foods is essentially able to bank on its existence. Whole Foods is able to succeed because there is already culturally a place for it, and the right community will inevitably find it wherever it may land. This community has more to do with certain ideologies of food production and the consumption of quality food—ideas that are disseminated through education and best enacted when individuals have the discretionary income to make ‘better’ choices—than race or geographic location.

The inequality and exploitation that occurs with the rise of the Creative Class and its idealized community is clear in the case of the Whole Foods community of Detroit. Despite the proposed inclusivity and the attempts to bring all members of the community to the same level of knowledge about food and nutrition and offering them access to the same products, the lower-income residents remain, at best, peripheral Whole Foods shoppers, unable to act as regular members of that community. Yet, what makes Whole Foods desirable to those who cannot shop there are the same things that make it desirable to the people who do. McMillan explains the sentiments of a woman who participated in a healthy eating and shopping class offered by Dr. Woolbright, writing:

She liked that it was clean and pretty and bright, that she could sit down, have a nice snack, maybe meet people. She liked its wholesome, healthy aura. None of that was true of Walmart or her local supermarket or the corner store where she bought cookies. “Whole Foods is great,” said Brown. “It make you feel … it put
you in a right perspective of yourself being healthy.” What she liked about Whole Foods, it turned out, were the same things that middle-class people liked.\textsuperscript{306}

We are once again left with the fact that Whole Foods—aesthetically pleasing, full of sumptuous displays, offering caring advice for a healthy lifestyle and healthy planet—is something desirable because it exists in contrast to base-level food and retail practices. What I see as most important in the above account of Whole Foods and nearly all consumer reflections on why they like Whole Foods is the feeling it gives—the feeling that everything presented is ‘good’ and that you, the consumer, are being cared for. I would argue that it is in this positive affective state triggered by the shopper’s sense of belonging \textit{in} the brand that is most essential to the imagined community. This good feeling is something that overwrites the inequalities perpetuated by Whole Foods simply because it is a business that must make money.

\textbf{Gentrified Community: A Mirage?}

What I am concerned with in the project of gentrification, the arrival of the Creative Class, and the opening of a new Whole Foods store is what happens to the preexisting residents—those who the gentrifiers recognize but do not fully appreciate for their contribution to the unique nature of the space they have come to find valuable. The continued presence of the lower-income resident serves as a necessary problem for gentrifiers. They are, in Bauman’s terms “flawed consumers”— “not about to afford the kind of sophisticated choices in which consumers are expected to excel.”\textsuperscript{307} But they are

\textsuperscript{306} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{307} Bauman, 96.
necessary to the image of an inclusive community, that have improved the lives of the
‘poor’ through the presence of the ‘rich’; as Jeremy Seabrook notes, “The poor do not
inhabit a separate culture from the rich…they must live in the same world that has been
contrived for the benefit of those with money.” In gentrification, the ‘poor’ pre-exist
the presence of the ‘rich,’ but it is the changes in landscape that come with the influx of
wealth that announces the presence of the ‘poor.’ Prior to gentrification, ‘poor residents’
were just ‘residents.’ The spatial reconfiguration of the city in gentrification marks the
place of the gentrifiers in contrast to the place of the longtime resident and, increasingly,
the geographic makeup of the area leans towards those who have the means to consume
more, catering to their interests while slowly displacing the previous community through
a re-acculturation of the space.

With gentrification improving through destruction, the lucrative consumer
institutions that gentrifiers see as having both direct and indirect benefits for low-income
residents and that low income residents find themselves attracted to, even if inaccessible,
replace the resources that the preexisting community saw as necessary and valuable. The
appeal of the “clean and pretty and bright” establishments of gentrification is only
enhanced by these newcomers to the business community that claim that they are there
for the community, and that, regardless of the scale of their business or corporate reach,
they will listen to the local shoppers and give back to the community. This claim to social
responsibility and inclusivity is integral to rendering a positive image of privatization of
space in the interest of upscale consumerism.

308 Quoted in Bauman, 95.
The distinction that Mackey and Sisodia make between the businesses of Conscious Capitalism and acts of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is relevant here, as they explain, “A good business doesn’t need to do anything special to be socially responsible. When it creates value for its major stakeholders, it is acting in a socially responsible way.” In contrast, they see CSR as basically a public relations maneuver, in which “firms that are primarily profit-driven…graft social and environmental programs onto a traditional business profit-maximization model” to improve their image. Unlike the traditional capitalist firms that embark on CSR initiatives as a response to changing consumer interests or to save face after being criticized for their business, social, or ecological practices—the most commonly cited example of course being Walmart—the businesses that take up residency during gentrification are most often of the ‘conscious’ variety, having built larger social, ecological, and philanthropic goals into their missions. In fact, the landscape of the gentrified neighborhood reflects Mackey and Sisodia’s register of fellow Conscious Capitalists—Starbucks, The Container Store, Panera Bread, REI, and Trader Joe’s—and includes many other national (and international) retailers and service providers who fit the profile, holding strong ethical commitments and ties to upper- and middle-class lifestyle preferences—lululemon, American Apparel, Peet’s Coffee, Lush Cosmetics, and CorePower Yoga.

Here we find the commodification of ‘local’ as Main Street and Wall Street fuse with increasingly expensive retail properties being snatched up by high-end corporate chains that, like Whole Foods, work to present their stores as unique reflections of the

309 Mackey and Sisodia, 37-38.
communities they inhabit—they are at once national/global and local, the best of both worlds. The idea that ‘local’ is something ‘authentic’ that can also be ‘bettered’ validates the project of gentrification as a means to enhance, not destroys, communities. This belief masks the fact that corporate chains, despite their attempts at local flair, homogenize communities according to a globalized neoliberal ideology of consumerism as identity—personal, cultural, and communal—in which identity is represented by widely recognizable brands. ‘Community’ and the related concepts of ‘engagement,’ ‘goodwill,’ and ‘care’ are no longer actions, but things that we buy when we shop with ethical businesses, which, when locally situated, go uninterrogated as beneficial to the local community.

The opening of businesses that are inherently ‘good’ and ‘caring’ works hand-in-hand with the ideology of gentrification as good for everyone. These are not the businesses that take advantage of consumers and then have to perform damage control; they have the best interest of consumers at heart and, moreover, can help to shape the community by compelling individuals to choose to buy ecologically sustainable, fairly made and traded, and philanthropically-oriented products. The justification for the expense associated with ‘better’ products comes though the rendering of the caring community through participation in the local economy through the retailers of gentrification. The community becomes the collective of individual shoppers who engage in community action by interacting in and making purchases from these Conscious Capitalist institutions.
The reality of community as a social formation becomes obscured in gentrification and with the influx of (inter)national brands seeking to re-present the local, as the parameters of ‘community’ and ‘local’ are considered spatially, as buildings, roads, and monuments, not according to who has occupied and used the space nor the meaning that space has to those people. To truly promote a potentially positive form of gentrification as community—not just spatial—reinvestment, it is essential to consider that the built environment and its architecture are unique and important to the activities that it facilitates. The importance of space to community and the loss of community in the restructuring of space can be seen in the civic battle that took place over the opening of a Whole Foods Market in the Hyde Square neighborhood of Jamaica Plain (JP), Massachusetts. In this case, Whole Foods was not only seen as an effect of gentrification but, also, as a tool in an attempt to drive out a community by replacing an existing celebrated communal space with a space that discretely excludes those people, perhaps serving as an example for the later actions and underlying motivations of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation.

I find the divide over the Jamaica Plain Whole Foods exemplary of the way in which gentrification and Whole Foods as a particular instance both operate upon a contradictory socio-economic ideology. In JP we see an area that had been undergoing the process of gentrification for decades, as according to the local news and entertainment paper *Boston Dig*, “if the affluent white was the face of gentrification, JP was one and
done a long time ago.”  The arrival of this iconic feature of gentrification served as cause for alarm, not simply as a nail to the coffin that was slowly built, but because Whole Foods was taking over a space that, at the point of signing the lease, was occupied by Hi-Lo Foods, a locally-owned grocery store that sold Hispanic foods at low-cost and served as a central meeting place for JP’s Hispanic community. Yet, according to the logic of some of the area’s gentrifiers, Hi-Lo was a problem that need be reckoned with—selling cheap foods, many of which were processed and overall ‘not good for you’—and Whole Foods was the solution—as according to Amber Thompson, a condo owner who has resided in JP for three years, “…when it comes to grocery stores, and if you’re really paying attention to the things that are in your food, no other store comes close.”

Thompson is presented as the naive voice of gentrification, who, as a member of the Whole Foods community, shares in the company’s values and desire to ‘help’ others to be ‘better’, but also sees investing in an area through the purchase of property (she notes she is a condo owner) and local goods (whether or not those goods are made locally or sold by local businesses) as the best way to show belonging to and care for one’s community.

The introduction of new supermarkets into urban areas is often celebrated by developers and supporters of gentrification, as well as many politicians and neighborhood

---

leaders, as remedying “food deserts,” which the USDA defines as areas that have both high percentages of low-income residents and low-access to large grocery stores or supermarkets. In the case of urban areas, a neighborhood is considered a food desert if it meets the low-income criteria and if at least 500 people or one-third of its residents are traveling over a mile to the nearest supermarket. Importantly, as Betsy Breyer and Adriana Voss-Andreae note in their study of food access in Portland, Oregon, the USDA considers the presence of “full-service grocery stores, usually national chain stores” as the litmus for the availability of “nutritious, affordable food,” while also failing to weigh the distance people are willing to travel to find the foods they want at the prices they are willing to pay, which means that people do not necessarily shop at the store that is closest to their home. Breyer and Voos-Andreae’s study indicates that the presence of full-service food retailers does not necessarily result in greater access to healthful food for lower-income residents, with those on fixed incomes still traveling an average of 1.8 miles “past the nearest grocery store to arrive at the nearest low-cost store.” What occurs in gentrification is then the emergence of “food mirages,” in which “full service grocery stores appear plentiful but, because food prices are high, healthful foods are economically inaccessible for low-income households.” As food mirage, a

---

312 Daniel Monroe Sullivan, “From Food Desert to Food Mirage: Race, Social Class, and Food Shopping in a Gentrifying Neighborhood,” *Advances in Applied Sociology* 4.1 (2014), 30. Sullivan uses “‘urban revitalization/regeneration’ advocates” as such individuals “tend to avoid the term ‘gentrification,’” whereas my employment of “gentrification supporters” is to assert the knowledge of the project and its effects held by those who advocate its execution.


315 Ibid., 135.

316 Ibid., 131.
supermarket, even if it is ‘America’s Healthiest’, does not quench a food desert for the poor—it does not equate to better food access, let alone better dietary habits, for the whole community.

Similarly, the excising of the Hi-Lo in favor of a Whole Foods did not put healthier foods in the hands of the lower income residents of JP. It just forced them to travel further to shop at an affordable store—it is a mirage. A locally made documentary short shows the reality of many in JP’s community, as they have been subject to increasing costs of living in the area. A respondent in the film expresses dissatisfaction about the closing of the Hi-Lo, stating, “Yeah, we have Stop & Shop, but they’re expensive.” This statement is essential in the positioning of Whole Foods within the context of gentrifiers’ interests versus the needs of the community. Presumably, if many in the pre-existing community find Stop n’ Shop, a traditional supermarket, ‘too expensive’, shopping at Whole Foods is out of the question, regardless of whether the food sold therein is ‘better’. Moreover, this resident’s concerns about the cost of shopping at Whole Foods is confirmed in a 70-page report by the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council (JPNC), which included a “supermarket comparison” that indicated “among 13 staple items Whole Foods’ prices were 39% higher than Hi-Lo’s, while prices at Stop & Shop… were 12% higher than Hi-Lo’s,” and further that “Whole Foods… did not offer basic Latino items such as plantains and white cheese,” showing the store’s inability to truly provide for the community of Hyde Park. This quantitative

---

317 StateoftheReunion.
data adds material proof to what was prophesied about this change of retailers: the replacement of the Hi-Lo with a Whole Foods replicates gentrification’s empty gesture towards community improvement that centers upon an illusion of inclusivity while actually privileging the tastes and culture of more affluent residents.

Promoting health and well-being, as well as a variety of community goodwill initiatives, my research of resident reception, which I have discussed above, indicates that Whole Foods is expected to have exponentially more positive effects on a neighborhood than other supermarkets that could move in. However, as Daniel Monroe Sullivan explains in his ethnography of the gentrifying Alberta neighborhood of Portland—an area that he has defined as diverse, eco- and health-conscious, as well as increasingly educated and middle class—a mission-driven, natural foods-based supermarket, does not necessarily draw regular shoppers from beyond its core consumer demographic, even when attempts are made to engage the entire community.319 This is to say, that while the vast majority of residents may shop at a store like Whole Foods in their neighborhood, those most likely to shop at a natural foods supermarket are by-and-large wealthier, more educated, and white. Specifically, Sullivan’s research shows “that college-educated (62%) and white residents (60%) are much more likely to shop [at this store] weekly, regardless of age, gender, owner-renter status, distance from supermarket, or length of time living in the neighborhood.”320 According to Sullivan’s analysis, there are symbolic and socio-economic boundaries that contribute to food mirages. He sees the race and

319 See Sullivan, 31-32. Specifically, Sullivan has studied a store called “New Seasons,” which, in its product line and community altruism, seems similar to Whole Foods, except that it includes some national brand products and offers a senior discount.
320 Ibid., 30.
class elements of both gentrification and the health and well-being culture of the natural foods supermarket as symbolic boundaries for black and lower-income residents, who feel excluded from and resentful of their changing community. The statistics provided by Sullivan add quantitative evidence to the scholarship I have already discussed as indicating the discomfort and even persecution pre-existing residents feel when confronted with wealthier (whiter) neighbors, and the institutions (both social and physical) of that culture.

The intangibility of symbolic boundaries is important because they are formed from and reify longstanding stereotypes about who belongs where and what different types of people value. The symbolic boundaries placed around gentrification and healthful foods delimit who can be part of the community without overtly excluding anyone. The persistence of symbolic boundaries counters the positive potential of a “cosmopolitan turn” in which “the city celebrates the potential for the forging of new hybrid cultures and ways of living together with difference.” However, “without actually spelling out how this is being, or might be, achieved in practice,” this ideological construction of inclusive community is predominately aesthetic, functioning as a façade under which an unequal power structure remains. The scholarship produced by others and my own personal participant-observations at Whole Foods indicate that the interactions that take place in the privatized public spaces of gentrification are not evidence of a cosmopolitan turn towards greater inclusivity and diversity, resulting from

---

321 Ibid., 34. See also Anguelovski.
meaningful social interactions that have the transformative power to create substantial change to the socio-economic hierarchy of cities. Instead, these interactions are illustrative of socially expected behaviors within, what Elijah Anderson has termed, “cosmopolitan canopies,” which he defines as “settings that offer a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together. Canopies are in essence pluralistic spaces where people engage one another in a spirit of civility, or even comity and goodwill.”  

While Anderson sees the transformative potential of Canopies, in that they offer people a chance to interact with others in a manner that is respectful of differences, arguing, “When people have positive experiences again and again, this scenario becomes expected and, over time, is built upon. The most socially productive behaviors are encouraged and eventually become established, even institutionalized,” the actual lifestyle and living preferences of individuals, and the motivations behind and desired outcomes of community (re)investment show the persistence of the dominant power structure to which those outside or below are asked to conform if they wish to reap its positive benefits. The dichotomization of blackness and whiteness is central to Anderson’s account, suggesting that it is always-already the black individual who must prove himself as civil and safe to white people. In this, he glosses over the connection between whiteness and cosmopolitanism—a connection that renders spaces that are rooted within other racial and ethnic communities less than cosmopolitan.

---

324 Ibid., 70-71.
and therefore less likely to engender the kind of positive social interactions of the Canopy.

The communal importance of Hi-Lo, namely the type of social interaction it facilitated, was key in the long and heated debate over the transition of the property to the national high-end retailer. The Hi-Lo, like Whole Foods, was a business. It was not a public space, and that is not my argument. What was at stake in the closure of the Hi-Lo in favor of a Whole Foods was not the loss of a truly public institution; it was the loss of an institution that mattered to a specific group of people in contrast to the social expectations of the dominant group. This is the social cost of gentrification—the creative destruction of a community as it is replaced the ‘Creative Community’. These social costs are considered by Gregory Squires in his discussion of the partnership that occurs when city governments partner with private companies for the “benefit” of the community. Noting that the public has long since partnered with private industry—for instance, public funds were allocated towards the development of railroads, which have always been owned and operated by private companies—he discusses the privatism of urban development, which has only intensified since the 1980s with the rise of neoliberal economic ideology and policies.325

Squires employs the term privatism, which he traces back to American Revolutionary ideologies regarding individual freedom and personal wealth. The logic of privatism is that private business creates economic growth, but, of course, some ventures

---

produce greater profit than others, and this is what I see in the urban revitalization that has taken place in areas that appear high on Florida’s Creativity Index. Because of this, the spaces occupied by and offering resources to the Creative Class are given priority over those that serve the needs of other classes. Squires notes that privatism results in a population riddled by seemingly insurmountable inequality, conflict, and opacities because public debate and governmental accountability is minimized as the city’s landscape and its welfare is sold off to large, powerful private firms, such as mixed-use property developers and national chain retailers. In Jamaica Plain—as in Detroit, as in Chicago—the voices of lower-income, racial and ethnic minority, residents are quieted by the promise of economic growth and urban renewal as offered by name brand investors like Whole Foods. A clear example of the lack of democratic interest in the privatization of the city can be seen in the city’s dismissal of a vote conducted by the JPNC indicating that residents felt that Whole Foods was “not a food fit for Hyde Square.”

As the private sphere comes to shape the public, buildings may be renovated, sidewalks and roads may be repaved, but these improvements often come at the greatest expense of lower-income residents who, through the spatial upgrading, lose the sense of community and the social networks and services their neighborhoods offered. Crucially, the social costs of privatism have “multiplier effects”—business closings result in job losses, which result in individuals’ economic hardship, leading to family tensions—and

326 Ibid., 211-13.
327 Anguelovski, 188.
these effects are most felt by those at the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, those who have the most to lose. Thus, when an institution like the Hi-Lo closes, its community loses more than jobs and a place to shop, it loses the social network that underpinned its subsistence, if not its existence. In this specific case, the Latino community lost: the ability to practice cultural food traditions, which was made possible through the products available at Hi-Lo (foods that were not and are not available elsewhere in the region); the ability to communicate with grocery store workers in the language that they are most comfortable (the majority of Whole Foods cashiers do not speak Spanish); the ability to directly approach management to get the products they wanted at the prices they could afford (Whole Foods management is still accountable to regional oversight and corporate regulations on inventory and pricing, resulting in less flexibility to accommodate individual requests); and the sense of concrete social community and communal dependence that was facilitated by the less formal gathering space offered by Hi-Lo (the Whole Foods café is available to everyone, but people are not permitted to gather outside the store, as this is considered ‘loitering’).

The displacement of shoppers in the closure of Hi-Lo thus has had ‘multiplier effects’ as the Latino community, once robust and growing, and its cultural traditions, key to defining the Hyde Square neighborhood, have been siphoned off with the loss of this important space. According to Isabelle Anguelovski:

[The Hi-Lo was] a social meeting and gathering place where customers inside or outside the store would nurture existing social relations, share life experiences,

328 Squires, 212.
and just converse about life, families, and the Latino community. Former customers explain that people would bring milk crates and play dominos in front of the store. Hi-Lo had produced a new sense of place in Hyde Square and allowed long-time immigrants to re-territorialize their traditions… In addition, much of the social interaction was [about] available jobs or apartments in the neighborhood and around other resources. Information would be passed down, creating a strong sense of mutual support and tight community. It was a cultural networking spot, which was important for disadvantaged people.\footnote{Anguelovski, 189.} The issue of space is a supporting element in Anguelovski’s article, which focuses on food justice and the cultural practices associated with food consumption. But I would argue that food is only the consumer element of what Hi-Lo offered. When thought of as a grocery store—a capitalist venture and not a cultural institution—it is easy to justify its replacement with a more lucrative business that has established itself as such because of the quality of its products and its wider consumer appeal. But the underlying issue, recognized or not, was that the culture nurtured by Hi-Lo—a culture that was neither diversely ‘cosmopolitan’ nor middle class and white—was not benefitting the neighborhood’s financial portfolio. The displacement of the Latino community in the loss of Hi-Lo was symbolic as well as real, rippling throughout JP with “many social and cultural rituals... lost” and other Latino businesses struggling financially.\footnote{Ibid.}
When the key attribute of community becomes its ability to produce value, diversity can be sacrificed in the name of profit, as peripheral residents are asked to conform to the parameters of a profitable community. The closing of Hi-Lo resulted in the loss of actual diversity in exchange for what Susan Fainstein calls a community “designed with the goal of diversity,” which attempts to rectify the homogenization of (sub)urban landscape caused by commercial development through the incorporation of “local character” national chain stores and generic residential developments.\textsuperscript{331} The ‘unique’ design of each Whole Foods store comes in handy here. Without the requirements to fit a homogenous corporate exterior, the JP Whole Foods retained many of the elements of the Hi-Lo’s exterior design, including a playful retro sunburst clock and zigzag awning, and bright orange walls with yellow lattice overlay and paintings of tropical birds. But these nods to the building’s former tenant do little to placate the needs of the population it served, rendering them and their cultural attributes into aesthetics that give an air of ‘authenticity’ to the gentrified neighborhood.

Resident-consumers are generally placated by the ‘upscaling’ of their environment and the simulacra of public space offered by private companies, as Zukin notes: “Together capital investments and consumer culture encourage both city governments and city dwellers to think they could have it all: a postindustrial revolution with no human costs, both a corporate city and a new urban village.”\textsuperscript{332} In offering safe, clean pseudo-public space, the private sector is seen to be “more effective than

\textsuperscript{332} Zukin, \textit{Naked City}, 223.
government in every way,” at least for those who can afford to take part in the amenities that private business offers. With increasing development that is spurred by private corporate investors instead of public funds or governmental contributions, the institutions offered are not actually for public use with even open-air squares and parks being maintained with private capital. While private businesses are technically open to ‘the public’, proprietors have the power to choose who they serve and who they exclude—a choice that is based not only on who can pay for services and commodities but, also, who belongs within the community and who reflects the identity of their brand.

Despite the fact that JP was undergoing the gentrification process prior to the arrival of Whole Foods, the civic action taken against both the closing of the Hi-Lo and the opening of the Whole Foods serves to call out the underlying problem of ‘upgrading’ this neighborhood: that ‘better’ by the standards of globalized consumer society is resolutely apolitical in that it privileges the private over the public, an action that functions from a foundation of socio-economic inequality that is in contrast to the democratic tradition of this specific community. Attempting to render the landscape of JP according to the generalized, aseptic desires and palates of the gentrifiers, we are confronted with a form of social and political inactivity that agrees with Harvey’s explanation of urbanization as “a world in which the neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism, and its cognate of political withdrawal from collective forms of action, becomes the template for human socialization.” The replacement of the Hi-Lo

333 Ibid., 145.
334 Harvey, “Right to the City,” 32.
with *a* Whole Foods can, therefore, be read as an attempt to dismantle the political opposition the lower-class residents represent, simultaneously socializing new residents according to a politically disinterested individualism based on consumptive distraction. While the Jamaica Plain Whole Foods has since become a fairly conflict-free site, the community’s acquiescence to gentrification and the corporatization of its landscape suggests that the upscaling of neighborhoods and the allure of new consumer institutions is more powerful than a desire for an ‘authentic’ or ‘diverse’ community.

Though the argument can be made that any capitalist business limits the population they serve, regardless of their corporate or chain status, the homogenization of the cultural landscape that takes place as brand name chain stores come to in predominance results in the loss of a community’s unique character. The issue is that, when national brand name chains arrive in an area, there is already an idea of the community they represent attached to them, or, put another way, they already signify what the community *is* or *can be*. Using this brand name cultural vocabulary, neighborhoods and their residents are defined by the companies that invest in the space, with more valuable, high-end retailers and businesses indicating a more affluent, choosey, and desirable clientele. At the same time, recognition occurs at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, with the presence of brands that reflect the interests of lower-income and budget shoppers creating a different type of community. Development is then an uneven process that is based on not only *who* resides within a community but, also and moreover, based on what a community is projected to become. This tension between *what is* and *what could be* lies at the core of debates over Whole Foods as the
brand of gentrification. With the optimism surrounding what Whole Foods will bring in cities like Buffalo and Rochester, and with condos listed at $309k next to the Whole Foods in Detroit, there is evidence that people *know* what it means to be a Whole Foods neighborhood and that they *want* to share in that splendor. And still, little attention is called to lower income residents, who as I have shown, are pushed out by a culture of exclusivity that does not benefit from their residency and at times even disavows their existence. This is a further problem in working class cities and suburbs—the sites where Whole Foods is now breaking ground—as they also lack the resources to become dedicated Whole Foods shoppers or regularly partake in the bourgeois shopping and dining venues that emerge alongside the natural foods supermarket.

When there are concerns about the costs of gentrification, Whole Foods offers a consolation for the working class community member. In addition to making the neighborhood safer and more welcoming, Whole Foods offers new employment opportunities, which are undeniably important to divested working class areas, as these potential jobs are always emphasized in the local news coverage of the plans for the opening of a Whole Foods store.335 However, neither Whole Foods nor the local news reporters call attention to the fact that most of the jobs created will not offer a pay rate commensurate with the increased costs of living in the gentrified neighborhood. In fact, as I will show in the next chapter, the wage one earns for working at Whole Foods does not necessarily even afford that individual the ability to shop at the store. Because this

fact remains obscured, it is the company’s positive reputation as a fair and caring employer that wins over working class residents looking for work. With the company bearing the promise of building better communities and helping individuals better themselves, employment with Whole Foods is often seen as an avenue towards personal career growth and the ability to ‘make a difference’. In reality however, the corporate structure of Whole Foods mirrors the same social and economic inequalities that are present in the gentrifying community, meaning that ‘team members’ are unequal from the get-go and, far from closing that gap, Whole Foods uses it to their economic advantage.
CHAPTER 5

The Labor of Consciousness

We Support Team Member Happiness and Excellence

Our success is dependent upon the collective energy and intelligence of all of our team members. We strive to create a work environment where motivated team members can flourish and succeed to their highest potential. We appreciate effort and reward results.\textsuperscript{336}

By calling on community members to join its “team,” Whole Foods shows its dependence on the community at both ends of the commodity cycle—as customers and as laborers—and the community becomes dependent upon Whole Foods as a retailer, philanthropic actor, and an employer. Yet, as with other facets of their mission, the company’s Core Value to “Support Team Member Happiness and Excellence” is indicative of the contradiction between its ideology and practices. The interdependence that the company prides itself on in the prioritization of ‘teamwork’ is countered by assertions of team member accountability for “our own success and failures,” claiming, “we are responsible for our own happiness and success.”\textsuperscript{337} As with traditional capitalism, the Whole Foods team member’s successes and failures belong to him alone, as a reflection of his willingness and ability to perform according to company standards.


\textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
Thus, while Whole Foods presents teamwork as an opportunity for people to build on their natural inclination to bond and work towards common goals, the company also reproduces the notion that individuals must first work for their own self-preservation and validation. As team members, individual workers still need to distinguish themselves by proving the unique value of their labor.

However, at Whole Foods, distinguishing oneself as an exemplary team member is not simply about selling the most kombucha or stacking the most aesthetically pleasing pyramid of oranges, though these efforts are no doubt worthy of attention. To meet the demands of being an exceptional Whole Foods team member, the individual must convey the emotionality of the brand—the team member must care and must do so sincerely, balancing emotionality and constraint to meet the culturally accepted middle class affective state of the Whole Foods shopper. With personality and “emotional intelligence” as key factors to success in the company, not everyone is suited to work at Whole Foods. In this chapter, I will explain what it takes to be the ‘right’ person for the Whole Foods team as well as why team members are seen as having different aptitudes for success and, accordingly, suited for different roles with different pay rates. And yet, despite the obvious hierarchy of leadership within the corporation and its stores, the company holds steadfast to the teamwork mantra, in which ‘what is good of one is good for all’. This reductive definition of teamwork ignores what it actually means to be part of a specific Whole Foods team and what it takes to function as a team member, team leader, or corporate leader. All of these roles differ vastly in what is expected of the team member as well as what the team member expects from the company.
What will become clear in this chapter is that the reality of employee relations at Whole Foods betrays the company’s vision of team culture. While the company claims to value diversity, equality, and open communication, its practices regarding team member promotions, pay rates, bonuses, and profit sharing, as well as their anti-union sentiments stand in opposition to those values. Far from acting as the facilitator for unique individuals to meet their career goals and ambitions, Whole Foods acts as paternalist provider, enabled by capital success and constrained by ethical imperatives. The company compels its team members to continue the company’s ‘good’ work mandating that team members constantly work harder to benefit themselves while, in the process, benefitting those around them through their work with a ‘good’ company. By redirecting the efforts of labor towards other-oriented goals, Whole Foods takes the focus off the actual inequalities that persist in their ‘better’ workplace.

The primary issue for Whole Foods in attempting to present the company as a ‘great place to work’ is based on a contradiction within capitalism that necessarily extends to Conscious Capitalism. Whereas Mackey sees the promise of capitalism in its ability to inspire innovation, leading people to more rewarding careers and better living conditions, capitalism requires that some profit from the work of others. When considering what it is to work—to labor for a wage—it must be understood that the work one does cannot be compensated ‘fairly’. There are those who are under-compensated, creating more value than they receive in return, and those who are over-compensated,
benefitting from the value created by others; this is the capitalist/laborer dialectic as presented by Marx. Under capitalism, the employer must extract more value from the laborer than is offered as pay—this is how profit is created. In agreeing to sell his labor to an employer, the worker’s labor no longer belongs to him and, therefore, the value produced by it does not belong to him either. In exchange for his work, the laborer receives whatever the capitalist deems is ‘fair’ compensation. All employees that are paid for their work, regardless of rank or wage, are selling their labor to another. Once a wage is set in the employment agreement, the worker has no control over his labor or the value it produces, which means that any innovation or efficiency produced by a specific worker is not his.

For Marx, alienation occurs because the laborer, working on only one facet of a commodity, is separated from the totality of his work and realization of its value. Additionally, in contemporary capitalism, with the creation of intermediary levels between ‘the capitalist and ‘the laborer’ as discussed by Marx, there are varying levels of detachment between the laborer and the realization of the value produced by his work. With some laborers compensated at a higher rate for their labor, receiving greater recognition and incentives for their work, the issue of exploitation through wage labor is complicated. This complication does not render exploitation nil, but instead changes a worker’s relationship to it with many believing that the way to succeed within capitalism is to obtain a higher-level position with a ‘better’ company.

Despite any upward mobility, the worker, whether at a desk or on the sales floor, paid hourly or salaried, and working for a traditional firm or Conscious Capitalist, never
stops being a laborer. Take the case of supermarkets, of which I remind you, Whole Foods is one. Supermarkets are operated through various levels of management, including store managers and assistant managers, department managers and supervisors; there is also an array of support staff including human, financial, and technical resources; lastly, but most crucially, we find those who are typically seen as the ‘workers’—cashiers, clerks, and cleaning crews. While these positions are differentiated in their responsibilities according to supervisory status, level of accountability to the store’s sales objectives, autonomy, and are subject to commensurate pay, all of these individuals are similarly working for someone else. The distinction and hierarchy within the store ensures employee accountability without the direct oversight of the capitalist who owns their collective labor. In the case of chains, national and regional oversight provide hierarchal layers of bureaucracy that keep all locations on the same page, reproducing the brand consistently while producing value for the corporation. Though stratified, with some employees even considered ‘employers’ or ‘bosses’, all workers who make their living predominantly from a wage and not in the form of stocks or shares are laborers; the distinction between types of laborers serves only to obfuscate the reality of their distance from the non-laboring capitalist.

Through Conscious Capitalism, Whole Foods may appear to lessen the exploitation of the laborer by creating less rigid hierarchies, better working conditions, more autonomy, indicating that they listen to and care about their workers’ needs, but the company does not provide a absolutely fair, egalitarian work culture, as to do so would be to end wage labor altogether. Conscious Capitalism may be ‘better’ for workers, but
only when viewed in relation to a completely unfair system. The practice of Conscious Capitalism has been revealed to be imperfect on numerous occasions through critical missteps by Whole Foods, including its attempts to block employee unionization and breakdowns in communication between team leaders and team members. The pros and cons of labor at Whole Foods have been discussed widely in popular and academic literature, sparking intense debate among the company’s stakeholders, supporters, and opposition. These critiques and ponderings most often approach Whole Foods as unique in its labor relations, ignoring the cultural and historical circumstances from which these practices have evolved. Labor practices must necessarily be understood within both the legal parameters and social norms under which labor operates. In reality, the employees’ complaints about their work at Whole Foods and their dealings with corporate oversight are not vastly different than those made by employees throughout the industry, and include precarious scheduling, requirements for extended working hours and holiday shifts, managerial favoritism, lack of support in dealing with customer confrontations, immobility of position and rank, and ambivalence to fatigue and needs for time-off. The issue for Whole Foods is that it promises to do more for employees—to care more and treat them as uniquely valuable ‘team members’, not as ‘workers’.

Discussing labor relations as a total practice that encompasses all ‘team members,’ from retail clerk to corporate CEO, elucidates the embeddedness of hierarchy as an assurance of productivity and financial success. The mandate for managerial oversight within capitalist business reproduces inequality both socially and economically through the stratification of workers whereby the one who supervises is worth more than
the one who is supervised. Because of the centrality of profit to all capitalism, including the ‘conscious’ variety, those who ensure the success of a firm are seen as being entitled to greater earnings. Interestingly, those at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy, with their integral role in the production and sale of products, are actually most responsible for getting the commodity to its purchaser. It is by their hands that the value of the commodity is realized. The hierarchy of wages is then in opposition to the worker’s relationship to the physical commodity, with those handling goods receiving smaller wages than those who handle ideas and ideologies. Those responsible for creating the cultural knowledge that gives the tangible commodity value are more valuable to the company. In this structure, the Whole Foods Market Corporation reproduces the status quo by placing the white-collar worker over his blue-collar counterpart and, at the store level, placing the team leader over the team member.

**There is no “I” in Team**

*We recognize there is a community of interest among all of our stakeholders. There are no entitlements; we share together in our collective fate.*

The notion of being a team member is essential to the ideology that Whole Foods wishes to disseminate about its corporate culture. As a team member, each and every person employed by Whole Foods is considered a vital contributor to the total effort and, in this, everyone is equally needed for the company’s success. The team is a totality that works together. While different members play different positions, the team can only win if everyone plays their part to the best of their ability. Yet, in a team everyone cannot

---

339 Ibid.
play the same position, and, more importantly, everyone is not qualified to play every position. Just as in major league sports, not all team members contribute in the same way and, thus, they are not compensated equally—there are MVPs and benchwarmers at Whole Foods, too, though in presenting an optimistic vision of teamwork, the company never calls attention to this fact. Teamwork is instead seen as an enactment of a natural tribal instinct that allows people to build trust and familiarity, inspiring each other’s strength and creativity.

At Whole Foods, however, teams have “profit responsibilities,” meaning that strength and creativity are only valuable in that they lead to profit. Because of this, each team member should contribute by filling the role that they have been deemed best qualified for, even if that is not the position they wish to hold. The ability to conform to one’s given skills is important. With Whole Foods offering incentives based on team performance, a team is really only as valuable as its weakest player. Those who do not meet the expectations of the others who are dependent upon them can be quickly cut from the team. This is not to say a team member cannot grow and improve within their role, or that it is impossible to transition to a different role. Instead, personal aspiration needs to be gauged according to the team’s needs. The individual must realize that fulfilling a given role is a reflection of their ability to give himself to the Whole Foods mission by acting in accordance with that which is in the best interest of the company. Though Mackey notes the team structure is about inspiring productivity and innovation, and that “no one is necessarily cut” from a team when it fails to meet its mark, he also asserts that

---

340 Mackey and Sisodia, 91.
team leaders recognize “poor attitudes [and] bad work habits” that are cause for termination—what is more evidentiary of these characteristics than failing one’s team? There is, therefore, an accountability shift that takes place with the instatement of the team structure at Whole Foods that is distinct from the direct supervisory relationship typical in other supermarket and retailer environments. Whereas in the latter employees are typically held accountable only for their actions as observed by their supervisor(s), at Whole Foods team members are accountable to each other while the leader acts as a representative authority over the collective. Though the team structure appears to give employees more input into the store’s operations, this change in structure does not necessarily mean more flexibility or agency in one’s work. Instead, the team structure is a panopticon where all employees are held accountable in the overall efficiency and profitability of the store—they must be both laborer and supervisor.

To understand how this shift in labor practices is typified by what we see in the team structure at Whole Foods, I refer to the theoretical framework set by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in The New Spirit of Capitalism. This work considers “the ideological changes that have accompanied recent transformations in capitalism,” specifically “the emergence of new representations of society, of novel ways of putting people and things to the test and, therewith, of new ways of succeeding or failing.” As I see it, for Whole Foods, the worker is agent and collaborator, independently and collectively responsible for the production of value, and, in this, the team member is not only accountable to

341 Ibid., 89-91.
capital in the production of value but, also and more directly, accountable to those on his team who are dependent on his success, as well as their own in the production of value. As Mackey notes, teams are as much about collaboration as they are about competition. In the tension produced between working together and being recognized as an individual, teamwork presents a new problem for the laborer, specifically if he wishes to rise in the ranks of leadership. The laborer now must prove that he knows when to contribute and when to take the reins. He must prove that he uniquely has the qualifications and personality of a leader while showing he knows when to seek advice and delegate work, being fair and judicious to everyone on the team.

Moreover, the Whole Foods team member needs to see the value in the work he is doing and the contribution he is making to the world over and beyond his paycheck, resonating with Boltanski and Chiapello’s definition of ‘the new spirit of capitalism.’ Combining what Max Weber and Albert Hirshman saw as ‘the spirit of capitalism’—the former recognizing the spiritual fulfillment it offers and, for the latter, the sociopolitical benefits it brings—the new spirit of capitalism is the ideological value and importance of wage labor that justifies participation in capitalism. Encompassing the personal and the social, with the new spirit of capitalism, capitalism is rendered the “best of all possible orders.”

This ideology has been proven by the rise of ‘middle class’ managers and the service industries in the West, and it has drawn people the world-over to the neoliberal capitalist paradigm, expanding its reach and ensuring its reproduction. Accordingly, with personal fulfillment and societal wellbeing attached to capitalism, those team members

---

Ibid., 10.
most interested in building their careers with Whole Foods see within the company the ‘good’ it can do for employees and the world, with those who are most dedicated to the company sharing in its mission and vision of the world.

However, as Boltanski and Chiapello explain and as we can see in the philanthropic initiatives taken up by Whole Foods, in the conjunction of personal gain to societal betterment we find a declining interest in the imperative towards equality, as monetary wealth becomes the essential feature of a well-functioning and caring society, even if a relatively small population holds that wealth.344 The new spirit of capitalism is an ideological device that is employed in contemporary managerial and leadership discourse as a means to gain popular consent from intermediary leaders who serve to ensure the production of value for capital. This ideology justifies their subordination along with the subordination of others in their operations who do not directly benefit from the increase of capital accumulation by their employer. Conscious Capitalism is a latter day example of the texts discussed by Boltanski and Chiapello in that it clearly outlines a vision of personal and societal fulfillment though capitalism, going further to present the ability for capitalism to ‘do more’ through other-oriented missions, and ‘giving back’ to those who contributed to their success, which, in the case of Whole Foods, are communities, workers, and the global ‘poor’. This feel good rhetoric makes the wellbeing of others contingent upon workers’ commensurate participation in capitalism according to their capabilities.

344 Ibid., 13.
Whole Foods’ definition of all employees as ‘team members’ sharing in a ‘collective fate’ problematically neglects the different types of work performed at Whole Foods and the different values attributed to that work, both socially and economically. This oversimplification of what it is to be a team member leads to a reductive vision of team members’ satisfaction, as what makes a happy CEO is different from what makes a happy mid-level manager or a happy hourly retail employee. Though Whole Foods claims that everyone in its employ is a ‘team member’, when this term on the company’s website and in corporate literature, it typically refers to retail employees, including department and store team leaders. The satisfaction of the retail team member is crucial to the continued success of Whole Foods. This individual serves as the public face of Whole Foods. While people may generally take issue with Mackey’s persona (including his conservative political stance and controversial outbursts), they do not interact with him as Whole Foods customers. Instead, it is up to the employees at Whole Foods stores to create positive relationships with shoppers. This affective engagement assures shoppers that Whole Foods is not just a big corporation, but is a part of the community. It is the tangible human connection that brings the commodity to life. It is also the one aspect of Whole Foods stakeholder relations that cannot be completely managed by the company in the production and diffusion of its ideology. Whereas other aspects of the company’s mission are fashioned according to the vision of its upper-level leadership and marketing experts—framed by text and held within photographic images to be placed on the internet and on their store walls—the retail employee is a living, breathing person who exists as part of Whole Foods only during working hours.
The in-store team members are in charge of maintaining the culture of Whole Foods while creating a unique community atmosphere that defies the basic homogenization principle of chain stores. In addition to handling direct customer relations, since Whole Foods operates on a decentralized model of store operations, it is up to the individual store’s team members to develop a product line and arrange for in-store events that will best suit the tastes of local customers. It is the team members’ responsibility to care for the customer. Their labor is not merely in the stocking of shelves, ringing of purchases, and frothing of lattes but, more importantly, in selfless care and devotion to serving the interests of the Whole Foods shopper, or, to use Arlie Hochschild’s words: “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service.” The team member is in effect paid to care.

But this paid care is a two way street. Mackey claims that by building Whole Foods on “love and trust instead of fear and stress” the company has been able to attract team members who see their values in line with that of Whole Foods and see their employment with the company as a means to make a difference in the world. Strategic human resources studies indicate that workers are most likely to stay in jobs where they feel that the work culture agrees most with their personal and career priorities and where they feel they are contributing to their company or society in a way that they find motivating and meaningful. This means that, regardless of the popular perception of a company, the benefits they offer, or the salary they pay, not everyone is right for every

346 Mackey and Sisodia, 88.
job because different people want different things from their work. With the rise of the service industries it has become the responsibility of the employer to find the employees who will fit best into their corporate culture and represent their product well.

With the proliferation of goods and services in advanced capitalism, including a variety of supermarkets and grocery stores catering to specific lifestyle demographics, the need to build a unique brand has exceeded media advertisements. The rise of web-based shopping and grocery delivery services has eliminated the need to even enter the supermarket, let alone the complications and frustrations of dealing with crowds and transporting purchases. In this atmosphere, human interaction becomes the thing that sells the supermarket and the shopping experience but only if it is executed with proper emotionality, making the customer feel special and important. In the case of Whole Foods, the team member who enthusiastically expresses Whole Foods culture ensures the validity of the brand by making the customer feel that he has made good choices by shopping at Whole Foods. The positive effect of the Whole Foods team member serves as living proof that the company is ‘good’ and, thereby, will do ‘good’ with its profits. Working at Whole Foods is, I argue, emotional labor that requires a specific affective performance of care that balances emotionality and constraint that has been normalized as proper. In this, the labor of the Whole Foods team member conforms to what Illouz refers to as “emotional capitalism,” wherein “interpersonal relationships are at the epicenter of economic relationships” with affect becoming a key part of the economic exchange as
emotion becomes constrained by the logic of economic exchange. With emotional capitalism, the care offered by the Whole Foods employee is part of the commodity, and as part of that commodity must be re-presented in a specific, expected way.

With the experience of shopping at Whole Foods the critical element in the construction of their commodity, recruitment of the ‘right’ people is essential for the production of value. According to Tamara Erickson and Lynda Gratton in their article for *Harvard Business Review*, the clear presentation of a company’s unique work culture, or what they refer to as a “signature experience,” is the key to “hir[ing] people who enthusiastically fit in, and thereby cultivat[ing] a more committed workforce.” Erickson and Gratton discuss “team-based hiring” as the signature experience offered by Whole Foods in which

[p]otential hires are informed that each department in each store (meat, bakery, and so on) comprises a small, decentralized entrepreneurial team whose members have complete control over who joins the group. After a four-week trial period, team members vote on whether a new hire stays or goes; the trainee needs two-thirds of the team’s support in order to join the staff permanently. This signature experience is in line with Whole Foods’ profit sharing program... [in which] bonus pay is explicitly linked to group rather than individual performance, so team members choose their trainees carefully—they want workers, not buddies. This entry into the company undoubtedly

---

weeds out lone wolves and conveys a strong message about the firm’s core values of collaboration and decentralization.\textsuperscript{349}

The signature experience gives the prospective employee a better understanding of the company’s operations and what leadership believes works best in achieving their goals. Team hiring shows consideration for the perspectives of existing team members and what they feel will contribute to the success of their team and the company in their assessment of the potential hire. The decentralization of hiring and the importance of teamwork align with the corporate values of interdependence, communication, and personal fulfillment serving as an enactment of the autonomy that Whole Foods leadership believes will allow team members to thrive and innovate. This team-based trial period also takes some of the hiring responsibility off of human resources and store leadership, as the trainee only becomes a full employee if team members reach quorum.

With the team member as a valued contributor to the success of Whole Foods and the ‘good’ acts the company facilitates, the alienating effect of labor under capitalism is implicitly negated. By integrating the whole individual into the production of the commodity, the individual’s labor appears more relevant to him and he is more willing to invest himself into his work. In turn, the Whole Foods brand is further rendered different and special because of the unique level of participation and care its team members put into their work. This emotional connection between the worker, his team, the Whole Foods brand, and the customer is at the core of what Illouz sees as emotional capitalism. I see the Whole Foods team culture as productive of a specific form of emotionality that

\textsuperscript{349} Ibid., 3-4.
requires the conveyance of a specific affective state that inspires positivity and goodwill in others. The positive emotional presentation by the Whole Foods team member is key to the development of long term customer relationships that lead to the company’s continued financial success.350

This is not to make the team member’s emotional presentation or their positive feelings about Whole Foods appear false. The ability of Whole Foods to attract team members sharing in its values, specifically healthy living, community engagement, and ecological sustainability, shows the cultural circulation of these values. Mind-body practices and social awareness of the counterculture have become mainstream with the privatization of solutions to social problems since the 1980s, creating the cultural conditions for the emergence of caring altruistically-oriented service companies. But the prevalence of emotional capitalism makes it no less laborious and, like all other labor, emotional work can become tiresome and stressful. In her analysis of flight attendants in *The Managed Heart* Arlie Hochschild discusses the potential stress and demoralizing fatigue caused by what she refers to as emotional labor, in which one must “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”351 In the case of the Whole Foods, the team member must express a form of emotionality constrained by a level of knowledge, respect, and positivity that reflects the value system of Whole Foods and that allows customers to feel that they are cared for and part of a community of ethical shoppers. The failure of the

350 Ibid.
351 Hochschild, 7.
worker to convey the proper affect and fully meet the needs of the customer is seen as a failure of the commodity to deliver as promised. Regardless of the worker’s personal connection to their employer’s values, the constant conveyance of a singular emotional state alienates that individual’s real feelings. For instance, Hochschild explains that if a customer is specifically demanding or cruel, the service worker must remain composed and pleasant, trying to appease that person.

This type of emotional stifling is not uncommon in the upscale shopping environment of the Whole Foods store. Numerous editorial commentators have cited the self-righteous, uppity, and even aggressive nature of the middle class clientele that composes the core customer demographic of Whole Foods. Thus, while the company attempts to consider the team member as a unique, whole person who is able to flourish as a representative of Whole Foods, the primacy placed on customer satisfaction requires that the team member internalize the values of Whole Foods as their own in the cultivation of a flawlessly positive emotional state (or, at the very least, the persistent masking of any negative emotion). In overwriting personal affect with corporate emotion a different type of alienation occurs, as Hochschild argues, “Beneath the difference between physical and emotional labor there lies a similarity in the possible cost of doing the work: the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of the self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is used to do the work,” further claiming,

“If we can become alienated from goods in a goods-producing society, we can become alienated from service in a service-producing society.”

In representing the Whole Foods commodity the worker cannot call attention to any social distance between himself and the shopper, as distance would render a level of falseness into the commodity. The team member must represent himself as part of the Whole Foods brand, fully encompassed by its mission and values as an embodiment of care. But the company’s attempt to place its team members and shoppers on the same page does not make them equal. The distinction between the two parties exists culturally in the socio-economic hierarchy that places the customer above the average retail team member—in the fact that one works while the other shops.

Within the Whole Foods commodity lies a degree of servitude, and this is not of the ‘servant leader’ variety as discussed by Mackey and Sisodia in which the “noble virtue of generosity” is cultivated, but the common form, wherein one person is subject to someone more powerful. The reality of the team members’ servitude is that, while they may contribute to the happiness of others by helping shoppers obtain what they need and what they believe they deserve, team members are not engaged in work that is a socially or politically transformative in a way that will bring people to “higher levels of consciousness,” as according to the model set forth in Conscious Capitalism. In his service, the Whole Foods team member is less an agent of consciousness than an attribute of the commodity, or a commodity in his own right. This form of commodification can

---

353 Hochschild, 7.
354 Mackey and Sisodia, 187.
355 Ibid.
only take place with the internalization of the ideology of care as something that is both authentic and something that can be sold and purchased. No matter how altruistic or ‘good’ the commodity is, the servitude of the worker to the customer reinforces the cultural ideology that the one who buys has power over the worker who makes goods available for the buyer’s choosing. And with the customer as chooser, it is the responsibility of the worker to make sure that person continues to choose to patronize his store—his job depends on it.

But emotional labor is not the invention of Whole Foods, and I do not wish to imply that the emotional labor that goes into working at Whole Foods is necessarily more intense or worse than in other jobs with other companies in the service industry. Instead, what is at issue is the presentation of working for Whole Foods as potentially more fulfilling or more meaningful than employment with other less conscious companies and the ideology that the labor that takes place at (and through) Whole Foods is somehow less alienating than other work. While Whole Foods offers informational resources giving employees up-to-date information on the company’s values and products, as well as ongoing training opportunities that enable team members to advance within the company, this is not the same type of extensive and ongoing employee training focused exclusively on indoctrinating employees to according to a standardized corporate affect through “emotional management” as in Hochschild’s account of Delta Airlines. Instead, Whole Foods attempts to attract people with the necessary level of “emotional intelligence” from

the get-go. Illouz explains the critical advantage held by those who exhibit middle class *habitus* in the post-industrial workforce, specifically in conveying “emotional intelligence,” with the ability of members of the working class to move up to positions with more authority, autonomy, and pay contingent upon their ability to represent middle class acculturation. Defined as “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions,” emotional intelligence became a central concept in human resources management literature during the 1990s and a desirable, if not necessary, trait to seek in potential employees. Emotional intelligence is therefore a social construction based on the acceptable emotional responses to situations, most notably: positivity, rationality, and constraint.

In *Conscious Capitalism* Mackey and Sisodia indirectly discuss the importance of traits of emotional intelligence in potential team members, stating: “anyone is capable of fooling a team leader for a while, but it is much more difficult to deceive the entire team. Probationary team members who have poor attitudes or bad work habits or who don’t fit the Whole Foods Market culture are not elected to their team.” The ability to “fool” the team leader is illustrative of the ability to perform emotion, whereas Whole Foods seeks sincere people for its teams. Because of the caring nature of the Whole Foods commodity, the sincere person who fits the Whole Foods Market culture reflects a high level of emotional intelligence, meaning they exhibit middle class characteristics that

---

357 Illouz, 64. Quoting J.D. Meyer and P. Salovey.  
358 Mackey and Sisodia, 89.
enable them to relate to the needs of the Whole Foods customer. The naturalization of the middle class as the personification of taste and social uprightness since the introduction of mass-production has ensured the prevalence of middle class values as American values. In effect, what differentiates the working class Whole Foods team member from Whole Foods shoppers is not his cultural awareness of how to act, but instead his inability to fully participate in that culture by buying into it as a consumer. However, because the whole person exceeds his performative role as team member, the potential exists for exposure of the fissures between the proper corporate affect and the employee’s emotions. There is a breaking point where, because of poor treatment, stress, or fatigue, the laborer externalizes his personal emotional state calling attention to the fact that he is not socially equal to the one he serves.

As I see it, the positions that require the highest level of constant, perceptibly flawless, performance of authentic emotional intelligence are that of retail store leadership, including store, department, and assistant team leaders. Though these types of jobs have traditionally been considered more blue-collar than white, store management must present the emotional intelligence expected of middle class professionals. I read the role of Whole Foods team leaders according to Illouz’s definition of the professional class, specifically as she describes them as “both [in] control and… controlled, whose positions demand a careful management of the self, who are tightly dependent on collaborative work, and who must use their self in both a creative and productive way.”

As a result of the professionalization of retail management, the Whole Foods leader can

359 Illouz, 66.
see himself as more like the middle class Whole Foods shopper, sharing in a common cultural lexicon that includes the conveyance of a proper, outwardly pleasant affect.

It is the team leaders who are responsible for reproducing the middle class *habitus* that ensures the value of the Whole Foods commodity. But leaders can only do this with the support of their team members, and this requires creativity and collaboration as the team leader acts as a role model and a productive member of the team. Setting the stage for the sale of the Whole Foods commodity, it is up to retail-level leaders to convey the emotional attributes that close the gap between the social and cultural capital of the Whole Foods shopper and the Whole Foods team member. This networking of affect bridges the team member to the customer, creating a relationship that both reproduces the dominant cultural values and results in the (re)production of capital—this is what Boltanski and Chiapello refer to as connexionist capitalism.\textsuperscript{360} The team leader is here a “network man” at the retail level, distinguished from the rest of his team in his ability to serve as a vital link between the Whole Foods ideology (as embodied by corporate leadership) and its enactment in the store (though team members).

There is tension between the company’s vision of an egalitarian workplace and the distinction imposed on the role of team leader. Hiring and promotion based on emotional intelligence and ‘fit’ into the existing culture functions in the same way as promotion based on technical or analytical skills. Emotional intelligence is an ideal based on intangible and unquantifiable criteria that helps to deem some people as being better suited for a position simply because they *appear* to be the right person. And yet, certain

\textsuperscript{360} Boltanski and Chiapello, 167.
‘types’ of people have a greater chance of being perceived as emotionally intelligent. Whereas the attainment of skills has been tied to class, through the financial ability to afford education and advanced training, the presentation of the ‘right’ attitude and personality is tied to the individual’s acculturation according to middle class values. Because, as I have explained, emotional intelligence reflects middle class habitus and is something acquired over time, people raised in middle class families and/or in predominantly middle class communities are more likely to present the qualities that are culturally attributed to ‘leaders’.

With those hired or promoted into leadership positions often most adequately reflecting middle class affect and, as based on their position within the company, potentially seeing themselves as above their team members, there is the possibility for socio-cultural distance between team leaders and members. While team leaders may be excellent at creating a welcoming community space that ‘delights’ shoppers, the ability to manage others, compounded with the stresses of the fast-paced work environment, requires an additional layer of emotional intelligence. Leaders must come off as naturally empathetic to diverse needs and, in doing so, illustrate the proper way to act as a Whole Foods employee, as the human embodiment of Whole Foods.

And yet, with Whole Foods leaders, as with all other team members, the whole person is not fully encompassed by the brand and there are ultimately cleavages between a properly ‘acted’ emotionally intelligent leader and the ‘real’ individual who is
employed by Whole Foods. Since team member satisfaction is a Core Value of Whole Foods, when team leaders come off as uncaring or distant to team members it disrupts the seamless reproduction of the brand’s authenticity. Whereas indication of a gap between the Whole Foods team members and customers points to a flaw in the presentation of the commodity, a gap between team leaders and team members points to a flaw in the commodity in its production. Inscribed within the commodity’s core, this flaw has the potential to destroy the commodity value in total. When team members come to find the promise of Whole Foods false, their dissatisfaction can penetrate and denigrate the brand.

By presenting Whole Foods as a culture of care, the failure of those in leadership to care enough ripples outward, as employees see working at Whole Foods as no different than working for any other capitalist business. Once a leader is perceived as unsympathetic, “phony,” or “two-faced”—playing nice for the customers and pretending to care about their team—it is difficult for team members to regain faith in their store and the company.

Reviews on the employment resource website Glassdoor indicate that many former employees of Whole Foods feel that the team members who are promoted to team leader and management positions are not necessarily empathetic or fair to the needs of the staff. Contrary to the company’s stated commitment to team member growth and development, some reviews from former team leaders indicate that Whole Foods does not offer enough training to enable them to successfully handle the interpersonal challenges that come with retail management. Instead, these reviewers see the progressive layers of

361 Here I evoke Hochschild’s distinction between the “acted” and “real” self of the emotional laborer; a distinction that the service industry tries to over-write by seeking employees that share in their corporate culture and values (132-33).
leadership and lengthy, inflexible human resources procedures as a substitute for fewer leaders with adequate managerial skills. Innovation, team autonomy, and individual stylistic freedom are not nurtured, but limited according to one reviewer who notes: “In leadership your every statement and action are overly scrutinized, feedback is often counterintuitive, and contradictory.”

This need to manage management is indicative of the company’s investment in the flawless representation of its brand, as well as its inability to fully place their faith in its team members to completely and appropriately meet the needs of the store’s middle class customer. Though the team leader has proven through his emotional intelligence that he shares in middle class socio-cultural knowledge, he is still a laborer. Problematically, while Whole Foods may pay relatively well and offer better benefits than others in the retail food industry, with an average starting wage of only eleven dollars an hour and offering mostly part-time positions, the company cannot attract workers with a firm footing in the middle class, even for its store-level leadership positions. It is, therefore, not surprising that Whole Foods has a ‘diverse’ retail team, with women and minorities each composing forty-four percent of their workforce, when these groups are traditionally paid less and more willing to resign themselves to less pay and part-time work than white males.

---

364 Figure referring the demographic composition of Whole Foods’ workforce sourced from Diversity MBA.
However, when considering emotional intelligence as something that cannot be perfectly feigned, Whole Foods inability (or unwillingness) to pay for a middle class workforce results in the company’s purchase of a simulation of the emotional intelligence it actually seeks—the laborer who aspires to middle class status, internalizing middle class values and ideals as socially desirable. Accordingly, while Whole Foods states its commitment to team members’ achievement of a happy work/life balance (with time for their families, hobbies, and, of course, community engagement), it is the laborer who most aspires to be part of the Whole Foods culture and is willing to give the most of himself to the company who is most likely to move up the company’s ranks (as one reviewer put it, “it’s like you have to be an overachiever who ‘drinks the kool-aid’ so to speak”). Developing into a leader at Whole Foods becomes a form of aspirational consumption in which the laborer is working simply to consume what he sells.

**Consciousness on Top**

Seeing a high standard of living as tied to capitalism is a form of ideological tunnel vision supported by the new spirit of capitalism. And yet, despite what appears to be the thorough integration of this ideology into the American workforce, it still needs to be reproduced and reinforced on the ground, hence the necessity of various intermediary levels of management to serve as affective and productive role models for the value-producing workers. Like the management texts presented by Boltanski and Chiapello, *Conscious Capitalism* and the team member guidelines of Whole Foods justify the

---

pursuit of capital and perpetuate normative aspirations for socio-economic success by imbuing labor with a sense of “meaning” and “shared goals.” While Boltanski and Chiapello argue that there has been a rise in management texts and a decrease in formal management since the 1990s as teamwork has become the new form of non-hierarchical supervision, the corporate ladder at Whole Foods shows the existence and importance of hierarchy in the reproduction of the ideology of career growth as linked to personal development under capitalism.

For the Whole Foods Market corporation, as with traditional capitalist firms, there is a chain of command that ensures the mission and business model are being upheld and that the company is profitable, which includes the company’s national (worldwide) board of directors, a nutritional advisory board, regional management, and, lastly, store and department team leaders, which I have already discussed. The team model of Whole Foods functions like nesting dolls with each team having a leader and each leader being part of a progressively higher leadership team: the team leader belongs to the store leadership team, the store leadership team is headed by a store team leader who is also a member of the regional leadership team, and so on to the highest levels of Whole Foods executives.

Another takeaway from Mackey’s experiences with the co-ops of the 1970s is that idealism is only valuable when balanced with business savvy. When left to handle all operations without guidance, optimistic but undisciplined co-op members often found themselves in over their heads, with internal debates and a lack of accountability sooner

366 Mackey and Sisodia, 63.
or later leading to the decline of many member operated co-ops. The layers of leadership within Whole Foods ensure the continuity of the “firm’s higher purpose and creating value for all stakeholders” and that those leaders with the greatest capacity to “understand the relationships between all of the interdependent stakeholders” are found at the top.\textsuperscript{367}

Serving as directors, presidents, and CEOs, these individuals accept responsibility for acting as exemplars of the company’s mission, both inspiring and being held accountable for team member success. In the management discourse of the new millennium, corporate success has been tied to the presence of leadership that is highly motivated to enact the company’s mission and worthy of the trust and admiration of those in their employ. As Mackey and Sisodia explain:

When businesses are led by individuals who are driven by service to people and the firm’s higher purpose—who lead through developing and inspiring others—it leads, in author Fred Kofman’s resonant words, to “peace and happiness in the individual, respect and solidarity in the community, and mission accomplishment in the organization.”\textsuperscript{368}

A crucial part of this is making sure the ‘right’ types of people are recruited for and promoted to leadership positions. These individuals must embrace the Whole Foods philosophy of teamwork and reciprocity while maintaining a critical distance from those they are leading. By avoiding fraternization, leadership is best able to remain unbiased in addressing what is best for the business and all of its stakeholders. Because of the

\textsuperscript{367} Mackey and Sisodia, 34.
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 194.
diversity of the Whole Foods team, leaders are not necessarily seen as different from those on their team—leaders can come from any racial or ethnic background and be either male or female, as the conscious company does not discriminate. Instead, the ability to act in this position is the result of hierarchal thinking, by which the team leader is distinct from team members in his or her ability to lead and having been chosen to do so.

In *Conscious Capitalism* Mackey and Sisodia explain that those who can successfully blend the “‘masculine’ traits of aggression, ambition, competition, and left-brain domination” and “‘feminine’ values of caring, compassion, cooperation, and more right-brain qualities” are primed to become great conscious leaders.\(^{369}\) Whereas masculine traits once dominated business, political, and social institutions, the authors see the rise of feminine qualities as important to the “harmonious blending” of human values into public life, creating more balanced work cultures that recognize employees as full individuals with needs, interests, and goals. However, unlike Mackey and Sisodia, who see the increased emotional expression as creating more meaningful interactions, Illouz believes that the co-option of sensitivity by business serves in the reproduction of capitalism by giving it a more humane face. As a tool of capitalism, emotionality is commodified as something that adds value to the worker and the labor he performs, but only in that it is mediated and constrained by the social propriety of business relationships. Because of this, the attachment of feminine values to emotionally intelligent leadership does not privilege traditional femininity or female workers. Instead,

\(^{369}\) Ibid., 179.
because the emotionally intelligent leader must exhibit masculine characteristics as well, the individual who wishes to succeed in the realm of conscious leadership must be acculturated in a completely new way.

Because the traits of leaders are acquired culturally, it must be understood that one is not born with the ideal qualities of the conscious leader, but, as I have already claimed, this does not change the fact that those acculturated according to middle class values and affective presentation from childhood are more likely to attain leadership roles. In their discussion of the requirements for conscious leadership, Mackey and Sisodia present emotional intelligence (EQ) as well as spiritual intelligence (SQ) and systems intelligence (SYQ), all of which can be developed over the course of one’s life, unlike intellectual intelligence (IQ). With the traditional qualification of intellect as measured by IQ taking a backseat, the possibility to become a leader is seemingly less rigid. Instead of being an inherent capability, the ability to lead is subject to one’s personal growth according to specific cultural ideals. In explaining what Whole Foods looks for when promoting team members to leadership ranks, Mackey notes, “Whole Foods Market has found that it is far more important for our leaders to have high EQ than high IQ… We can’t afford to have analytically brilliant people if they are also arrogant, insensitive, or tactless.”

Because corporate leadership must exude company culture of other-oriented service in the retail industry, attitude can be valued over intellect in the selection of leaders. To create a culture of interdependence and communality, leadership must be

---

370 Ibid., 185.
empathetic to the circumstances of others and understand how the emotional states of others feed back into the culture. According to Mackey and Sisodia, conscious leaders “are acutely aware of the importance of service in helping organizations realize their highest potential. They also know that helping leads to more personal happiness.” In this explanation of “servant leadership” service is distinct from the service provided in the retail sector, and this is an important distinction that bifurcates any vision of a unified Whole Foods team. The corporate leaders are servants in the sense that that servitude has a higher purpose in the Weberian sense, as a ‘higher calling’. The ability of the leaders of capitalist firms to create value for the company is as such an act of altruism with the greatest act of service being in the benefit of the capitalist firm from which the financial and social goodwill can flow to “the larger community.”

The value placed on emotional intelligence in the discourse of Conscious Capitalism is rendered as a means of achieving altruistic goals. But, as explained by Illouz, “Emotional intelligence is an instrument of classification which, like the notion of IQ, is able to stratify social groups by the simple virtue of being translated in organizational roles, advancement, and responsibilities… [because of this,] EI [or EQ] quickly became a way to classify productive and less productive workers… and was used to control, predict, and boost performance.” In the employment of EQ for capital gain, the presentation of ‘authentic’ emotional intelligence and the desire to serve others is a marketable trait. The concept of EQ only offers a modified version of the class

---

371 Ibid., 187.
372 Illouz, 65.
dichotomy. No longer is it intellect that separates workers and managers, but ‘personality’.

While Whole Foods and conscious companies strive to strike a balance between profit-oriented management skills and people-oriented leadership skills, in placing emotional and spiritual intelligence at the top of their human resources priorities Whole Foods suggests that being ‘likeable’ or socially popular is essential to building a successful career with their company. But the popularity of the conscious leader is only ensured in that American workers find emotional intelligence an important characteristic of management. Emotionally competent leaders who value employees for their ideas and opinions—as whole people—have become the standard measurement for a ‘good’ workplace, as reflected in employee surveys, such as those used in the compilation of Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For,” which ask specifically about the credibility, trustworthiness, and camaraderie of those in managerial positions.373 In rendering real connections between the capitalist firm and those in their employ, the emotionality of leadership must be felt as authentic for the company, its capital goals, and its mission to appear sincere. The evolution of mindfulness thus equates to a more valuable leader over time as he grows as an individual and as a more full reflection of the corporate brand as he develops within that culture.

373 Fortune’s rankings are the results of employee surveys conducted by the Great Place to Work Institute, a human resources consulting firm. Companies having at least 1000 employees within the US and that are at least five-years old can apply to be evaluated by the Institute, which means that only a sample of US companies are assessed in the compilation of the “100 Best.” Whole Foods has been featured on the “100 Best” list since its inception in 1998, and was one of only four supermarkets named on the 2014 edition. See “What is a Great Place to Work?” Great Place to Work, http://www.greatplacetowork.com/our-approach/what-is-a-great-workplace.
Importantly, with leadership roles requiring a keen sense of both emotionality and rationality—the combination of general likability and an interest in profitability—not everyone is equally capable to be a great and influential conscious leader. The contradiction between the prospect for unlimited mobility and the reality of its limitations is justified with the rationale that leadership is itself hierarchal, and therefore the uniqueness of individual leaders means that those individuals are uniquely qualified to be different types of leaders. Through stories of team members who were able to rise in rank, Whole Foods presents a corporate culture that “motivated team members can flourish and succeed to their highest potential” while, at same time, indicating the exceptional qualities and dedication of those who evolve to reach the highest levels of leadership.374

We could consider Mackey himself to have climbed the leadership ranks, building the business from the small Victorian house it occupied in the late-'70s to its multi-billion dollar status today, but it is Mackey’s co-CEO Walter Robb who appears as the embodiment of the promise of a successful career at Whole Foods as attained through perseverance, positivity, and dedication. Robb began his career with Whole Foods in 1991 as the store leader in Mill Valley, California before being promoted to northwest regional manager two years later. Within a decade he was promoted again to Executive Vice-President of Operations (2000), then to Chief Operating Officer (2001), before arriving in his current position of Co-President/CEO in 2004. Robb comes off as a “regular guy”—pleasant and down-to-earth—acting as the counter-balance to Mackey’s

374 “We Support Team Member Happiness and Excellence.”
public persona as an over-opinionated libertarian. It is no surprise that Robb has become the bridge between stakeholders, frequently appearing in newscasts and the company’s promotional videos as the voice of the company. By regularly updating his blog on the company’s website, he follows through on Whole Foods’ commitment to transparency. Growing with the company, Robb shows the potential for a successful and meaningful career with a conscious business.

To further validate the narrative of the rising leader, Whole Foods presents the stories of a few other employees who have moved up its ranks on its website, including that of Xochitl, who was hired to work in a store’s prepared foods department and within two years became a trainer for the Denver metro region, and Stacey, who was hired as a buyer for a store in Santa Monica and now buys for twelve area stores. These stories are telling for what they indicate and what they omit. All of the stories on the Whole Foods website, including the board member profiles, imply the unlikelihood of moving from team member to regional or national director, with most advancements taking place at the store level or to the professional managerial level of the regional offices. By quietly revealing the constraint placed on mobility within the company, it is suggested that someone needs to be in the middle and not everyone can be at the top.

Yet, the stories of mobility are essential to the creation of an engaging, meaningful workplace. As noted in Conscious Capitalism: “Stories are the most powerful way of engaging with people at an emotional level; they can cause people to think, feel,

and behave differently. To facilitate team cohesion Whole Foods wants its workers to see themselves as relatively similar in status but, also, as being able to move up in the company by showing their personal leadership skills their personal dedication to the Whole Foods brand. Masking the real differences in the ways that Americans of different income experience life, the ideology of America’s ‘massive middle class’ serves to keep workers tethered to what are essentially upper-middle class values and lifestyles. The popular perception of the Whole Foods brand is, here again, essential, as it enhances the desirability of working at Whole Foods. The perpetuation of Whole Foods as better than other supermarkets means that working for Whole Foods confers a higher status upon their worker as the worker is seen to share in the ‘good’ products and acts associated with Whole Foods. These stories help people see their potential to grow and evolve in a meaningful way that contributes to society through Whole Foods. But these stories also help to represent the culture of aspiration, dedication, and service that Whole Foods wishes to build—a culture that encompasses traditional middle class values presenting all good things to those who work adding the caveat that you must not only work well with others, but also for the good of others.

Egalitarian Aspirations

Giving team members and prospective employees a picture of a company that cares about them as ‘whole people’ and that will give them the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential does not imply that there is the endless possibility to make money or rise above teamwork as a Whole Foods employee, even at the level of CEO. Though

377 Mackey and Sisodia, 190.
enactment of egalitarianism by Whole Foods is incomplete at best, unlike the vast majority of corporations it restricts the maximum earnings of its employees by instating “a salary cap that limits the compensation (wages plus profit incentive bonuses) of any team member to nineteen times the average total compensation of all full-time team members in the company.”\textsuperscript{378} In creating a ‘fair’ workplace, Whole Foods is predominately concerned with internal equity of pay, meaning that payment is perceived as fair according to those who work for the company, instead of external equity, as based on the overall economy in which it is not uncommon for CEOs to make four to five hundred times more than the average worker. The fact that Whole Foods can offer its CEOs a ‘higher purpose’ in exchange for lower pay is acceptable only in that those individuals are able to meet their needs and maintain a relatively high standard of living in comparison to the average worker. The salary gap between the retail-level team members and leaders and the top paid CEOs at Whole Foods may be much less than other companies, but it is still large. This disparity in pay reflects a distinct class-divide between upper-management and hourly workers that reproduces the inequalities of capitalism in a slightly more humane form, creating the illusion that Whole Foods is doing ‘good’ for its workers.

Because the existing socio-economic system has resulted in vast inequalities in pay and quality of life, it becomes important to think about what the form of pseudo-egalitarianism offered by Conscious Capitalism provides workers across the employment spectrum. The profits derived by Whole Foods are in direct correlation to the creation of

\textsuperscript{378} “We Support Team Member Happiness and Excellence.”

315
surplus-value. Because of this, the ‘better’ wages and ‘better’ conditions the company offers as an employer are relative to an exploitative system, not optimal conditions for humanity. As individuals who work for Whole Foods exist within a society that shapes their needs and expectations, the wages and benefits presented by Whole Foods must be framed by the history of employment in America. What Whole Foods provides their retail team member is a relatively satisfactory standard of living in comparison to the baseline requirements of the United States Department of Labor (DOL) and what is granted to employees by other supermarkets and retail chains, and, because of this, working for Whole Foods is justified as ‘better’ than the alternatives despite the company’s human resources imperfections.

Pay is the first factor many prospective employees consider when looking for work. As of 2014, the minimum hourly pay for a Whole Foods team member was eleven dollars—a rate considerably higher than the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour, which is, notably, far below a subsistence living wage in most geographic markets. Seeking a position with Whole Foods is logical for those looking for employment in unskilled positions in the retail sector, where most entry-level employees are hired at minimum wage. Even in supermarkets where employees are unionized, receiving nominal scheduled wage increases based on adequate job performance, it would take an individual hired at the federal minimum wage a very long time to reach a rate pay rate of eighteen dollars an hour—the average pay rate of a full time Whole Foods team

member.\footnote{The average hourly wage for a full time Whole Foods employee in 2013 was $18.89 as reported in Whole Foods Market, \textit{Notice of Annual Meeting of Shareholders: Proxy Statement}, January 10, 2014, 19.} The publicity given to the above average hourly pay and industry leading employee benefits at Whole Foods allows the company to appear caring and generous despite the fact that many of their retail-level employees struggle to make ends meet, especially those who have families to provide for.\footnote{Two workers making $11 an hour would make a combined income of $45,760 a year. The median income in the US in 2013 was $53,046. The average household size was 2.61 people, meaning that with only one child, a family in which both adults worked at Whole Foods would have lower resources per person than the average. See “State and Country Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html; Average wage discerned from \textit{Glassdoor.com}: http://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Whole-Foods-Market-Salaries-E422.htm.}

Once we understand individuals’ needs and the ability to meet those needs within capitalism, wherein the individual’s take home pay determines their quality of life and personal wellbeing, the presentation of ‘egalitarian benefits’ by Whole Foods becomes paradoxical. In that the company offers all team members the same set of benefits as based on tenure with the company instead of rank or position, these benefits are egalitarian. However, participation in the benefits programs and the ability to utilize benefits to the fullest extent is relative to the team member’s income. Because of the inequalities in pay, the ‘egalitarian benefits’ that Whole Foods prides itself upon are far from egalitarian in practice, as health and wellness services are more attainable to those with greater incomes. Even the benefit of paid time off is differently experienced depending on wealth, as vacations and holidays are often more enjoyable to those who can afford to travel or use that time purely for recreation instead of engaging in alternative or domestic labor.

In promoting their benefits as testimony to their care for team members, Whole Foods often focuses on its commitment to health and wellbeing, namely through its
employee elected and company subsidized healthcare plans, which grant affordable premiums to employees working over twenty hours a week once they have completed 800 hours of service to the company. As with the federal minimum wage, the employee health provisions required by the DOL are minimal. Prior to the instatement of the Affordable Care Act (ACA or ObamaCare), the DOL only required that employers deliver five benefits to employees: social security, unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation insurance, overtime compensation for hourly workers, and, for companies with over fifty employees, unpaid family and medical leave (FMLA, 1993). ACA is a distinct improvement over the previous requirements in that it mandates that all employers of more than fifty workers provide full time employees (classified as those working a minimum of 30 hours per week) with minimum-value individual healthcare coverage that costs no more than 9.5% of their yearly household income. Employers of over 50 workers who failed to offer affordable healthcare to their full time employees by the beginning of 2015 faced monetary penalties under the “Employer Shared Responsibilities Provision,” which places the availability, affordability, and quality of healthcare as a shared responsibility between the federal and state governments, insurers, employers, and individuals.  

For Whole Foods, which already offers insurance to employees, including many who are not considered full time under the ACA guidelines, the provisions enacted therein pose little concern, having no real impact on its practices.

or employees. In fact, the coverage offered by Whole Foods remains better than that required by ACA, allowing the company to maintain its status as ‘better’.

As with the federal labor guidelines, ACA serves as a baseline for what must be offered, which does not mean all companies will offer equal coverage in regards to quality or cost. The ability to offer ‘better’ benefits is important to the construction of a ‘good’ employer who attracts the ‘best’ employees. Since the post-War era, Americans have come to see benefits packages as an important part of their overall compensation. Historian Frank Dobbin shows the origins of employee-sponsored health insurance and other fringe benefits in the confluence of changes in public policy, business practices, and union interests that occurred during the late-1930s and ‘40s. By placing the development of privatized insurance historically, explaining America to be a nation that developed industrially (privately) before politically (publicly), Dobbin paints the image of a state that could not provide social insurance to its people and, as such, required the intervention of private insurance companies and capitalists to handle the task. Since that time, hegemony to the employer-sponsored benefits system has resulted in the perpetuation of the notion that the greatest level of individual freedom and ability to provide for oneself is offered through private industry, further increasing the dependency of human livelihood upon capitalism. This ideology has been counterproductive to the development of more egalitarian state-sponsored social insurance or welfare, with people

---

feeling that state intervention is tantamount to oppression and that, in going against the capitalist tide, they could end up even worse off.

While Dobbin notes that public policy shifts since the 1930s have effected the discussion of how much the government should be involved in social insurances, he also mentions the “frequently unintended effects” of public policy, giving the example of Social Security legislation leading to “increases in the popularity of private pensions.”

This same effect can be seen at present with the vocal opposition to ACA, with some Americans feeling that “ObamaCare” is an overly complicated system that costs them more money than completely privatized insurance (as tax paying citizens and policy subscribers) and strips them of their ability to choose. In the current climate, employers continue to benefit off of their ability to create a relationship of trust and care by offering their employees ‘good’ benefits in contrast to the lacking, inefficient, and even harmful governmental policy. This culturally perpetuated dependency on private business as the means for meeting needs allows Whole Foods to garner positive attention for only relatively ‘better’ terms of employment—terms that are becoming more common industry-wide with the rising of consciousness in capitalism.

For instance, the practice of offering subsidized healthcare to part time employees who have established a certain level of dedication to the company has become a standard among the more employee-focused companies in the service and retail industries as indicated by the companies featured in Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For,” which includes not only Whole Foods, but other firms highlighted in Conscious

384 Ibid., 1420-21.
Capitalism like Starbucks, the Container Store, and Wegmans. Praising these companies for offering ‘excellent’ healthcare benefits masks the fact that in the US, unlike other developed nations, personal health is contingent upon one’s ability to obtain and maintain employment with a benevolent employer. For Whole Foods to promote itself as a ‘good’ employer based on offering team members affordable healthcare, healthcare cannot be socialized—equal provisions cannot be made available to all people. Considering the importance of offering exceptional benefits, it is no surprise that Mackey would be opposed to a fully socialized healthcare system. Yet, the version of ACA that was passed bears no significant resemblance to plan for socialized healthcare originally sought by the Obama administration and, in effect, this modified system allows for Mackey’s vision of employer-sponsored health insurance to prevail while also enabling him to continue to criticize the inefficiencies and expense of ACA.

Positioning himself (and, thereby Whole Foods) against equal care for all, Mackey believes that the most logical route for saving on healthcare expenses is to let employees choose the coverage that makes the most sense to them and for employers to encourage more healthy lifestyles. According to Mackey, the history of benefits voting by Whole Foods team members clearly reveals that healthier people, who require less frequent medical care, will choose low-premium high-deductible plans paired with Heath Savings Accounts (HSAs), which enable them to save money in the event of a health related incident.\(^\text{385}\) Healthy people, the logic goes, would prefer to pay less in purchasing

\(^{385}\) According to Whole Foods website, during their last benefits vote 80% of team members voted and 90% of eligible team members are currently enrolled in the company’s healthcare plan. See “About Our Benefits.” See also Stephen
insurance since they are less likely to use it to the fullest. On the contrary, sick people, who are not committed to caring for their bodies to ensure their good health, will spend more on insurance because they will benefit off its use. Whole Foods, as such, incentivizes good health instead of pushing for more comprehensive, higher-cost health insurance plans. Aside from offering a generous discount on purchases at Whole Foods, the company promotes team member health through its “Healthy Discount Incentive Program,” which allows team members to obtain additional discounts on products at Whole Foods based on their level of wellness as measured by “certain biometric criteria,” and its “Total Health Immersion Programs,” which are intensive week-long medically-supervised healthy living programs offered to their “sickest team members and those most at risk for getting ill—those who are obese, have heart disease or diabetes, or have very high cholesterol or blood pressure levels.”

Mackey asserts that supporters of the single-payer healthcare system believe that people cannot make wise decisions regarding their own health and that high-deductible plans “discourage spending on preventative care,” in effect, encouraging poor health that requires medical intervention. By empowering people to make better health choices by giving employees access to quality food and nutritional resources, Mackey believes that the Whole Foods holistic (in both the natural sense and the all-inclusive sense of the term) system of healthcare is an actual preventative model, reducing the need for both routine medical care and expensive

Mackey and Sisodia, 96-97.


medical treatments that drive the costs of healthcare and have resulted in increasingly high insurance prices.

Yet, this model of employee elected benefits fails to consider the inequalities between laborers in both wages and socio-cultural knowledge, or *habitus*—two factors that have a great impact on which benefits team members will find most important and which team members will choose the options that have the most positive benefits for Whole Foods as a company. First, Mackey’s insistence that people generally care about their health and want to do what will lead them to optimal health has been proven false, and even Mackey knows this. As an advocate for a whole foods plant-based diet, Mackey *knows* that eating animal products and processed foods contributes to myriad health problems. And yet he sells these things in his stores because the majority of Americans, including those who are well versed in nutritional facts, consume these products *knowing* that they are not in the best interest of their health. However, it is true that people from higher socio-economic classes consume healthier diets and are generally more physically fit as a result of increased knowledge about foods and the ability to afford better foods, constraining their eating habits or choosing *less bad* options. This sociological fact has the effect of skewing Whole Foods Healthy Discount Incentives Program towards those employees who are from middle class backgrounds—those most like Whole Foods shoppers and who most clearly reflect Whole Foods culture as fit, middle class, educated, and white.

A second and related, though more problematic issue, is that, while the company indicates that the majority of its employees personally uphold high commitments to
wellbeing and nutrition, the company neglects to mention that many of these team members are part time workers who see Whole Foods as a temporary job while they work towards higher paying and higher status careers—a group composed largely of college and graduate school students who most often are single, without children, and in some cases receive financial support from family members and other sources of income. The single workers with no dependents save the company on healthcare costs in another way: by opting for less inclusive healthcare plans that require a lesser contribution from the company. As told by one former employee, of the three insurance plans selected by Whole Foods for team members to vote on in 2013, two “threw workers with families under the bus in order to lessen cuts to the benefit packages of single workers who have no dependents,” resulting “in significant cuts in benefits and increases in out-of-pocket employee costs.”388

According to this worker’s experience, the democracy enacted at Whole Foods mirrors the contemporary political practices in the US in which American voters are addressed as autonomous individuals instead of a collective citizenry (part of a team), and find themselves bombarded with promises but lacking the transparent information that is necessary to make educated choices. Instead of allowing for open discussions between team members and the negotiation of benefits with those at the corporate leadership level to arrive at the best policy to meet the needs of the greatest number of team members, in

---

this case, the company’s ‘conscious’ leadership drew on the cost savings to the individual as a means to entice the selection of the most economical plan for the company.

For Whole Foods, collectivity is achieved through team member voting on a given set of benefits packages that were selected by executives, not a collective negotiation of what benefits should be offered. In this, team members are acting in a similar fashion to consumers in the marketplace of mass-produced goods—they are choosing between a predetermined set of things with their needs and wants shaped by what is offered. In the case of healthcare benefits, by approaching team members as individual actors, asking them which criteria—cost or coverage—matters most to them as individuals, Whole Foods removes team members from the context of the team. As individuals, team members are not necessarily concerned with the needs of others on their team and, in the event they are, they are not made aware of how the needs of others may differ from their own. If Whole Foods team members were to engage in unions, they would be brought together as a collective to consider what was in the best interests of the whole team. The terms of employment and employee benefits could then be negotiated as distinct elements instead of voted on as packages. Bringing team members together under the guidance of a union organizer in order to consider the full range of the team’s needs, interests, and lifestyle factors would create greater understanding between team members and would likely help on the interpersonal level when dealing with the day-to-day stresses and potential conflicts on the sales floor. In seeing each other as a team of unique individuals who are working together for a common goal, this type of dialogue could
enhance team members’ willingness to accept a total benefit package that reflected compromise—something that is at the core of teamwork.

**The Un-Wholly Union**

Union mediation, thus, seems like the best avenue for achieving an egalitarian workplace. However, such mediation undercuts the paternalistic authority of Whole Foods as ‘good’ employer that knows what its team members need. More problematically, unions serve to achieve what is in the best interest of labor even if contrary to the corporate bottom line, making it more difficult for employers to prioritize the interests of some employees over others while claiming democratic participation. As with the third party inspection that takes place in the certification of organic and fair trade standards, union representation should simply serve to ensure that Whole Foods is following through on its commitments. But, unlike their partnerships with those certifiers, which serve as evidence of the company’s higher production standards, it sees unions as an unnecessary and inconvenient intervention between leadership and team members. This mediation, it claims, disbands with their corporate ideals of teamwork by creating a culture of distrust. The company’s anti-union sentiment is most often exemplified in popular accounts that relay Mackey’s decade old proclamation: “The union is like having herpes. It doesn’t kill you, but it’s unpleasant and inconvenient, and it stops a lot of people from becoming your lover.”\(^{389}\) This residual hostility is paired with the company’s

---

\(^{389}\) Paumgarten.
self-presentation as unilaterally aligned with the interests of its team members in its attempt to dismiss any employee interest in unionization.

With a proliferation of awards validating their human resources practices as some of the best in the nation, Whole Foods should serve as evidence that union membership is not a requirement of a ‘good’ workplace. Named one of the “World’s Most Admired Companies,” and “World’ Most Ethical Companies,” the success of Whole Foods as a corporation and an employer is indicative of the fact that the practices of Conscious Capitalism can benefit American workers and the profitability of capitalist firms. With the notion that we achieve our full potential as individuals when we contribute to teams and/or larger institutions, unions can seem stagnating, valuing tenure over innovation. Because of this ideology of individual growth, companies like Whole Foods that promote an open and nurturing workplace of career mobility can be appealing despite or even because of their non-union status. While many union members and labor activists claim that the company’s stance against employee unionization is reason to boycott the chain, the waning of labor unions over the past century has caused few consumers and workers to make much of the absence of unions from Whole Foods, let alone whole-heartedly abandon shopping at its stores. Moreover, to judge Whole Foods as different or special for its anti-union sentiments is to neglect the paternalistic nature of corporate leadership overall and the desire to keep workers docile, malleable, and dependent by keeping

390 “Why We’re a Great Place to Work,” Whole Foods Market, http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/careers/why-were-a-great-place-work. Note that Ethisphere and WorkplaceDynamics are, like The Great Place to Work Institute, for-profit firms that recruit participants from the business community who are then assessed for their published lists and awards. See also “About Us,” Top Workplaces, http://www.topworkplaces.com/about.php, and “About,” Ethisphere, http://ethisphere.com/about/.
unions outside of their shop doors. This imperative against unionization is common across all capitalist industry and can be seen throughout the history of grocery retailing.

At the turn of the century when few chains existed, grocery workers’ unions came about as a way for the clerks and managers of these small shops to band “together to seek community-wide agreements in limiting store hours.” The leadership of the nation’s first grocery chain, A&P, shared a similar sentiment to that held by Whole Foods at present—they felt that because they paid their employees well and “avoided layoffs” there was no need for unions. Prior to the institution of legal policy requiring corporate engagement with their employees’ unions, the leadership at the A&P refused to negotiate with the unions the represented nearly 90,000 of the chain’s employees. A&P took every possible measure to deter interest in union membership—granting paid vacations to full time clerks and managers, company-paid disability, overtime pay, and a shorter workweek. Even between the 1930s and 70s, at the height of employee unionization, A&P was able to minimize employee interest in unions, mainly through offering moderately better benefits. By showing their goodwill towards employees, leadership was able to increase employees’ satisfaction and stake in the company, making them less likely to take any action that would put those benefits in jeopardy.

Another example of anti-union practices is that conducted by Food Lion, which currently operates more than 1,100 supermarkets in Mid- and South-Atlantic states. This company has been steadfast against employee unionization since it opened the doors of

---

391 Levinson, 187.
392 Ibid., 188.
its first store in 1957. Like Whole Foods, Food Lion attributes its ability to care for its employees to the company’s non-union status, priding itself on offering “some of the industry’s best health insurance benefits, plus stock options and profit sharing.”\footnote{Mark Wineka and Jason Lesley, \textit{Lion’s Share} (Asheboro, NC: Downhome Press, 1991), 211.} But, as with Whole Foods, Food Lion’s ability to keep unions out of its stores has not been as cut-and-dry as employee satisfaction or a lack interest in unionization. A number of former Food Lion employees have expressed frustration with the company’s “unfair policies,” including inequalities in the company’s profit-sharing system, “cold and impersonal” management, and “no real feeling of security” in their jobs.\footnote{Ibid., 232-33; 236.} Employees have also charged Food Lion’s leadership with “threats, harassment, and interference” in the effort to keep workers from unionizing.\footnote{Ibid., 234-35.}

While narratives of scare tactics and corruption appear throughout the history of unions, the majority of workers are not adamantly pushing to unionize. Notably, the percentage of unionized supermarkets has dropped dramatically since the 1980s. A specific example can be seen in Washington, DC. During the 1980s nine out of the ten largest supermarket chains in the District were union shops, whereas only four of ten were unionized in 2013.\footnote{Abha Bhattarai, “Unionized Grocers Face Competition From Nonunion Newcomers to Washington Market,” \textit{The Washington Post}, October 6, 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/unionized-grocers-face-competition-from-nonunion-newcomers-to-washington-market/2013/10/04/58c97d1a-2484-11e3-b3e9-d97fb087acd6_story.html.} Because capital has been so successful in thwarting or blocking employee unionization, it is important to think about what the prospect of union membership offers workers in relation to direct cooperation with a firm. The purpose of unions is to ensure that workers receive a fair share of the value they produce for capital,
which includes not only wages but, also, other benefits that make it possible for them to meet their needs. But unions also work from a premise of equality—the notion that laborers should be paid according to a common scale. This is problematic in the light of the central ideology of emotional capitalism, which holds that individuals as unique and uniquely capable of different forms of labor that have inherently different worth. Further, unions have historically been a tool of the working class, therefore relying on the continued distinction between labor and management. This division is problematic for Americans who wish to see themselves as predominantly middle class and upwardly mobile.

Max Green links the rise of the service industries during the post-war period to the waning of union membership in the United States. Green claims that because these white (and pink or white-ish) collar workers are not subject to the stark class divisions that existed in the manufacturing sector, there are fewer grievances against leadership, making unionization much less relevant. Further, as seen in The New Spirit of Capitalism and Conscious Capitalism, it is advantageous for middle management and service workers, specifically those who wish to move up in their careers, to cooperate with corporate leadership and capitalists. This is especially the case of small firms where employees and employers worked hand-in-hand. Removing the intermediary efforts of the union, workers implicitly show their willingness and ability to engage with higher-level leadership, presenting themselves as sharing in the same cultural lexicon. What Green renders as a small firm worker mentality has become a tool of advanced

397 Boltanski and Chiapello, 153-54.
capitalism—and we can see this in the centrality of the ideologies of teamwork and ‘shared purpose’ in contemporary management literature. Properly enacted, a company’s signature experience should make the largest corporation feel like an intimate firm where all employees are valued as “whole people” who share in a common culture. The signature experience is a cost free way of attracting and maintaining dedicated employees who, if successfully enraptured within the company culture, will be less likely to seek union representation or mediation. This sense of ‘belonging’ is one non-economic form of worker compensation that adds to the overall benefits package.

However, as I explained earlier in this chapter, team members often note fatigue with the inequalities that take place within the team structure, including inefficient, unorganized team leaders, preferential treatment, and understaffing that result in some workers receiving a better chance at receiving bonuses and promotions. Additionally, while Whole Foods prides itself on flexibility and openness to team member concerns, a number of former team members providing reviews on Glassdoor also indicate that this ideology is rarely enacted in stores, where inconsistent and inflexible scheduling, strict attendance policies, and irresponsive management prevail. Despite the recruitment of culturally similar team members, this type of disillusionment with the corporate vision led those in the Whole Foods store in Madison, Wisconsin to seek union representation—an event that would result in positive company-wide changes for team members, but at the cost of this store’s union membership.

Six years after the Madison store opened, a number of workers found themselves at odds with some of the new and existing company policies and practices, as well as
finding frustration with the rising cost of the company sponsored health insurance. An open letter from the store’s “Whole Foods Workers Organizing Committee,” written in May 2002 states team member grievances against the company, including the company’s failure to empower employees and support their success and happiness, claiming:

The ridiculously high turnover rate, wages that are lower than the industry standard, pervasive lack of respect, constant understaffing, absence of legally-binding grievance procedure, and other poor and unfair labor practices—all of which have led to widespread low morale—highlight the simple fact that workers ultimately have no say in the terms and conditions of their employment at Whole Foods Market—not just in Madison… Whole Foods relies on worker apathy and lack of investment in their jobs to keep turnover high, and for the most part, wages, benefits, and other working conditions poor.\footnote{Mark T. Harris, “Welcome to ‘Whole-Mart’: Rotten Apples in the Social Responsibility Industry,” Dissent (Winter 2006), 64. Quoting letter from Whole Foods Workers Organizing Committee.}

Interestingly, while being overworked and underpaid are typical concerns expressed in the reviews of employment with Whole Foods, and causes for unionization more generally, a 2003 article in the New York Times suggests that straw that broke the camel’s back for the Madison team was the imposition of a stricter dress code, which employees felt was an infringement on their individual expression.

Regardless of the actual reason team members finally sought union representation, Whole Foods corporate management saw the main problem to be a
breakdown in the lines of communication between team members and leaders.\textsuperscript{399}

However, when the instatement of new management did little to alleviate the discontent it was revealed that there was a larger underlying problem. For the team, the issue was not the specific people in leadership positions but the company’s failures to deliver on its stated commitment to team member happiness and a democratic workplace as outlined in the company’s Core Values. The contradiction between vision and reality is evidenced in the following statement made by Jeremy Plague, one of the workers involved in the union efforts: “It’s all a great, worker and environment-friendly system until you get to the actual people working in the stores, stocking the shelves and ringing you up at the register.”\textsuperscript{400} This breach of ideology caused labor advocates to relegate Whole Foods to the same category as Walmart—a huge corporation that lacks concern for workers and is focused on profit maximization by any means—with conscious leadership of Whole Foods faring no better than his conventional counterpart.\textsuperscript{401} In the drawn out process of unionization, Mackey was depicted by union sympathizers as a petulant figure, stomping his feet and pouting at those who went against the phony culture of trust and love he has created.

Of course, there are two sides to this story. The account of the formation and dissolution of the Madison store’s union provided by Mackey in \textit{Conscious Capitalism} paints Whole Foods as the righteous victim of vengeful union organizers, who misled

---


\textsuperscript{401} Nathans.
employees in an effort to drive a wedge between team members and leadership. As told by Mackey, it was not team members who reached out to the union, but the union organizers who “gained employment the store for the purpose of organizing it.” The interlopers then earned the approval of real team members by making “unrealistic promises” and thereby turning the naïve associates against a company that had offered them open lines of communication.\textsuperscript{402} With this narrative in hand, Whole Foods brought allegations of union corruption to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Much to the dismay of Whole Foods, the NLRB dismissed the company’s charges, ruling the election to be legitimate and thereby allowing the store to proceed with unionization.\textsuperscript{403}

According to union representatives, Whole Foods stalled bargaining sessions in attempts to defer the unionization vote until after the company could institute more employee-friendly policies in hopes of dissipating union interest—a move that union organizers saw as undermining the company’s stated commitment to democratic participation in a collectivist workplace. But unionization was never what Whole Foods intended in their enactment of democracy. Unions are a third party and, therefore, an outsider to the team culture of Whole Foods. As an outsider they have no stake in the direction the company takes and cannot truly know what it or its team needs to be successful. In the minds of the company’s leaders, the deferment of union talks was in an effort to better understand why a union was even necessary—an attempt at due diligence in addressing the shortcomings of which they were previously unaware. If we are to

\textsuperscript{402} Mackey and Sisodia, 160.
\textsuperscript{403} Nathans.
believe that, as according to US law, corporations are people, then the oversight of employee discontent was simply an error in perception by Whole Foods, similar to that of busy parents who fail to notice their teenage daughter has stopped eating. In this scenario, the attempt at unionization was a cry for help, not a foregone conclusion; a sign of inadequate parenting that could still be rectified without the need for the intervention of child protective services.

But even before the instatement of union membership, the hands of the Whole Foods leaders were tied. As Mackey notes, while unions can make all sorts of lavish promises to prospective members, “companies are prohibited from making any promises concerning either compensation once a union-organizing campaign has begun and once the National Labor Relations Board has been notified.”404 With one store successfully unionizing, the voices of disgruntled team members across the nation came to the fore making Mackey aware that Whole Foods was not delivering on their promise of creating the best possible workplace.405 The Madison union served as “a huge wake-up call,” that, according to Mackey, ultimately helped “to make Whole Foods Market a better company.”406 Mackey tells of visits to every store in the US, in which he listened to team members concerns and dissatisfactions. Following this employee relations tour, the company’s leadership immediately set to work on improving a number of human resources policies, including providing better, more affordable healthcare plans.

404 Mackey and Sisodia, 160.
405 Nathans cites team members at the store in Falls Church, VA as being set to vote on union membership in April 2003, though the NLRB halted this election, the picketing of stores in Chelsea in New York City and northern New Jersey, and the union drive to organize employees in Whole Foods’ hometown, Austin, Texas.
406 Mackey and Sisodia, 160.
However, because employee concerns were addressed after the Madison store had appealed to the union, team members at that store were unable to immediately benefit from the company-wide changes to team member benefits that they had initiated. Those in Madison would have to wait until a union contract could be negotiated—a time lag that benefitted Whole Foods as it served to illustrate the inefficiencies of union mediation.

More generally, Whole Foods decision to offer better wages and benefits to all team members who did not unionize was a win for capital, indicating to workers that a ‘good’ company will always put the best interests of their workers at the fore and, because of this, if one works for a good company, the additional responsibility of being a dues paying union member is not only unnecessary but can be counterproductive.

The ability to create a self-regulating culture of goodness requires both isolation from the outside intervention and the ability to refer to a dialectical outside ‘other’ that serves to prove Whole Foods is ‘good’ in relation to the alternative. Whole Foods as an understanding, caring provider for their team members exists only in contrast to conventional supermarkets as cold, bureaucratic institutions that see people only as ‘employees’ to extract value from. The fact is that unions break with this black and white dialectical model, serving as a means for employees both within and across companies to engage in critical discussion about their workplaces and employers, putting their labor in perspective by considering it as part of a collective. This collectivity allows for dialogue that can result in the establishment better overall conditions for workers by making them less dependent upon what is ‘given’ or ‘offered’ by their employers. While it may appear that union intervention into privately held corporations results in modest gains at best, the
historical impact of unions and the prospect of collective employee action continues to
effect capitalist labor practices. This is clear in the case of the unionization of the
Madison team, which had a positive impact on Whole Foods employees company-wide
with the aforementioned gains in compensation, including a 120% increase in the starting
hourly wage, and the fact that these changes remained in tact after the union’s
termination, which sadly, took place only two years after its instatement. Moreover, the
improvements to the company’s human resources policies that were prompted by the
union efforts have had a ripple effect across the industry, as other supermarket and retail
chains felt pressure to follow suit in order to remain competitive in attracting and
retaining employees. But these changes serve to ‘better’ circumstances under capitalism;
they are not the best possible outcome for supermarket workers who, by and large, still
struggle earning less than subsistence pay.

As with the tale of the rise in union interest in Madison, there is no coherent
narrative of its dissolution. Its end often attributed to a general, undefined decline in
employee interest, though Mackey attributes the disbandment with the union to the team
members’ realization that the union was not only inefficient but that it was, ultimately,
unable to deliver on the more extravagant promises it offered (which he leaves
undefined). In contrast, union sympathizer Mark Harris presents the “company’s steadfast
refusal to engage with the UFCW” as leading to the NLRB’s reconsideration of their
ruling on the company’s claim regarding union misconduct—a ruling that barred the

407 Harris, 64, states increase in starting hourly wage for team members in the Midwest region to have increased from
$7.50 to $9.
UFCW from that store for this act of corruption. One factor Harris’s account glosses over is the predominance of college-enrolled part time workers at the Madison store. As I noted earlier, these employees, passing through Whole Foods on the way to their white-collar careers, are often not committed to the ongoing struggles of the working class. After their tenure at Whole Foods, these students likely move on and up, losing political interest as they enter the class of altruistic Whole Foods shoppers and conscious leaders. Problematically, having never been taught to listen and learn from others, these rising leaders and philanthropists are likely to fail to address the needs of those they are trying to help. The aid they offer will merely help them feel better.

The real problem posed for workers in the decline of union membership across the nation and the rise of the new spirit of emotional capitalism is that it has become axiomatic that capitalism can and will provide for everyone, and that under this system all people are fairly compensated for their contribution to society. The neoliberal ideology of individualism in addition to the cultural belief that the form of tenure protected by unions produces lackadaisical employees has driven a wedge between union ideology and what people have come to see as the best practices for achieving personal success. The inequalities inherent in the economic system are never given sincere scrutiny because capitalism has been historically naturalized and justified in the perceived splendor it has made possible and the dreams it is said to enable. The promotion of the illusion of a classless America, alongside the ideology that individuals can distinguish themselves through their hard work and financial status, amounts to the vilification of unions by Whole Foods and other respected ‘good’ companies. Hegemony
to this ideology chains workers to capital, unable to express their needs as anything beyond economic. In effect, everything from personal values to emotions becomes commodifiable traits that merit reward or result in dismissal.

By rationalizing that corporations are only as ‘good’ as the people who serve as their leadership and that people are inherently good and compelled to goodness, Mackey’s vision for Conscious Capitalism neglects the structural injustices within capitalism and its negative impacts on the lives of the majority of people. No matter how ‘good’ the leaders of Whole Foods claim to be, their new hierarchy still results in the extraction of more labor from retail team members than the company pays for. This surplus benefits its shareholders and its corporate leaders, who only make nineteen times more than the ‘average’ worker. The assertion that this salary cap is fair only holds water in completely unfair system, under which true egalitarianism can never be attained. What Whole Foods presents team members with is always-already relative to the company’s financial bottom line. This is to say that caring for workers must not only be cost effective for the company but that is should produce value—adding to the authenticity of its altruistic brand. Yet, with the economic at the heart of every matter, the care that Whole Foods offers can be read as sincere and special, enabling the worker to feel as though they an important part of ‘something more’—a collective that is inclined towards goodness and in which there are few insurmountable divisions. Whole Foods creates the illusion of collectivity by disavowing the elements of difference and distinction their labor model depends upon, and in doing so reproduces the ideology that we are all just about equal.
While American workers may be lulled into believing that capitalism has been the vehicle for opportunity and relative equality in their homeland and that its upgrade, Conscious Capitalism, will ensure the economic stability of the nation and its people, the dichotomization of labor and capital is pushed outward. There needs be someone to ensure that the nation’s ‘massive middle class’ continues to work, and work hard, knowing that they could be worse off. Because of this, inequality is deferred onto the distant laborer, who is imagined as not just culturally different but also, and more to the point, at a different phase of social evolution. Conscious Capitalism assures the First World worker of his position as both above and different from that of the Third World laborer and, because of this, enlists his help in supporting that distant other. By presenting Conscious Capitalism as a means for people to come together and express care for those below them on the socio-economic ladder, Whole Foods turns labor into more than the creation of value for its company. In next chapter I will show how Whole Foods presents the labor that takes place for its company through its partnering firms as necessary for the assurance of social justice across the globe. This action is, however, only possible if consumers see the value of investing their money in the purchase of altruistic commodities at Whole Foods.\footnote{Here I am referring to Andrew Ross’s Introduction to No Sweat in which he discusses the antagonistic relationship between US apparel companies and that of the developing world. See No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers, edited by Andrew Ross (New York: Routledge, 1997), 25.}
CHAPTER 6

The Indirect Action of Commodity Altruism

*Whole Trade: Improving Lives with Every Purchase™*

_The Whole Trade Guarantee program was created to highlight our commitment to ethical trade, the environment and quality products sourced from developing nations._

_Every purchase of Whole Trade products helps fund projects such as new community centers, schools and homes for real people. Look for the seal!*

My argument is that what _matters_ to Whole Foods and what drives its community giving efforts is what I have come to refer to as _commodity altruism_—the enactment of a generalizable notion of ‘good’ as demonstrated by specific ‘good acts’ that are facilitated through the accumulation of surplus-value from the sale of ‘good’ commodities to customers who know to buy the ‘right’ things. The opposite of direct action, commodity altruism is the disinterested production of goodwill as a side effect of the self-interested acts of consumption that feed capitalist accumulation. Commodity altruism, in effect, serves only to mask the inequalities that are created in the capitalist process by keeping consumers and producers at a distance from each other and, in which, the commodity serving as the only interface between the two. It is through this _indirect_ action, that Whole Foods ‘takes care’ of the local, national, and global communities in the way best

---

suited for a large, successful corporation: through the selective investment in the
standards of production that reify its mission and goals and dispersal of funds to
organizations, communities, and producers that support and share in its overarching
corporate objectives.

The products I see as most emblematic of commodity altruism are those carrying
the “Whole Trade Guarantee”—goods that can more generally be placed under the
parameters of ‘fair trade’ but branded for and sold exclusively at Whole Foods. Part of
the proceeds from Whole Trade products goes to the Whole Planet Foundation—a
private, nonprofit organization operated through the Whole Foods Market Corporation.
Because of this, Whole Trade commodities are imbued with the additional value of
altruism to appeal to Whole Foods shoppers at the ideological and moral level, appearing
as a viable means for creating a more socially just marketplace. For this ideology to
function there must be a cultural understanding that spending money by buying certain
‘good’ things is an adequate form of action, either in addition to or as a substitute for
grassroots engagement and building interpersonal relationships. Thus, while I have
shown that Whole Foods employs the rhetoric of community engagement and supports its
team members volunteerism in their local communities, the company indicates that the
greatest potential for widespread social change and the economic stability takes place
through its larger branded initiatives, which are directly related to consumer spending and
monetary contributions. Moreover, these programs established by Whole Foods work
from the premise that access to monetary wealth is the enactment of fairness and equality.
In this chapter I will show how the notion of altruism and communal betterment embedded in the Whole Trade Guarantee conflates integration into the global market with socio-economic progress by grafting American (and Western) neoliberal economic and consumerist lifestyle ideologies onto producers in the developing world. Through Whole Trade, Whole Foods expands and solidifies its global ‘partnerships’, ensuring the continuity of a steady supply of the exotic ‘ethical’ commodities that its customers seek. In turn, laborers in the developing world are supported through contracts that facilitate higher standards of employment and additional benefits like education, housing, and the prospects for community members to obtain ‘fair’ business loans through the Whole Planet Foundation. There is an inherent contradiction in attempting to serve the desires of Western consumers and better the circumstances of individuals in developing nations. The result is that Whole Foods acts in a neocolonialist fashion, obtaining goods that directly benefit its American shoppers while creating relationships of dependency that subject individuals in developing nations to the moral and economic philosophies of the West. The best interests of laborers and small business owners in distant regions are, therefore, conceptualized and realized according to the discretion of the corporate leadership of Whole Foods and its affiliated nonprofit organizations.

The appearance that Whole Foods serves workers and communities across the globe is directly referential to the Western understanding of what people in the developing world need and want. Importantly, these needs and wants are not the same as those of American consumers or people in the West more generally but relative to the lesser means afforded to these laborers according to their nations’ economies and
infrastructures. Building on the cultural imaginary of the ‘Third World’—raft with straw shanties, children with minimal clothing and exposed rib cages, and women in fields carrying baskets on their heads—Whole Foods perpetuates Western paternalism and aids in the ability for American consumers to feel sorry for the distant laborer. Playing on the sympathies of middle class shoppers, Whole Foods helps to ensure these consumers that the elementary needs of the laborer are being met; the company does not go as far as eliciting empathy, which would mean suggesting that these laborers should be able to attain the same quality of life as Americans. Far from reducing the distance between the producer and consumer, or rectifying the alienating capacity of the industrialized food system, Whole Foods transforms commodity fetishism through the ideology of altruism—an act that allows American consumers to feel that they know what the producer needs from life and work and to feel that they are contributing to fairness by buying the fairly produced commodity. The commodity value is still abstracted from the actual laborer but, here, that labor is re-presented in the brand and certification label on the food product—the seal that the Whole Foods shopper is told to look for. In these products, the value is the idea of fairness, which, in itself, is problematically unfair. By privileging commodities and corresponding monetary initiatives over direct engagement, Whole Foods helps to solidify the reigning notion that all we have to do is make ‘good’ choices when we shop if we want to see good things happen in the world around us.

**Of Free Markets and Fairness**

The general premise of the fair trade system is that, through the setting of price and production standards, free trade can provide the best circumstances for all people
involved. The agreed upon definition by the informal coalition of European fair trade organizations is that:

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers - especially in the South. Fair trade organizations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.\(^\text{410}\)

Fair trade partnerships should, in effect, reduce or eliminate the unjust practices and ecological degradation associated with capitalist industry. Fair trade contracts offer farmers prices above market average for their crops, instituting price minimums, which as Fairtrade International (FLO) explains, act "as a safety net for farmers at times when world markets fall below a sustainable level."\(^\text{411}\) Though these prices "follow market trends," they are guaranteed over a term, consistently higher than the conventional market, and, at minimum, are set to cover the expenses of production, which enables farm owners to pay fair and timely wages to their laborers.\(^\text{412}\) Additionally, fair trade communities receive a "social premium," a monetary return that is based on the sales of local fair trade farmers that is to be invested in betterment projects, which are, however,


\(^{412}\) Moore, 78.
most often at the discretion of or conceived by the partnering fair trade organization. Higher wages, in addition to better communal resources, should ease some of the hardships associated with entering the global marketplace. Yet while fair trade organizations and the brands that employ fair trade practices attest to the successes of the system, the majority of the global supply chain does not currently support fair trade initiatives, and even when fair trade practices are implemented, there are doubts as to how much the associated higher market prices benefit rural laborers and their communities.

Because the expansion and formalization of fair trade reflects a rise in consumer consciousness about the sourcing of commodities in accordance with the development an interdependent global supply chain, the associated ideologies and practices are subject to inherent contradictions. What is afforded to Western consumers today and to what we have grown accustomed, is the result of an equal system and the continuation of this level of consumer choice ultimately results on the maintenance of inequalities. We can see this in the historical development of the global commodity sourcing. Even prior to capitalism, the subjugation of the global South during centuries of European colonization and mercantilism led to the existing power dynamic and has served as the foundation for the present conditions of dependency. While fair trade has its roots in the national liberation movements of the 1960s, it was the “severe trade imbalances” caused by the deregulation of markets that took place during 1970s and ‘80s that made consumers acutely aware of

the inequities in the global economy.\textsuperscript{414} With the vast majority of large corporations operating out of the North, governments of the South were left unable to repay loans that were granted during the period of decolonization and national development following World War II. As result, these nations felt the need to agree to the terms of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) through the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under these terms, leaders agreed to create export economies in order to increase national revenues by removing protective tariffs and opening their lands and labor to foreign investors to pay back their debts.\textsuperscript{415}

The advantages derived from exploiting the global South increased with the instatement of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995—an organization that was envisioned as a means to serve as “a single institutional framework for world trade” that could facilitate trade negotiations and mediate trade disputes through the elimination of tariffs and quotas and the restriction of other non-tariff trade barriers.\textsuperscript{416} Tariffs that served to benefit the local economies of developing nations were thus prohibited as ‘protectionist’. This policy enabled affluent nations and their corporate entities to export cheap raw materials and agricultural products while forcing those nations to rely on imports to feed their citizens. Developed within the West with the interests of capitalism at its core, the WTO sets only economic standards, including investment and property

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid., 2-3.
\textsuperscript{416} Busch and Bain, 325-27.
rights and regulations. Tasked with the organizational objective of promoting free and ‘fair’ economic exchange, how value is created, how capital is managed internally, and what is done with the proceeds of exchange falls beyond the WTO’s scope of interests. The WTO only bears an interest in the maintenance of labor relations in the abstract, with general prescriptions against forced labor, child labor, and labor discrimination. The issue of labor more specifically is explicated and enforced by a separate institution—the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The harsh competition embedded in the neoliberal economic system and the fragmented, hierarchal intergovernmental regulation of the facets of production and circulation have resulted in inadequate governmental intervention into social welfare, spawning the creation of private organizations in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to come to the aid of exploited and underserved populations. In effect, the intergovernmental collaboration facilitating the maintenance and spread of capitalism under the guise of ‘independence’, ‘freedom’, and ‘competition’ has contradictorily led to a new form of paternalism, wherein private companies and NGOs can sweep in to act altruistically by aiding those who appear to be incapable of providing for themselves according to the standards of Western consumer capitalism. The resulting private interventions and ‘better’ standards of labor are therefore seen according to Mackey and Sisodia’s vision—as capitalism doing ‘good’ as opposed to the cronyism and greed that led to the exploitation of the developing world. Problematically, this ‘good’ is contingent

---

417 Ibid., 325.
on the pre-occurrence of that exploitation, for without that initial encounter there would be nothing to fix—no ‘unfair’ to make ‘fair’. These contrasting constructions must, therefore, be seen as completely based on culturally specific Western notions of ‘fairness’. By extension, ‘fairness’ must always reflects an interest in the sustenance and expansion of private business, the recognition of people as individual consumers, and the differential treatment of individuals and nations based on their relative position in the global economy. The emergence of private standards of ‘fair trade’ illustrates the hierarchization of interests based on economic and, thereby, political and social power. It is not the demands of workers and small farm owners in the global South driving the internationally recognized formalized ‘fair trade’ initiatives nor the ways in which they are marketed to American consumers, but the Western desire for other-oriented fairness as a means to justify the continuation of globalized consumer capitalism.

The popularization of the ‘fair trade’ certification and the growing corporate interest in producing fair trade goods has led to increased interrogation of the consistency of the enforcement of labor standards and the ability to deliver on the promise of socio-political empowerment. As indicated by Geoff Moore, a professor of business specializing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the fair trade conceptualizations of community and individual empowerment are the result of “the exogenous determination of standards” that fail to address the practices and social hierarchies that effect labor relationships in the South. Because Northern fair trade organizations can be “too preoccupied with their own agendas to recognize that empowerment is, by definition, not something that can be imposed,” attempts at enforcing empowerment can
often be *disempowering* to both workers and farm owners.\textsuperscript{419} The positive impacts of fair trade are thus extremely localized, and reflect the cultural dynamics of the communities they take place in, as well as the partner organization’s ability to correctly assess the needs of that community in advising the investment of the ‘social premium’.

The role of manufactures and retailers must also be factored in when considering the possibility for a truly beneficial fair trade system. While Western consumers may be seeking more ethically sourced products, they continue to demand value and, moreover, the company’s that sell to them must yield profits. Most major corporations’ engagements with fair trade are not seen as earnest attempts to rectify the inequalities resulting from price competition in the retail sphere. In a 2005 UK Food Group briefing, Anne Tallontire and Bill Vorley explain the disconnect that takes place between policy and practice in the realm of ‘ethical’ and ‘fair’ trade, stating: “In fact, the current trade environment is characterised by both a proliferation of standards for ethics and sustainability *and* the abuse of market power by powerful buyers, leading to a classic cost-price squeeze for producers.”\textsuperscript{420} The logic of free markets, which enables large, profitable companies to expand rapidly and cut costs through economies of scale, contradicts the actual potential for all participants in the productive process to be fairly compensated for their contributions, let alone the ability for “disadvantaged

\textsuperscript{419} Moore, 80.
"What is Fair Trade?"

421 “What is Fair Trade?”
Since, for the majority of retailers, the importance of labeling goods as ‘fair trade’ in the ability to meet a consumer desire that allows for premium pricing, the role of third party certifiers cannot be understated. Similarly, because certification results in additional expenses for the producing agents, they “are unlikely to police themselves.”\textsuperscript{422} Third party certifiers serve as the unbiased voice in the regulatory system, mediating between capital and consumer but, as Sociologists Lawrence Busch and Carmen Bain point out, there is still “the potential for cheating, bribery, corruption, and other chicanery.”\textsuperscript{423} The possibility for transgression is only enhanced by “the physical distance between buyers and sellers” and the simple fact that, despite claims of impartiality of inspectors, “very often [private] regulation is quite different from public sector regulation in that creation of the rules, monitoring, and enforcement are all found in the same private body.”\textsuperscript{424} The regulation process becomes muddy as nonprofits receive funding from or have even been

\textsuperscript{422} Busch and Bain, 334.  
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 338.  
\textsuperscript{424} Ibid.
created and are overseen by for-profit companies. Because of this financial entanglement it comes as no surprise that, as with the National Organics Program, standards are written with consideration to the interests of corporate manufacturers and retailers and that former industry executives are often given roles in enforcing producer compliance. Here, we find the tensions that exist in the fair trade practices conducted by Whole Foods as well as their private brand “Whole Trade Guarantee.”

A Whole New Brand of Fairness

Unlike other supermarkets and big box stores that integrate only the most well-known and abundant fair trade products into their inventories, such as coffee, chocolate, and bananas, Whole Foods carries a wide variety of fair trade and ethically-sourced products and the promotion of these items is central to the company’s overall mission of personal, communal, and ecological wellbeing. Yet it should be noted that when Whole Foods introduced the Whole Trade Guarantee in 2007, the goal was to have at least fifty percent of its inventory composed of fair trade certified items within 10 years. Though significantly beyond the scope of other retailers, this goal seems modest at best for a company built on an ideology of doing ‘good’. It must also be stated, even if obvious, that the profitability of these commodities is relevant to Whole Foods; the late introduction of the Whole Trade program is indicative of this. It would be illogical for the company to invest the resources into the production of this product line without advance knowledge of the potential for success. Thus, while Whole Trade is the private branded

certification initiative of Whole Foods, its value to Whole Foods is in that it there was an existing market for these products. Only Whole Foods stores carry Whole Trade products and these products are held to standards created by Whole Foods, which are then ensured and enforced by existing certification organizations and third party inspectors. With Whole Trade, Whole Foods created a new branded product—the company did not invent fair trade and it did not convince consumers that fair trade is something they need. Whole Foods simply offered something that was gaining cultural relevance in a new way.

Though the Whole Trade Guarantee shares most of the same criteria as Fair Trade USA, FLO, Rainforest Alliance, and the Institute for Marketecologocy (IMO)’s Social and Fair Trade certification, the combined authority of these certifications within the Whole Trade Guarantee adds credibility and value to the private brand as represented by its unique logo (Figure 4):

![Whole Trade Guarantee Logo](image)

*Figure 4: Whole Trade Guarantee Logo.*
Through the partnerships created with the inception of the Whole Trade Guarantee, Whole Foods’ reputation as the premier retailer of natural and organic foods and their commitment to transparency and consumer empowerment also contributed to the viability of the individual certifiers.

As consumer interest in fair trade products has seemingly grown in accordance with the corporate expansion of Whole Foods, with the most dramatic increase taking place since the beginning of this millennium (when fair trade products were predominantly found in European markets, mainly because of the promotional work done there by FLO426), the decision of Whole Foods to create their private certification standard illustrates their drive to maintain their position at the forefront of ethical retail in the US, as well as their financial ability to invest in value-added initiatives. Both Fair Trade USA and FLO indicate continuous growth in the sale and impact of fair trade certified products over their organizational histories, with FLO estimating the global sale of Fairtrade certified products at €5.5 billion ($5.9 billion US) in 2013; an over five hundred percent increase in the sale of Fairtrade products in the US since the previous year.427 We can see an early awareness of this consumer trend reflected in Mackey’s statement in the company’s 2007 press release for the Whole Trade Guarantee, in which he states:

With our shoppers' growing concern about ethical and responsible trade and with our Company's increasing scale and scope, the time is right for Whole Foods

426 Moberg, 178.
Market to help make more of an impact… We have a long track record concerning ethical business practices, equitable pay for Team Members and suppliers, safe working environments, and love and respect for all people and the Earth. We are extending that concern to the global community by bringing products from developing areas to the marketplace in a way that is a win for the producers and their families, for our shoppers, for the environment, and for poverty stricken communities where we do business.428

Here, Mackey indicates that Whole Foods wishes to ensure its vision of ethics is being enacted further along the commodity chain, however, he does so in a way that renders absolute difference between the American consumer and the distant laborers in “poverty stricken communities.” Through Whole Trade, as well as Whole Planet, Whole Foods asserts the dependency of the developing world upon the American shopper, who has the ability through his purchases to ensure the betterment of the conditions there—a promise that is only made possible through the successful integration of the developing world into the capitalist system.

In their market-based criteria for partnership for Whole Trade certification and Whole Planet microloans, Whole Foods mandates that producers consent to the productive requirements of a successful corporation. Whole Foods and its nonprofit and certifying partners recognize the difference in large and small firms in the various sectors they partner with and have drafted standards of production and profitability accordingly. However, whether discussing the agricultural Whole Trade partners or the artisans and

428 “Whole Foods Market Launches Whole Trade…”
small business owners who are recipients of Whole Planet microloans, all are required to produce value in excess of the human labor that is put into the production—there must be a *surplus* of value that can be reinvested to advance the means of production and/or used towards the repayment of loans. A partnership with Whole Foods is a way for agricultural nations to gain recognition in the eyes of the West and, in turn, slowly grow their economies and enhance the quality of life experienced by their working population but only as according to the standards of ownership and wage labor under capitalism.

With their leadership, specifically Mackey, holding firmly to the belief that in capitalism is the best framework for meeting needs and expressing the inherently entrepreneurial spirit of human beings, Whole Foods serves as the model for ‘good’ Conscious Capitalism that will come to the aid of likeminded nascent capitalists in the developing world. The altruistic initiatives of Whole Foods thus parallel the company’s vision for business and capital growth, in which large, successful companies can and *should* offer support to smaller businesses and the surrounding communities. We see vision play out in the donation of one percent of the sales of products marked with the Whole Trade Guarantee to the Whole Planet Foundation. The large scale and cooperative agricultural business conducted under the Whole Trade program facilitates the development of small business through the Whole Planet Foundation; this gesture is mirrored in the support Whole Foods offers to small producers within the US and Canada through its Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP), which I will elaborate on later in this

---

chapter. These programs show that big businesses and small businesses are not in opposition and, instead, as bigger businesses become more profitable, they are better able to share their wealth in support of small entrepreneurs. Commodity altruism is thereby compounded with overlapping of brands within a single product sold in (1) Whole Foods—a company that supports local and global communities, (2) carrying the Whole Trade Guarantee—a certification of the highest fair trade practices, and (3) funding the Whole Planet Foundation—an organization that supports entrepreneurs in the developing world.

The branding of these initiatives is essential in solidifying the connection between Whole Foods Market and the production of altruism. The cultural meaning attributed to Whole Foods in America gives credibility to the enactment of fairness for distant laborers with whom the consumer is unable to personally interact. Whole Foods sets aside the large scale of many of their agricultural partners in their discussion of fair trade, focusing on their ability to positively impact the lives of the working people. The narrative offered presents the company as the paternalistic caregiver for exploited peasants, who must learn the positive potential of capitalism to fully realize the value of their produce. We can see this in a statement made by Remond, a mango farmer in Haiti, who is quoted on Whole Foods’ website as saying: “Before [Whole Trade], we sold to the ‘vulture.’ Now we get more money. It's a beautiful program. We like getting the payment in between harvests because it makes people think of the value of the mango tree. We used to cut
down mango trees for wood. Now the tree has value." This testimonial from the distant producer allows Whole Foods customers to feel that their purchases of Whole Trade mangos have a more significant impact than mangos purchased elsewhere. The word “vulture” in Remond’s statement implicitly places Whole Foods and their altruism in direct contrast to all other companies and the predatory practices; Whole Foods appears to be radically different from the typical First World supermarket by placing concern for producers before the company’s economic gains.

However, in this unique form of aspirational altruism, the scale and wealth of the Whole Foods Market Corporation is not to be seen as the model to which the peasant laborer should aspire. The playing field is not level in the food or retail industries. The ability for Whole Foods to accumulate profit in the American retail sector is much greater than what the agricultural producers and retailers in nations in the global South can or should expect. There, the consumer economy is much less developed and the cost of living is much lower and, for Whole Foods to profit, it ultimately must remain this way. This means that while Mackey and Sisodia make the argument in Conscious Capitalism that these programs help “impoverished people… create and improve their businesses,” we must see the conditions of continued impoverishment of small farm owners, wage laborers, and the “self-employed” to be, at least in part, a result of the extension of capitalist industry into the global South in quest to obtain cheaper agricultural and human resources. In short, Whole Trade and by extension the Whole Planet Foundation do

---

‘good’ by reducing some of the effects of capitalist exploitation by creating global hegemony in offering a semblance of the Western capitalism to the developing world. Through the enforcement of higher employment standards, investment in social services, improved environmental protections, and support of independent businesses, individuals in communities partnered with Whole Foods reap a modified version of the benefits of living in the developed world, which in turn helps to ensure their participation in a system that remains radically unequal. It is crucial here that the free market is not seen as egalitarian—free does not imply equal. The producer/consumer relationship must retain distance between the two parties with the latter given the upper hand. The developing world must, to some extent, remain developing and never fully developed.

**What Fairness Looks Like**

The presentation of the accomplishments of the laborers and the agricultural sector of the developing world as a result of fair trade practices is the essential element in the promotion of fair trade initiatives. In its core ideology, fair trade exists to support the developing world—its industry and its people—not as a means for the corporate expansion of Western manufacturers and retailers and not to offer a sense of self-satisfaction to American and European shoppers. The annual reports of FLO and Fair Trade USA enlist the narratives and testimonials of supplier partners and their community members as evidence for the importance of fair trade in creating a more economically sustainable tomorrow for the developing world. These textual segments are enhanced by photographs of agricultural laborers in the fields, portraits of smiling
workers, and close-up images of produce held in rough, suntanned hands, all serving to add a tangible human element to the discussion of fair trade partnerships.

While publicly traded companies are required to produce annual reports documenting a summary of their financial data as pertinent to shareholders, nonprofits and NGOs are not subject to the same policy. The annual reports of NGOs like FLO, therefore, serve more as a record of organizational accomplishments for donors and interested parties, which means these groups can be more selective and artful in their choice of what information to present and how it is presented. FLO explains in its annual report that fair trade means not only a better living for those on the farm, but more opportunities for their children to “set out to new horizons… or [come] back to their communities, ready to plough their new-found knowledge into the family farm.”

Specifically, it cites the case of Alida, who, upon completing her studies 400-miles away from home, returned to her family’s farm to serve in the role of bookkeeper and has since advanced to general manager, acting as their business liaison at international trade shows. This narrative and corresponding image of a woman (perhaps Alida, though there is no textual indication that this is so) holding a sign that reads, “You have a right to have your say,” is indicative of the transformative power of fair trade for laborers in the developing world as they find their footing and independence in the global marketplace. Yet, Alida appears as an exceptional case, with the majority of the stories and images showing workers situated within their farms. These less monumental stories from owners of small

farms indicate their delight with attaining a greater number of customer accounts and better rates, which have led to increased incomes, lower production costs, and the ability to engage in environmental conservation, while those from laborers tell of their satisfaction in being granted a greater voice in the state of working conditions and the abilities to claim permanent resident status, attain living wages and sufficient housing, and, potentially, be promoted to supervisory positions.\textsuperscript{433} The story of Alida, as juxtaposed to the comparatively modest accomplishments of other fair trade partners, is the reflective of the fairness of capitalism, that is the outstanding success of a few that serves as evidence of the potential for \textit{anyone} to achieve greatness.

Although the annual reports produced by Whole Foods necessarily focus on corporate financial performance, including extensive financial information that is not required of Fair Trade USA and FLO, each year the company places great emphasis on the unique nature of its mission within the food retail industry, correlating its mission-based approach with its financial success. Aesthetically similar to the reports of fair trade nonprofits, Whole Foods employs an earth-toned color pallet and images of fresh produce along with the corporation’s facts and figures. The first page of the report begins by featuring Whole Foods Core Values, which are followed by graphs indicting “financial highlights.” The report indicates the company’s ability to balance the interests of its stakeholders (Mackey’s win\textsuperscript{5}), though it is prepared primarily to address the interest of shareholders. Because of this, Whole Foods focuses on the company’s continued

\textsuperscript{433} Ibid.; additional information found in Fair Trade USA, \textit{Innovating for Impact: Celebrating 15 Years: 2013 Annual Report}, 8.
financial success, discussing the acceleration of store openings and increased sales that offset its costly value and transparency initiatives that are essential to meeting the concerns of its customers, team members, and supplier partners. Placing the importance and successes of its altruistic corporate mission alongside its creation of value for shareholders, the annual report gives narrative to the continued expansion of the “good works” of their foundations in relation to corporate expansion and, thereby, financial return for the investor. But these foundations are ancillary to the state of the corporation, meaning that nuanced human-interest stories have no place in the annual report.\textsuperscript{434} Instead, Whole Foods offers heartwarming tales of the impact of Whole Trade on their website—a website that closely resembles the annual reports and websites of their nonprofit certifier partners.

On the “Whole Trade” portion of its website, Whole Foods relays the stories of producers who have benefitted from partnerships with the company and its affiliated fair trade certifiers. Here we find images, text, and videos that drive home the crucial importance of fair trade in ensuring equitable pay, health care, education, and homes to workers all over the globe. I see one specific ten-minute video produced by Whole Foods as encapsulating the cultural imaginary of the successful fair trade partnership; the cinematic enactment of the stories presented in FLO and Fair Trade USA’s annual reports. This video, entitled “Whole Trade Flowers Help Real People,” shows a day in the life of workers at the Elite Flower greenhouse in Columbia. These workers are able to take part in a company operated home ownership program and their children are granted

\textsuperscript{434} WFM, 2013 Annual Report.
the ability to attend one of two schools funded by a foundation created by Elite, and
viewers are informed that both opportunities have been facilitated by the increased
revenue the company has received through the Whole Trade program. Through personal
narratives centering on education and housing, this video artfully and cohesively
addresses two core elements of fair trade’s mission—creating better lives for workers and
their families and facilitating a better, more independent tomorrow for farmers and their
communities.435

All factual information about the worker and community initiatives and the
specific details about the individuals depicted are conveyed through text that overlays the
scenes. The accompanying sounds are that of the locations—the discussion in the
classrooms, communications between family members, friends, and co-workers, and
noises of clipping, crinkling, and motion—allowing viewers to feel that they are sharing
the space occupied by these people. Viewers are first introduced to the families first thing
in the morning, as they get ready for their day at the Elite greenhouse or one of the two
Elite schools. Unlike other schools in Columbia that often operate on half-day schedules
and begin enrollment at age four, the traditional Elite school runs all day and is open to
all children from infancy, allowing for their parents to work full time without the burden
of seeking and paying for childcare. The second Elite school is for deaf students. This
school is especially unique because hearing impaired children in Columbia are often
unable to attend school since the existing schools cannot meet their needs. Because of

435 “Whole Trade Flowers Help Real People,” Whole Foods Market, Accessed April 22, 2015,
this, these children never learn the Spanish language and are, therefore, dependent on their families for their entire lives. Throughout the first half of the video footage of the children at school is interspersed with that of their parents at work, where they are cutting, arranging, and wrapping flowers in paper emblazon with the Whole Trade logo; the viewer encounters a productive society, just like in America, made possible through this interaction with Whole Foods, an American company.

The day’s timeline leads to Jose, who is packing to move into his new home, which has been made possible through his work for Elite and its work with Whole Foods. Here we learn, “For many of Columbia’s agriculture workers, saving enough to purchase a home can take decades. For a single father like Jose, the barrier to home ownership is even higher.” We then seen Jose’s seemingly meager belongings stacked, topsy-turvy, onto a late model pickup truck. These things are driven down narrow streets, past sparse buildings and agricultural land, before being carried into a home with a deliberately unfinished interior “so that new homeowners like Jose can create their dream home.” Jose’s money savvy and entrepreneurialism are implied when the text informs us that he plans to add a third story to his home to rent out for additional income. When the narrative moves to Jose and his sons sitting down at the dinner table (complete with white tablecloth) to enjoy a homemade meal in their new home, viewers are informed that this meal in this home was made possible “thanks to” the Whole Trade program and Elite’s foundation. The affective engagement created in this scene connects the act of buying flowers at Whole Foods to this family’s livelihood and continuity of family values. This is commodity altruism—buying flowers becomes something more as these people are
delivered *additional* benefits, both financial and social, that would not be afforded to them otherwise.

Before the video ends, viewers visit other dinner tables, returning to the school children we met earlier. Viewers are then informed that one of the children, John, a hearing impaired teen, will be able to achieve his dream of attending university, while the younger children are able to receive consistent care and education, all because of the funds provided by Whole Trade. Surprisingly, for a video that centers on education and home ownership, there is a central and reoccurring appearance of food and drink, which call to stereotypical images of hungry Third World children and the importance of the intervention of caring Westerners to help these people meet their basic needs. Poetically, following a scene of a young boy slowly and carefully eating soup, the Whole Foods shopper is given this closing reminder: “Every purchase of a Whole Trade product is a chance to the families and communities of the farm workers.” The final footage illustrates the connectivity of all actors in the supply chain, showing a flower from its time in the field to being cut and packaged before finally reaching the Whole Foods shopper (which, if one wants to really be persistent, is problematic, since this narrative was about flowers grown in a greenhouse, not outdoors).

This video touches all of the keystones of the transformative power of fair trade for workers in the developing world, functioning as a different (and unequal) version of the American Dream in which workers become private property owners and see their children attain higher levels of education to advance socially and economically. This narrative, and what it implies, provides the American consumers with evidence that
capitalism works and that if they purchase with care, those workers and communities who produce the things they buys will receive the resources they need to live happily ever after. Apparent in the narratives of the program’s successes are the ways in which individual workers, entrepreneurs, and students have benefitted from the altruistic acts facilitated by Whole Foods, suggesting to American consumers that, given the opportunity, everyone can provide from themselves by engaging in enjoyable, meaningful work. This video, as with all of the promotional materials produced by Whole Foods for Whole Trade and Whole Planet, as well as those created by fair trade affiliated NGOs, asserts that hard work and the desires for education and private property are inherently human. Here, the affective bond rendered between the viewer and the individual in the developing world justifies capitalism and global exchange as the sole means to meet humans’ intellectual and physical needs.

**The Scale of Fairness**

In his book *Slipping Away*, Mark Moberg indicates that fair trade is likely the best-case scenario for mediating the effects of capitalism. In this project, Moberg analyzes the impact of the globalization of neoliberal economic policies on banana farmers in the Eastern Caribbean. Recognizing the imbalance of power in globalization, Moberg demonstrates that, because fair trade organizations and certifications reflect and reify capitalism’s current power dynamic, “there is a general agreement among farmers, other industry segments, and national governments that Fair Trade has materially
benefitted farmers and rural communities." He explains that, in comparison to the original intention to transform the world market, the current manifestation of fair trade is “ameliorative” to the more detrimental effects of rampant capitalism. Moberg is a cautious optimist, failing to share in Mackey’s enthusiastic vision for a heroic form of capitalism that will promote independence and innovation throughout the world. Instead, Moberg states that fair trade partnerships are a “new kind of dependence” in which farmers do not have “any more control over what he produces, how he produces it, or how he packages it.” The political and economic accomplishments of fair trade within the Eastern Caribbean are accordingly “replete with ironies.” Rural communities have achieved power in numbers, gaining recognition from politicians who often include the interests of farmers in their rhetoric and abstract plans. However, because these plans are often not fully realized in the actions of their elected representatives, fair trade farmers’ groups end up forming their own informal collectivist democracies, “supplying services that an atrophied neoliberal state has abandoned.”

Because Moberg focuses on the rising collectivity of small local farmers as outside of, if not oppositional to, their formal governments, he is able to present fair trade programs as empowering at the local level despite their inability to actually change the marketplace or the course of globalized corporate agriculture. Though Moberg nods to the problematic marketing of the “de-radicalized” fair trade, which large corporations and

436 Moberg, 224.
437 Ibid. He also puts this premise upfront in his book, stating in the introduction: “Fair trade is not a panacea for the problems of the underdevelopment, and in many respects it falls far short of its promised reciprocity” (15-16).
438 Ibid., 226. Quoting residents of Windward Island in the Eastern Caribbean.
439 Ibid., 228.
supermarkets utilize as testaments to their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), his claim that the inclusion of large corporations in fair trade programs can be ‘ameliorative’ is paradoxical, undercutting the very notion of fairness through equity, sustainability, and market access. By allowing large firms to expand their operations under the guise of ‘fairness’, fair trade certifiers are in fact hindering the competitive capacity of the smaller farms the movement was conceived to protect. This oversight gives the impression that small farmers can improve their livelihoods and communities through fair trade partnerships because it dismisses the fact that standards and contracts are increasingly being geared to meet the high production demands of industrial agriculture. As fair trade policies become more about individual workers and less about collectivity or the societal impact of farming, rural farmers are actually disenfranchised as they are made autonomous actors—individual laborers who must act in their individual interests in order to provide for themselves under capitalism.

Most importantly, in Moberg’s analysis he fails to recognize how the rise in the popularity of fair trade products has necessitated the increased production of those products—a scale of production that is only possible through large agricultural firms—an oversight possibly justified by the date of publication (2008), when consumer interest in the US was just beginning to peak, and only shortly after Whole Foods had launched the Whole Trade Guarantee. Yet, this oversight is replicated by a number of scholars who have chose to focus on the ‘smallness’ implied by the idealized notion of fair trade
production. By placing the responsibility for the loosening of fair trade standards on the certifying organizations and the misleading marketing of fair trade products on corporations and retailers, this scholarship delinks the interdependence of the two in the production of the value of ‘fair trade’ in the marketplace. Thus, while fair trade was, in its inception, to assist small farmers in an increasingly industrialized competitive market by encouraging collaboration and community engagement, fair trade standards have evolved towards the ‘ameliorative’ trend, with the growing number of partnerships between corporations and fair trade NGOs, as well as NGOs and intergovernmental bodies, like the World Bank. With supermarket chains like Whole Foods, and even larger retailers like Walmart, taking interest in providing consumers with fair trade options, fair trade farms to be large or, in the very least, collectivized into large units to partner with these Western retail corporations that are able to offer the benefits of long term contracts and even additional provisions beyond those required by Fairtrade International (FLO) and Fair Trade USA.

Because they require a large quantity of product that signifies as ‘fair’, it is important to these corporations that there is a singular definition of ‘fair trade’ so that a product from a small farm does not appear fairer than one grown on an industrial plantation. Corporations, therefore, have a stake in fair trade standards and seek to shape them in the same way that they have been able to shape the National Organic Standards. We can see the corporate influence on fair trade standards in Fair Trade USA’s 2013

440 See the collection of essays presented by Lyon and Moberg in Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies in which they focus on seeing fair trade as an alternative to and not an associated part of neoliberal globalization.  
441 See Fair Trade USA.
annual report, in which the organization notes its future plans to present a single fair trade standard for all firms regardless of size. Though the organization presents its initiative to broaden ‘fair trade’ as being to the benefit of all workers and communities in the rural South, the liberalization of standards circumnavigates the role of Western corporations in the rise of unfair labor practices as a cost-cutting measure. Fair trade certification and oversight places the responsibility for fairness in the hands of those who directly interact with agricultural labor, as well as the laborers themselves, effectively exculpating the owners of capital (as both plantations and corporations) who dominate the food industry from any a priori mandate to fairness. Critically, to the benefit of capitalism, because fairness is not a prerequisite for business, the evidence of the achievements of fair trade laborers appear as compassionate action by the corporate firm with whom they are contracted. We see this gesture of worker empowerment and corporate ethics play out clearly in the material provided in support of the Whole Trade program—a program that thrives because the scale of fair trade has grown exponentially over the past decade, a growth that has only been made possible by the evolution of existing standards and the production of new ones.

It is not my intention here to claim that Whole Foods is solely responsible for the loosening of fair trade standards, or that the Whole Trade Guarantee does not benefit

---

442 Ibid., 20, which states: “In 2013, Fair Trade USA updated its Independent Smallholder Standard (ISS) and Farm Workers Standard (FWS) to reach millions of farmers historically left out of the Fair Trade system. The ISS provides “independent” farmers who own small parcels of land but are not organized into cooperatives or associations with the ability to partner with a Certified Market Access Partner to commercialize their products and access the benefits of our model. Similarly, the Farm Workers Standard serves workers who do not own their own land, but hire onto larger farms. Both the ISS and FWS are based on the principles of farmer and worker empowerment, economic development, social responsibility and environmental stewardship, and we are working toward the goal of merging both into a single Agricultural Production Standard in the near future.”
farmers and rural communities in comparison to the alternatives. The blanket claim that the purchase of Whole Trade products will produce “real, tangible improvements in people’s lives” is an obvious oversimplification of the complex interactions that take place across global commodity chains.\textsuperscript{443} In presenting fair trade as the answer to a system riddled with inequalities that are essential to the production of value, Whole Foods allows consumers to feel that they are doing something good, when, at best, they are doing something marginally better that ultimately leads to the reproduction of that unfair system. The creation and branding of separate Whole Trade standards allows for a new scale of fairness where, instead of thinking about small farms as more fair than industrial plantations, consumers come to see the compounded fairness of the multiple certifying bodies within the Whole Trade logo as the apex of fair practices, which can then be read as uniquely valuable.

This scale of fairness is especially important if we look again at Fair Trade USA’s annual report, which celebrates the important connections the organization has made with manufacturers and retailers by displaying a full page of the logos of some of their most notable brand partners from the retail and manufacturing sectors, such as Whole Foods, Trader Joes, Walmart, Hershey’s and Nescafe (Nestle), and Arrowhead Mills and Celestial Seasonings (Hain Celestial). Financial backing cannot be considered value-free. With further interrogation, this visual can be read as further evidence of Busch and Bain’s findings of the role of corporations in the creation of private standards

in the WTO era. To summarize, their argument is that in the creation and enforcement of base-level global industry standards, the framework instated with the WTO makes it possible for supermarket chains to extend their geographic reach and increase their financial power, as well as making it valuable for these companies, with the help of third party certifiers and NGOs, to support the creation of optional regulatory standards that offer consumers the knowledge that they are purchasing ‘better’ products. This concept of ‘better’ is completely contingent upon the reproduction of inequality and the deferment of complete ‘fairness’ that would remove the Western consumer’s ability to choose ‘better’.

The decision by retailers to carry fair trade products as part of their premium product lines is in their desire to meet the desires of this lucrative demographic and, thereby, increase their stores’ profits. Writing over ten years ago, Geoff Moore underscored the risk that had already been noted by other scholars regarding the possibility for “dilution of fair trade ideology by the market” with “profit seeking companies [attempting] to bolster their legitimacy by adopting the rhetoric of environmental and/or social responsibility.” An example of this is indicated by Moberg in the case of Chiquita, which illustrates the ability for major corporations to certify only certain farms or products as fair trade while gaining the added value of “fair trade” across their brand with consumers failing to recognize that all products that a company offers are not subject to the same standards. The dilution and/or inaccurate representation of

444 Busch and Bain, 325; 327.  
445 Moore, 83.  
446 Moberg, 189-92.
fair practices allows for companies to benefit from the idea of fair trade at very little cost to them, mainly because consumers place their confidence in companies’ use of the term with little information qualifying specifically what occurs in the fair trade transaction. This is precisely the problem of private standards: as privately created, maintained, and regulated, they offer information that attests to the positive attributes of those firms that hold a vested interest in their success and cultural value.\textsuperscript{447} Consumers are, therefore, left in the same position as they have been since the inception of national brands at the turn of the last century—they must believe that the food producer and retailer are truthful in their claims.

With a wide array of companies claiming a stake in fair trade, Whole Foods must reassert their presence at the forefront of fair trade retailers by showing they hold a greater claim and greater authority in the production and sale of fair trade products. The positive impact of Whole Trade on the productive end of the commodity chain is noted by Fair Trade USA when they dedicate a full page of their annual report to Whole Foods as an “Innovator Partner,” explaining:

In 2013, Whole Foods Market purchased 79\% of all Fair Trade Certified\textsuperscript{TM} fruits and vegetables sold in the United States, up from slightly more than 50\% in 2011. Stocking its stores with certified bananas, pineapples, bell peppers, roses, avocados, mango, citrus, cucumbers, eggplant, cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon, peaches, table grapes, zucchini, asparagus, tomatoes, and hard squash, Whole Foods Market offered an unprecedented variety and volume of

\textsuperscript{447} See Busch and Bain, 338.
fresh products in 2013 that underscored Fair Trade USA's own expansion to support migrant farm workers on large-scale produce farms via its Fair Trade for All initiative.\footnote{Fair Trade USA, 26.}

Though the following paragraph goes on to note the importance of this partnership in supporting farmers in developing communities, what I see as most notable about this text is the emphasis on the “unprecedented variety and volume” of fair trade products offered by Whole Foods, which has aided in the expansion of fair trade programming to “large-scale produce farms.” This scale is not only problematic to the objectives of fair trade as a social movement that seeks to benefit independent farmers, but also contradictory to the emphasis that fair trade places on protecting the eco-system, as the high volume, intensive monocultural farming required of large retail chains is detrimental to soil, regardless of the presence of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as I indicated in chapter two.

The problems resulting from the intensification of chemical-free production are amplified for small landholders, as indicated in Moberg’s account. These farmers not only have a difficult time understanding why they cannot use herbicides that have proven more effective than manual methods of pest removal, but are also forced to struggle with increased labor costs as a result of eliminating chemical additives—an expense that is often not recuperated, considering these farmers are often unable to sell \textit{all} of their product as fair trade, and therefore left to sell the remaining produce at a lower cost to conventional wholesalers. The collectivization required for small farmers to be fair trade
certified also comes as a source of frustration as farmers are left to navigate through layers of bureaucracy in order to receive an authoritative decision on how to deal with critical outbreaks of pests that need to be dealt with in a timely manner.\textsuperscript{449} The owners of these plots, who “often do not have the institutional, technological, or infrastructural capabilities to easily make the necessary changes” are left on the fringes of the industry, in what Busch and Bain see as a “reconfiguration of social relations” wherein Western consumers, corporations, and NGOs are coming together to develop and implement new standards that are in their intention socially- and ecologically-minded, but myopically centered on the Western notion of the coexistence of consumer choice and industry fairness.\textsuperscript{450}

For Busch and Bain, a key problem is that these private standards, though seemingly more efficient and effective than governmental regulation, lack democratic participation. Because of this, those with the most money hold the primary influence, while low-paid wage laborers, who are elemental to the success of the private food system, remain unheard or, in the least, under-acknowledged. There are also ecologically detrimental effects resulting from fair trade policies that fail to hold Western corporations accountable for the introduction of chemical agricultural methods and GM seeds to developing world, which has resulted in these farmers dependency upon these measures. In recognizing the role of the West in creating this unfair and toxic agricultural system, some of the responsibility for transitioning to fair trade practices would be placed on the

\textsuperscript{449} Moberg, 195-97.
\textsuperscript{450} Busch and Bain, 341.
industry and this would grant less financially powerful farms the ability to move towards fair practices. However, this is not what has occurred. Instead, because, as noted in my previous discussion of retrograding for organic production in chapter two, the conversion of soil and the (re)learning of less industrial farming methods is costly and takes time, it is much more easily conducted by large, successful agricultural firms than small farm owners. The current fair trade system has resulted in small farmers often resigning their family plots, moving to other industries or laboring for larger firms where their livelihoods can be ensured.

Of course Whole Foods provides a solution for the need for large-scale suppliers who share their vision of social and ecological fairness. By partnering with the nonprofit international university EARTH (Escuela de Agricultura de la Región Tropical Húmeda) in Costa Rica, Whole Foods not only ensures the security of an abundant supply of fair trade bananas, through the EARTH banana plantation, but also is able to reproduce and advance the fair trade agricultural industry in the global South by educating future generations.451 In operation since 1990 and accredited in 2006, EARTH University “offers a rigorous four-year undergraduate program in agricultural sciences and natural resources management and a prestigious, international faculty, providing a world-class scientific and technological education that emphasizes values, ethical entrepreneurship and environmental and social commitment.”452 Whole Foods claims that the profits from selling nearly 20 million bananas annually fund the university’s operational, research,
and scholarship expenses, though this money in actuality only covers a portion of those costs. In order to “empower… promising young leaders from economically underprivileged communities,” the majority of EARTH University’s students are awarded full scholarships, with many more receiving significant financial assistance.

EARTH’s partnership with Whole Foods validates their shared mission through the market success of the product—the sale of EARTH bananas proves that capitalism can be socially just and ecologically friendly—while the desirability for the education offered by EARTH illustrates the knowledge held by individuals in the global South that the best way to earn a living is through gaining access to a dominant firm within the agricultural industry.

EARTH’s work is important to the reproduction of sustainable agricultural communities in the developing world, but also to the reproduction of capital, which is seen as the University prides itself on the fact that eighty percent of its alumni return to their countries of origin and that sixty percent work in the private sector with twenty-four percent owning their own farms. The education of business-minded leadership in the developing world facilitates the potential for success of these agricultural communities, however, it is important to put these figures into the matrix of neoliberal accumulation and corporatization as envisioned by Whole Foods and other Conscious Capitalists. In this, EARTH’s form of communal betterment and social justice hinge on the same differential parameters of fairness presented by First World corporations and NGOs. The
“promising leaders” of rural communities in the global South as discovered by EARTH University are different than the promising leaders in developed nations. Bridging the gap between Western corporations and the agricultural laborers, EARTH graduates’ entrepreneurial knowledge serves to legitimize and justify the social and ecological practices required for certification. In effect, though this may not be their intention, EARTH works to eliminate farmer discontent with fair trade contracts by educating the younger generation as to why the Western methods of production are questionably ‘fair’. The successful indoctrination and integration of leaders from rural communities into the private agricultural sector, specifically within large firms, further supports the notion that capitalism does offer new and profitable possibilities for all people, and that, given the resources, members of less developed regions can rise to the occasion, becoming innovators and entrepreneurs. This can be understood as why, as the president of EARTH notes, Whole Foods sees the entrepreneurial aspect of the University as especially important—it serves as proof of the humans essential entrepreneurial spirit that just needs to be fostered under the right, conscious, conditions. However, the entrepreneurial spirit embraced by Whole Foods is one that remains centered on the expansion of big business above and beyond the small local businesses people may choose to patronize locally.

By restricting Whole Trade partnerships to large agricultural sites like EARTH in Costa Rica and farming cooperatives like Turbana/Uniban in Columbia, Whole Foods places pressure on farmers to forego some of their independence by integrating into larger organizations in order to obtain a competitive advantage in the industry, achieving economies of sale to meet the volume and price requirements sought by Whole Foods. It
is only in meeting the needs of Whole Foods that a firm can reap the benefits offered by their corporate partnership, which exceed the specifications of Fair Trade USA and FLO, as shown in the examples of EARTH University and Elite’s schools and housing program. Thus, while fair trade contracts generally require collectivization of small farmers, Whole Foods promotion of its partnerships with large producers that have the organizational oversight to act as both capitalist firms and social welfare institutions works within the existing capitalist framework. Whole Foods thereby conveys the opinion that large plantations are the best means to achieve fairness and meet consumer demand. When put in light of the disenfranchised governments of the developing world, agricultural firms become a new form of government in which laborers are citizens, who are provided for through an export economy contingent on the altruistic partnership with Whole Foods. This form of privatized public service renders Mackey’s vision a reality: Heroic businesses and conscious leadership properly care and provide for those in their employ and, by extension, the communities those employees inhabit. The Whole Trade product then holds within it the promise of the contradictory construction of the free market democracy of privatized agricultural communities—a vision of a better pastoral reality that American consumers can contribute to through their purchases at Whole Foods.
“They are not buying a banana. They are buying a dream.”

With efficiency and price of fair trade production seen the biggest hindrances to broadening the appeal of fair trade products, there is no question that industrial production is a requirement for the expansion of fair trade. As such, what Whole Foods, Fair Trade USA, and FLO are supporting is a kinder and gentler form of industrial agriculture. But increasing a market requires an increase at both ends of the commodity chain. Consumers must see that fair trade is something worth supporting in order for the movement *cum* economic project to grow. For this, the vision of what is being purchased when one purchases ‘fair trade’ must be abundantly clear and, therefore, concise. The connection between consumer and producer must be obviated so that the shopper can see a direct correlation between their money and the ‘good’ being done. This connection is confounded by the rise of corporate plantations, which look nothing like the pastoral ideal of rural peasants working on earth-friendly farms. The distance between the producer and the consumer is not closed through fair trade, and instead the *idea* of the producer is re-inscribed into the commodity by the Western company and supporting certification body. The scale of fair trade production then has little impact on the consumer’s relationship with distant labor because, simply put, the consumer has no concept of the reality of that labor outside of the representation offered by Western capitalism. In this, large corporate farms are fragmented, shown through close-ups of the happy faces of individual workers or hands gently cradling fruit or flowers. We never see the full scope of operations, even in the time-lapse video of Elite Flowers.

---

455 As stated by Jose Zaglul, President of EARTH University, in “Earth University.”
The narratives I have discussed all present a vision of fair trade that does not completely reflect the totality of its processes, illustrating instead the most beneficial aspects of the system. Whole Foods makes it easy for the consumer to know the relative quality of their products by showing the care and concern for others embedded in them. The stories, videos, and images it supplies rely on culturally recognizable, even stereotypical, understandings of what agricultural laborers in the developing world look like, what they need, and even their aspirations in life, and in effect reproduce the paternalistic attitude of the West. It is through an engagement with these simplistic images that the American consumer is compelled to partake in commodity altruism. Yet, Whole Foods is not sole proprietor of commodity altruism, which we can see in the examples of conscious companies as given by Mackey and Sisodia in Conscious Capitalism. While many Conscious businesses place philanthropy centrally in their missions, the presentation and execution of philanthropic action varies, serving as a unique reflection of the brand, the product being sold, and what matters to its creators and customers.

In its general recognition as ‘good’ Whole Foods is made exceptional within their industry. Having the means and the reach to attract consumer confidence and to produce incremental changes that soften the state of capitalism, Whole Foods makes shopping more palatable to consumers who are experiencing increasing “unease with abundance” as a result of “concerns about the social and economic impacts of globalization.”

Whole Foods offers a unique opportunity because its corporate mission is that it will do

456 Johnston, 238.
‘good’ by making money, meaning that everything included within its stores walls is imbued with transformative potential upon consumer purchase. With a totalizing environment of self and communal wellbeing and the monolithic identity as “America’s Healthiest Grocery Store,” Whole Foods maintains its position as the leader of ethical retail, despite the inherent contradictions in their practices.

In their ethnographic study of Whole Foods shoppers, Josée Johnston and Michelle Szabo find that advantage of Whole Foods in the retail sector is in their ability to bridge existing consumer lifestyle habits with products that support alternative, ethical ideologies and to do so consistently, namely through the exemption of products that do not meet their corporate standards. However, Johnston and Szabo also find little consumer interrogation of what those standards actually are and that, instead, consumers take for granted that shopping at Whole Foods is a step towards “achieving social and/or environmental objectives.”\footnote{Johnston and Szabo, 308.} Thus, while some customers recognized Whole Foods as imperfect in its execution of ethical objectives, others “indicated a fairly straightforward faith in market alternatives and corporate information… [taking] promotional information at face value.”\footnote{Ibid., 312.} What is more important is the fact that, despite acknowledging the contradictions in the practices of Whole Foods, “even the participants who had deep misgivings about WFM’s corporate form continued to shop there,” suggesting a “contingent trust” in the company, especially when it is placed in contrast to retailers that have historically proven to be less committed to ethical concerns.\footnote{Ibid.}
This brand recognition as ‘better’ (if not best) has given Whole Foods a leg up in the fair trade market with the production of the Whole Trade Guarantee, a program that bears the same contradiction as its stores overall, which, as summarized by Johnston and Szabo, is that, “Rather than encouraging a rethinking of consumerism or resource-intensive lifestyles, the store enables the replacement of conventional commodities (e.g., non-organic) with different commodities, albeit those which draw on ethical consumption discourse (e.g., certified organic).” By assuring consumers of the positive attributes of their shopping, Whole Foods obscures the material reality of its practices, which is that these practices are good because they are good for the company and the consumer economy regardless of the detriments they facilitate and feed upon. The disparities resulting from capitalism contribute to the contradictory nature of the practices of Whole Foods, as the company continues to build their business on the belief that altruistic capitalism is the answer, masking that capitalism only creates inequalities and perpetuates unfairness. And yet, this paradox is necessary in the production of its totalizing brand culture, as the brand must offer a complete coherent vision of the world and all of its aspects of interaction. If care is at the core of the Whole Foods brand, then care must be something that can be attained through profit.

The evolution of the Whole Foods brand is illustrative of the persistence of cultural values in the production of economic value, with the company revising its policies, practices, and initiatives according to changing consumer knowledge and beliefs. We can see this adaptation in the company’s regular updates to their production

---

Ibid., 309.
and retailing standards and moves towards greater transparency on what it already sees as clear and respectable practices, like the addition of the produce rating system. This adaptability to consumer interests is essential to the brand; as Banet-Wiser explains, the creation of a brand culture that effectively reflects the interests of a consumer demographic requires “the labor of consumers—ordinary people, creative producers, artists, laborers—as well as brand managers.”461 In this, the subculture of the brand (as it exists within and responds to the culture from which it arises) is shaped in, from, and around its consumer-participants and what those individuals seek socially and culturally. There is, therefore, a complex give-and-take that occurs between brands/corporations and consumers/people as fairness and sustainability are defined through capitalism, which is an evolving but naturalized, all-encompassing socio-economic structure. Whole Foods must, in effect, enlist the labor of its stakeholders in realizing its claim to be a ‘good’ brand, as the company can only manage the image it would like to present, not how it is interpreted. Thus, while Benat-Wiser agrees with Stuart Hall in seeing the political potential of consumer’s agency through the individual interpretation of a cultural text, I am arguing that the overarching socio-economic structure has resulted in a limited relationship to and understanding of these texts. Whole Foods benefits from the hegemonic power of consumer capitalism that has resulted in consumers wanting more and more, while also wishing to feel that they are not selfish, causing the plight of others, or the demise of the planet.

461 Banet-Wiser, 215.
It is the relationship between consumers and things, not consumers and producers, that we see in the images presented in the Whole Trade and Whole Planet campaigns. Of course these are images of people, but these images as representative of ‘fairness’ function through the American consumer’s desire to have things, not to help others. If the primary goal were helping people and the planet the means to that end would not be shopping, it would be direct action. In attempting to dispel the alienation of labor that takes place with mass-production, Whole Foods presents the consumer with the laborer, rendering the humanity back into production. And yet, this is a one-sided exchange. The producer, or more accurately, the representation of the producer, generalizes, homogenizes, and typifies the laborer within pastoral imagery that serves the Whole Foods mission. The laborer himself is not brought closer to the consumer. He remains dependent on the sale of his commodity through Whole Foods, which requires that he create value for the company.

Therefore, we must understand that the value attributed to producers through fair trade as not based on the additional value that they impart to the fair trade commodity but in (1) the value of the consumer recognizing the importance of shopping differently and altruistically acting on the behalf of those who cannot act for themselves, and (2) the third party certifiers and corporations who see the benefit in acting philanthropically, which not only ensures the reproduction of labor across the global, but also increases the surplus-value of their inventories. The laborer’s value is in effect only important at all its recognition by those at the consumption end of the commodity cycle. As the laborer is made visible within the conscious practice of fair trade certification, he also remains
alienated from his produce as its *realized and valuable* form only comes into fruition once his commodity is given the appropriate label, aesthetic frame, and (distant) interpretative matrix that make it valuable to the ethical consumer. The consumer is not paying for what the laborer produced, but is instead buying a commodity that has been given a value within the corporatized food system that profits by mediating between the producer and consumer. The corporate food system, in effect, exists only in that it exploits labor by ensuring it is *not* paid the full value attained in the marketplace.

Studies dating back to 2003 indicate that consumers internationally are concerned about the conditions under which their food is produced and this is reflected in their willingness to pay a premium for certified fair trade and organic products.\(^{462}\) In their 2008 study of French consumers’ responses to fair trade products, Tagbata Didier and Sirieix Lucie found that, among the customers they surveyed, specifically older participants, there was an attribution of a twenty to thirty percent price increase to the cost certification standards. However, in most instances it was not knowledge about the certification standards that compelled customers to buy fair trade products. Instead, perceptions about taste related to aesthetic qualities and context of the product’s display proved to be greater determining factors, and factors appeal to the consumer personally, not to ethical or ecological concerns. The context provided by Whole Foods and the aestheticization of fair trade cannot be underestimated in considering consumer compulsion to pay more for ‘better’. As Michael Serazio explains, “Whole Foods

manages to weave competing products on its shelves into a larger, coherent narrative. This is a narrative that seeks to soothe the discomfarts of aging and mortality, politics and history, and globalization’s promise and perils.”[463] This narrativization creates what Serazio refers to as a “brand utopia,” in which shoppers—mainly aging baby boomers and bourgeois bohemians (or “bobos”) in his account, though I would extend this to many gen X’ers and millennials who find themselves lacking actual political agency—see their purchases of ‘good’ and ‘better’ things at Whole Foods as a dual enactment of their class privilege as an expression of their taste and their desire to help others (though, notably, younger shoppers of lesser financial means are obviously less able to act altruistically through their shopping).

Commodity altruism, though intended to inspired good acts in the most simple of ways, can itself be a cause for both consumer guilt and socio-political apathy because it links productive citizenship to ability to buy the ‘right’ things. [464] The redefinition of products according to their production methods has resulted in a seemingly endless proliferation of standards and signage in Whole Foods stores, indicating that ‘fair’ is simply not fair enough and that consumers can still demonstrate higher levels of care by making even better choices among the good choices at Whole Foods. By permitting a gradation among the products presented within their stores, Whole Foods facilitates the possibility for those with smaller budgets to shop ‘better’ by shopping at Whole Foods. At the same time, the company also validates the notion that the most ethical shopping is

[464] Ibid., 161-63.
comes at a higher price, imploring those with the greatest financial means to make the best possible choices by to purchasing the *most* ethical products—those which are also most beneficial to the bottom-line of Whole Foods because they fetch the highest premium.

Locating the success of Whole Foods in the shift from natural foods as property of the counterculture to the domain of the mainstream bourgeois society, Serazio asserts that wealth is the key attribute of the Whole Foods shopper. And yet, with the proliferation of Whole Foods stores and the growing interest in ethical consumerism, it becomes harder to generalize the socio-economic class of the Whole Foods shopper. Cultural changes in consumer understanding regarding the impact and meaning of food shopping has resulted the need for Whole Foods to adapt to the wider availability of ethically-sourced products. Specifically, Whole Foods has responded to the increase in competition from conventional supermarkets with, at end of the spectrum, the inclusion of lower price-point products and, on the other, the implementation of rating systems that promote the fact that its stores offer products of *higher standards*, which are more costly but amply available for those who wish to purchase them. I see this dualistic presentation of ethical consumption as a new stratification of shoppers. Shopping at Whole Foods becomes something that all shoppers can engage in and something that is progressively more meaningful as one increases the amount they spend on ethical products. By seeing shopping at Whole Foods as a culturally motivated decision, we can then see the need to buy higher quality and more expensive products from its stores as a means to indicate both higher socio-economic status and greater ethical commitments, regardless of the
intention of the specific consumer. Through the widespread cultural knowledge of the
stated ethical commitments of Whole Foods and its practice of retailing of high-end
commodities, the consumer’s ability to spend more is conflated with social responsibility.

Commodity altruism is, therefore, a practice that reproduces the class hierarchy
inherent in capitalism while increasing the dependency of people across the globe on the
kindheartedness of the middle and upper classes of the First World, who are given the
option as to whether or not they wish to share their wealth with those down the
commodity chain. The optional nature of ethical shopping shares the same problem as the
private certification of fair trade more generally: it does not change the standards, it
simply presents a different and arguably ‘better’ choice. Further, because commodity
altruism is socially beneficial to the giver as a status symbol and indicator of moral
uprightness, it is never a truly selfless act. And yet, because of the normalized practice of
consumerism under capitalism, wherein individuals have come to see shopping as the
way to meet their needs according to their spending of their money, commodity altruism
can feel selfless. Making a choice that takes into account the interests of another is
something that is not inherent within consumer capitalism. Shopping is rendered a
necessity for life, whereas spending more to help someone or something else is the
choice. Because of the naturalized role of consumption in American life, commodity
altruism can serve as a safety valve for capitalism by re-inscribing essential elements of
communalism into the marketplace by reimagining the individual’s co-dependence as
member of humanity, subverting the overtly selfish nature of capitalist pursuit and
consumerist accumulation.

390
The promotional materials, signage, and packaging used by Whole Foods all assert the connection between the sale of Whole Foods’ products and better conditions for workers. Placing workers’ testimony at the fore as evidence of the company’s ability to ‘do good,’ the continued reproduction of the goodness done by Whole Foods is left in the hands of the consumer. Whole Foods shoppers, and potential shoppers, must interpret their role in enacting altruism. If read correctly, consumers should understand that by buying more Whole Trade products, more ‘good’ will be produced as the Whole Trade program reaches more laborers and communities. This is Conscious Capitalism in action as the production of goodwill is inherent in the right kind of corporate economic growth.

But there is more to Conscious Capitalism than altruistic salvation of people of the developing world. The expansion of capitalism, regardless of the treatment of the workers who serve in its reproduction, means that an increasing number of people become workers. The problem herein is that people and communities no longer have the ability to be self-sufficient, producing for and directly exchange goods and services among themselves, but instead are dependent on wages and the abstraction of their value and needs through monetary capital. Whole Trade is then not the best possible scenario, but appears as a ‘better’ scenario based on the strict parameters of capitalism, which guarantee the exploitation of labor in the production of value. To be truly fair would mean that all people would live according to the same standards, having the same ability to meet their needs, and holding similar understandings of success and fulfillment. To treat labor ‘fairly’—or to present one form of trade as ‘whole’ in opposition to a more fragmentary or one-sided practice—is entirely relative to a system that is radically unjust.
and unequal, and in which individuals with economic and political power, living in completely different cultural circumstances, determine what is not only fair but also what is needed and important to those they subjugate.

The Hierarchy of Dependency Behind a Façade of Fairness

The dynamic of inequality as ‘fairness’ is further played out by Whole Foods in the distinction between the needs of those in the developing and developed world through the segregation of producers as loan recipients with the offering of, on the one hand, ‘microloans’ to the “self-employed poor” through the Whole Planet Foundation, and on the other, “funds for expansion and capital expenditures” to “independent local farmers and food artisans” through the Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP). While the former initiative allows Whole Foods to fully realize the capacity for commodity altruism by bettering the lives of small entrepreneurs within the communities where the company sources products, but who, themselves, are unable to meet the productive capacity to become a Whole Trade partner, the latter serves as testimony to the company’s consciousness in ensuring that the spoils of capitalism are spread fairly in the West, giving smaller business the opportunity to thrive. These two programs do not challenge the paternal, neocolonialist practices associated with capitalism, nor do they thwart the domination of American industry by corporate monoliths. Instead, Whole Planet and LPLP serve as a façade for the fact that Whole Foods has the same bottom line concern as all other corporations: profit.

The leadership of Whole Foods sees the company’s lending programs as a means to facilitate the continuation of the small businesses that they claim are essential to the maintenance of a robust economy. However, loan recipients are not given increased independence or agency and, instead, budding entrepreneurs and local producers become dependent on the corporation’s financial success and expansion. By offering these programs, Whole Foods does shift traditional capitalist practices, as small businesses are not threatened by a prevailing firm, but exist because of it. Whole Foods indicates that capitalism does not require maximum exploitation or the elimination of competition and, in this, makes the suggestion that capitalism can be beneficial for all people—that the local and global, big and small, industrial and natural, mass-produced and artisanal can all exist in perfect harmony. At the same time, the company makes their role as altruistic actor clear, implying the failures and inadequacies of the government and the public sector in supporting citizens and bettering society. Whole Foods aids the expansion of global capitalism by showing that private industry is the best means for achieving the highest quality of life, integrity, and innovation, while solidifying the notion that the needs of people are different based upon their position within the global economy.

As defined by Whole Foods, the purpose of the Whole Planet Foundation is to create economic partnerships with the poor in those developing-world communities that supply our stores with product. Through innovative assistance for entrepreneurship — including direct micro-credit loans and tangible support for other community partnership projects — we seek to unleash the energy and
creativity of every human being we work with in order to create wealth and prosperity in emerging economies.\textsuperscript{466}

To ensure that all money raised by the Whole Planet Foundation goes to funding small entrepreneurs, Whole Foods allocates a portion of its profits to cover the costs of operating the Foundation, meaning that the Foundation—a nonprofit organization—is directly dependent on the financial success of the supermarket chain—a for-profit business. By extension, small business owners across the globe are dependent upon the commensurate expansion of Whole Foods, a company whose stores bear no presence in their communities and, therefore, whose goods they are not permitted access to.

These entrepreneurs, connected only to the company through the philanthropic credit system, come to see the grand potential that lies within capitalism, specifically within the vision of Conscious Capitalism, where financial success leads others to “pay it forward.” Through this, it is proclaimed, a better, more healthy and sustainable, world can be created wherein all people can meet their needs (by having enough money).

Therefore, Whole Planet’s support of local, small businesses and “financial services for the self-employed poor” in the emerging economies in sixty-one countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas and the success of these businesses (as most directly evidenced through their ability to pay back their loans), holds greater meaning and importance than the affronting altruistic intention.\textsuperscript{467} Micro-finance—and we are talking \textit{micro} as the average first loan for a recipient is $186 in a developing nation and


\textsuperscript{467} “About the Foundation,” Whole Planet Foundation, https://www.wholeplanetfoundation.org/about/.
$1500 in the US—does not simply help entrepreneurs in the developing world and female by showing them the potential for a better life through monetary earning.

Because the businesses Whole Planet funds most often remain beyond the reach of the Whole Foods customer, Whole Planet initiatives are commodified differently than those of the Whole Trade program. There are two commodities available in stores chain-wide that directly benefit the Foundation: the annual Whole Planet Foundation calendar, featuring images and narratives about select entrepreneurs who have benefitted from the foundation’s microloans, and Liberation Soup, the Whole Planet Foundation’s cookbook. Though presented as useful things, these items are more correctly interpreted as trinkets signifying the consumer’s donation to the Foundation. As physical evidence of the creativity and hard work of distant others, in their purchase of these trinkets American consumers can see themselves as contributing to the successes of people who share their values and dedication to work and who want to create better lives for themselves. However, in my opinion, the most effective means of creating a tangible relationship between the Whole Foods shopper and Whole Planet producers is in the presentation of special limited edition lines of handmade, artisanal goods, such as handmade holiday ornaments and jewelry, in the company’s stores. Displayed alongside narratives and aesthetic elements that call to their producers’ cultural and national heritages, these small batch goods not only attest to the existence of the distant

entrepreneur, they also exude authenticity, thereby solidifying the position of Whole Foods as facilitator of *real* intercultural exchange.

For the form of altruism that Whole Foods enacts to have validity, the Whole Planet loan recipient need be seen as culturally different, both in her aesthetic and craft and in her needs and participation within capitalism. Her lifestyle and contribution must be seen as *less than* that of the First World citizen, regardless of those individuals’ socio-economic standing within their respective societies. In the Whole Planet Foundation’s 2014 promotional brochure, as in the Whole Trade narratives on the Whole Foods website, the needs and successes of people in developing nations are presented as vastly different from American notions of desirable living standards as well as poverty and subsistence. There is a jarring disparity between an understanding of universal human needs and specific cultural needs as produced by socio-economic circumstance. Here, I find myself in agreement with David Harvey, who argues, “Universality must be construed in dialectical relation with particularity” and the ways in which political-economic processes and structures impact our interpretations of our circumstances and the circumstances of others.\(^\text{470}\) Surely, no Whole Foods shopper or Whole Foods team member would be satisfied, feeling that her needs had been met, if she, like Erika from the Foundation’s brochure, were rewarded for her hard work by being *lent* funds to raise chickens and a dairy cow. And yet, this narrative is meant to suggest the positive potential for raising one’s standard of living through the receipt of a microloan.

---

\(^{470}\) Harvey, “Class Relations,” 63.
With this dichotomization, it is not only the Whole Foods shopper and the Western entrepreneur who is placed above entrepreneurs and laborers in the developing world, Whole Foods workers are also given an upper hand as they are asked to make contributions to the Foundation (which are tax-deductable and can be transferred directly from their paychecks) and to volunteer to travel abroad with the Foundation, where they can: “Encounter new cultures. Learn about Whole Planet Foundation®. Meet microcredit clients. Provide community service. See where and how Whole Foods Market® products are grown. Challenge [themselves].” 

The presentation of the learning experience offered in exploring the culture of people who are fundamentally different and the corresponding fact that this work is a challenging, suggests that there are inherent differences between the wage laborer of the First World and that of the Third, and, moreover, that it is the responsibility of the privileged, caring, and knowledgeable Whole Foods team member to act on behalf of his lesser-off counterpart.

While Americans have been acculturated to see their charity and volunteerism as altruism in the purest sense, the very premise of coming to the aid of others who are struggling financially is a result of capitalism. Whereas charity once served those who could not produce or care for themselves, often those with no family or cast out from their communities, charity under capitalism aims to serve an increasing population of impoverished citizens that has resulted from deepening inequality caused by capitalist expansion. I see two factors that are related to the social structure under neoliberal

---

capitalism playing into the ideology of charitable contributions and volunteerism at the present. First, the demand for smaller government has led to corresponding cuts in social programs, many of which served to provide for citizens’ basic needs. In the absence of social programs, support for those in need becomes a choice in which the citizen-consumer is asked to give/spend his money to help others. Charity is optional—a moral choice that has signifying-value that also supports the disengagement of the government and the continued growth of capitalism, inequality, and the need for charitable donations.

This financial choice based on personal resources is also re-envisioned as an ‘investment’ in Whole Planet’s literature, which poses a privatized solution to global poverty through financing the private businesses of individuals, not the development of economically and politically sustainable communities.\(^{472}\)

Secondly, the traditional gender binary plays into our cultural construction of charity and the worthy recipient under capitalism. As both historically oppressed within Western history and seen as needing the support of others, altruism that distinctly benefits females is rarely questioned and, in most cases, is lauded as a means for leveling the socio-economic playing field. The Whole Planet Foundation proudly proclaims their focus is on ending poverty by providing microloans to women in the developing world with eighty-eight percent of the Foundation’s loans thus far going to female entrepreneurs.\(^{473}\) The Foundation’s 2014 brochure suggests that the problem of global poverty is a female problem and that by helping women to get their creative endeavors

---


\(^{473}\) Ibid. Figure from brochure reflects statistics from 2006-2013.
off the ground the organization will be able to provide better lives with more opportunities for their children, resulting in an overall better future.

However, Harvey explains that the “huge gains made in the United States by women within ‘the most prestigious and lucrative professions’ have been offset entirely by a life of increasing frustration, impoverishment and powerlessness for the rest.” We can see this as true if we consider one hundred percent of the Foundation’s recipients in the US are women, predominately first generation immigrants working to reproduce their native traditions through their business initiatives. I extend Harvey’s claim to the global workforce, as middle and upper class American women—like those who receive LPLP loans through Whole Foods—are placed in diametric opposition to women in the developing world whose work has enabled the proliferation of cheap commodities and high standard of living in the West. Morally and financially well-off women of the developed world are then enlisted to serve as exemplars for the possibilities inherent in a successful capitalist economy, while they are also asked to provide aid to women of the developing world who have not yet experienced the socio-economic benefits made possible through capitalism.

Gender becomes an additional hindrance when we add the ideology of the male ‘breadwinner’, which comes into play when considering ‘worthy’ recipients of charity and aid. Because there is an expectation that men should be able to support their families through their hard work, failure to provide is rendered an individual problem based on

---

lack of skill, indifference, laziness, and etcetera. It is only in his absence that the West comes to paternalistically intervene in order to ‘save’ the female and children. This savior complex problematically ignores the reality that the advance of capitalist industry and the creation of economically dependent export economies has made it increasingly complicated for people in of both genders to support themselves, driving families apart under the weight of financial struggle and social shame.475

The conceptualization of “a future without poverty” presents a different definition of poverty for people in the developing world than those in the West, ignoring the constitutive elements of those circumstances and, instead, determining the needs of the distant working poor to simply be more basic because of their less developed economy. Because needs are interpreted by the donor and not the recipient, the prospect for social justice is thwarted as the voices of those in the developing world are funneled through the graciousness of those who grant aid. The circumstances of the micro-entrepreneur are measured only in comparison to her neighbors; she is only relatively ‘better off’ than they are, but her circumstances bear no comparison to those at the top of capitalism’s global hierarchy. When universals are “imposed hierarchically from above,” social justice becomes an illusion that serves the status quo by presenting solutions to political and economic problems that simply mask the realities of those who are exploited by or casualties of the privatized neoliberal marketplace. With the neoliberal construction of universals, altruism takes on a moralizing dimension while it aids in continued

475 See Oxfam, “Trading Away Our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chains” (2004), for a detailed account of the problems with flexible labor as a result of globalization. Though many women are now able to attain employment and contribute to their families, these jobs are both instable and low paying and often come at the expense of the male workforce.
exploitation, as one’s ‘worthiness’ of aid is determined according to Western ideals of unlimited potential through personal hard work, determination, and ability to use their resources wisely.

The vision of morality and worthiness extends to the selection of the small business recipients of Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP) funds. Like the microfinancing conducted through the Whole Planet Foundation, LPLP works only with producers who have preexisting relationships with Whole Foods, suggesting the shared moral dispositions of the company’s partners. In addition, LPLP recipients must be in regional proximity to at least one of the company’s stores in the US or Canada. These loans enable selected applicants who have demonstrated positive relationships with Whole Foods to expand their production in order to increase “the availability of high-quality local products” for Whole Foods’ customers. Unlike the Whole Planet Foundation, which functions as a separate nonprofit organization, LPLP is operated by Whole Foods, with loan funds coming directly out of the regional budgets where loans are granted. Thus, whereas the Whole Planet Foundation can present its work as a social service in global community betterment, LPLP is clearly capitalist in its intention, facilitating the development of smaller businesses for the sake of creating a greater number of ‘better’ options for discerning consumers.

LPLP serves in the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism and capitalist ideology through the creation of a self-sustaining business community wherein a larger capitalist

firm supports smaller firms that share its mission and customer-base giving the appearance that big and small business can not only co-exist, but also harmoniously support each other. Whole Foods adds a positive spin to its corporate domination of natural foods retailing by showing that its success contributes to the successes of small, local businesses. Its positive impact within the small natural foods businesses then feeds back into the production of the Whole Foods brand as authentic and counter to conventional big business. With an inventory of readily available small batch products, the company is granted an air of authenticity while the continued existence and development of the smaller, subordinate companies serves as evidence that Whole Foods cares about the natural foods cottage industry, product variety, and other issues that matter to its consumers and their communities.

There are, as such, different expectations for LPLP and Whole Planet regarding the goods that will be produced, including how they will be represented and who they will be consumed by. LPLP exists to reproduce the market for small batch, artisanal products that Whole Foods customers pay a premium for and which they see as supporting their local economies. Because of the feeling that these products are reflections of the local economy and the types of people who live in the community, the presentation of those the program supports and the products they produce is vastly different from the aestheticization of Whole Planet benefactors. Populated predominately with white faces and taken in portrait studios or sterile kitchens, the pictures accompanying the LPLP profiles display a homogenized vision of American middle class success. The stories included further attest to the difference between the values and needs
of American producers and those in the developing world. Whereas producers in distant rural communities struggle to bring themselves and their children out of poverty, the American entrepreneurs who work with Whole Foods are confronted with an entirely different form of strife, which some might refer to mockingly as “First World Problems,” for instance dietary and lifestyle parameters that have made it ‘difficult’ for them to find ‘healthy’ options in mainstream stores, which have prompted them to ‘do it themselves.’

These narratives of company origin exude the privilege afforded to middle class American consumers as well as the moralization that is commonplace among natural and organic food enthusiasts, with many recipients noting how their products serve critical needs within the American consumer marketplace. For example, the profile for New York based Purely Elizabeth states:

Purely Elizabeth was founded in 2009, by Elizabeth Stein, Certified Holistic Nutritionist in order to cater to those seeking healthy, delicious, gluten free foods. Elizabeth enjoyed homemade baked treats and wanted to develop a line of products using the highest quality, nutrient rich ingredients, loaded with health benefits and free of processed bad stuff. A mission-driven company, they believe that Good Health begins with what you put in your body.477

Like Whole Foods, Purely Elizabeth is a ‘mission-driven’ company, but of a smaller scale. The company’s founder, Elizabeth Stein, a certified nutritionist well-versed in current concerns over gluten consumption, shares Whole Foods’ interest in healthy,

nutritious eating and demonstrates the ability to speak to the sensibilities of middle class health food consumers. Further, the picture accompanying the company’s profile—a headshot, presumably of Stein, a vibrant woman, smiling, and fit with tan skin and golden waves of hair—gives the business a human face, enabling the consumer to affectively connect with the company as authentically caring for their customers health and wellbeing, but also shows this business is owned by someone those customers would socialize with or want to be like. As I have explained, the relationship between physical and moral perfection became solidified in the 1980s with yuppie culture in which buying the ‘best’ foods was an illustration of knowledge, taste, and affluence. Stein’s image next to the narrative of her company’s history makes her product desirable to a specific type of consumer—or one who wishes to become or be seen as that consumer—in what it offers ideologically as well as nutritionally, as our understanding of nutrition is a result of the cultural ideologies surrounding food, bodies, and consumption. In this interpretation, the desirability of the attributes of this company and those associated with it is found in consuming the lifestyle that Whole Foods (and its LPLP recipients) values and which creates value for it. This is very different from the relationship that the Whole Foods shopper has to the distant other of the Whole Planet Foundation. The LPLP entrepreneur is not someone who needs to be saved but someone who can save others with the help of the socio-economic business support network created by Whole Foods.

I see this narrative of middle class natural foods entrepreneur as savior further illustrated in the LPLP profile of California based NuttZo, which states: “After adopting two malnourished boys from the Ukraine, Danielle LiVolisi started creating creative
super-nutritious foods. NuttZo, an organic multi-nut butter high in Omega-3s, is the result of her research.478 LiVolsi’s business was inspired by her altruism. This purity of intention in her desire to ‘do good’ adds to the authenticity of her persona as a “realistic dreamer” and her personal mission to make a difference in the world as evidenced through her own nonprofit, Project Left Behind, which seeks to better the lives of orphaned children across the globe and to which one-percent of NuttZo’s gross profit is contributed.479 Like Stein, LiVolsi is physically attractive, with tan skin, golden streaked hair, and a big smile, her body showing her dedication to nutrition and fitness. She too serves as an exemplar of the ideal Whole Foods consumer and, in this, has found her success as one of its suppliers by providing something that consumers like herself can find themselves needing—a jar of organic nut butter, which retails for about eighteen dollars, a price that can be justified in all the commodity offers. LPLP must be seen as made possible the proliferation of niche markets with the advance of capitalism, wherein consumers express themselves through and define their identities through the things they buy as they search for the authentic in the vast sea of mass-produced goods. Whether consumers identify with the LPLP commodity because it speaks of their local economy and community, dietary and health practices, or desire to enact ‘goodness,’ LPLP reproduces the notion that small businesses are important reflections of unique identities.

and serve as proof of the existence of cultural elements that have not been fully integrated into the mainstream.

And yet, because Whole Foods claims to “support small producers who need a hand, not a handout, to help them make their dreams reality,” its sentiment smacks of conventional neoliberal rhetoric, as those who are deemed truly worthy are those who have, to some extent, already succeeded. LPLP does not offer ‘start up’ funds for those looking to get into the natural and organics industry. These loans are for those companies that have already proven their ability to thrive and who can project an increased demand for their products. In this, the best loan recipient is one who can not only pay back their debt but also stand out as a shining example of the persistence and importance of small business in the American consumer marketplace—an exception to the struggles experienced by many small business owners who cannot compete with larger businesses nor access funds to keep their operations afloat.

While the successes of those funded through LPLP serve the ideology that anyone can make a living off of their own merits and that resources are always available to those willing to work for them, the role of Whole Foods as a large corporation within an economy dominated by the corporate conglomerates implies that the road to success is limited to those who take a subordinate role to a corporation. The fact that these are loans to be repaid and not ‘handouts’ or ‘buyouts’ does not make the small businesses that accept these arrangement less dependent on Whole Foods’ success. On the contrary, not only is the positive brand image of Whole Foods an asset to these producers, the viability

480 “LPLP Details.”
of the Whole Foods brand is built on the successes of those they choose to fund. As such, LPLP applicants acknowledge the potential for their brand to be used at the discretion of Whole Foods by agreeing to the following terms:

I authorize and irrevocably grant to Whole Foods Market Services, Inc. and any of its affiliates and their licensees and agents the right to use, display and depict my name, likeness, business name and logo in connection with advertising and promotion throughout the world, in any media; I further consent to the disclosure of the Loan, including any and all details, by Whole Foods Market Service, Inc or any of its affiliates and their licensees and agents in connection with advertising and promotion throughout the world, in any media…

Waiving their rights to the control of their name and logo, small business owners should recognize the value of their commodity (their branded product) to Whole Foods. It is the sign-value of the independent business that makes it a good investment for Whole Foods. While the commodities these businesses offer enhance the high-quality choices available to Whole Foods shoppers, the actual importance of LPLP is in the proliferation of ‘good’ companies and actions as facilitated by Whole Foods. This ‘goodness’ is made visible through company names and logos, with Whole Foods’ “right to use, display and depict” other companies names and logos “in connection with advertising and promotion

---

481 Whole Foods Market, “Whole Foods Market Local Producer Loan Program Application.” Downloadable PDF, last updated October 25, 2010. Whole Foods has discontinued use of this paper form and now requires applicants to use a web-based application, found here: https://wholefoods.fluxx.io/user_sessions/new (accessed September 14, 2015).
throughout the world, in any media” manifesting a vast network of caring, sustainable, and altruistic Conscious Capitalists.\(^{482}\)

In partially co-opting the brands it invests in, Whole Foods stakes its claim on the ‘good’ acts and initiatives these companies produce or take part in. Thus, while LPLP is distinctly not a philanthropic initiative, it carries forth the company’s philanthropic mission indirectly by investing in small businesses that act altruistically by engaging in volunteerism, community action, and donations. This is to say, for instance, that by granting NuttZo three LPLP loans over the course of that company’s history, Whole Foods, as a corporation, has acted philanthropically in that a portion of the proceeds of NuttZo go to Project Left Behind. We can infer that at least some of the work done by Project Left Behind has been made possible because of the resources afforded to NuttZo through their partnership with Whole Foods; this is what Whole Foods wants its altruistically inclined, community-oriented and globally aware consumers to see when they encounter the story of NuttZo’s inception and learn of Whole Foods support of its product and mission. It is important to remember that though Whole Foods may grant loans to ‘support’ small businesses, the company is not a bank: its interests cannot, and must not, be considered solely financial, as in the repayment of debt with interest. There is always-already a cultural rationale for its support of the businesses it chooses to fund, as it is in the cultural realm, at the point of consumption, that the surplus-value of this investment is realized. In saying this, I do not mean to deny that LPLP recipients benefit from their partnership with Whole Foods, most obviously in their ability to reach

\(^{482}\) Ibid.
consumers who are willing to pay more for small batch, ethically produced and local products. However, the advantages garnered by these smaller-scale entrepreneurs are exponentially greater for Whole Foods.

What becomes apparent in the formation and execution of the philanthropic initiatives of Whole Foods—whether through their higher standards for production, nonprofit contributions, or support of small businesses—is the necessity of these activities to appear to offset the detriments of capitalism, including the perpetuation of inequalities by Whole Foods. The connection between Whole Foods corporate expansion and their ability to ‘good’ is paradoxical, but only to the extent that we can see the potential for ‘good’ in capitalism at all. Once the inequality that is a necessary result of capitalism is unveiled, it becomes clear that Conscious Capitalism, like all capitalism, serves only its own interests. Conscious Capitalism is not, as John Mackey claims, the result of an evolved or higher form of consciousness, it is, as I have shown, a result of the compulsion of capitalism to integrate its adversaries in order to reproduce itself.
CONCLUSION

The Value of Values: Where Profits and Ethics Clash

_We’re trying to do good. And we’re trying to make money._  
_The more money we make, the more good we can do._  
—John Mackey

Throughout this project I have shown the contradictory impulses of the multifaceted ethical mission of Whole Foods. While this mission makes the company appear unique as a business, giving the brand value and a central place in the current cultural imaginary, the fact is that Whole Foods functions within the existing economic structure and that system places parameters around the things companies _can do if_ they want to be successful. At most Whole Foods is able to affect _small_ changes within the food system, the social world, and the economic marketplace that _appear_ as steps towards the achievement of the company’s mission. More than mere evidence that Whole Foods is overstating the potential positive impact of its work, as argued by those who claim the company is greenwashing consumers, the superficiality of these changes is detrimental to the achievement of the company’s underlying goals.

---

483 As quoted in Paumgarten.
The incremental improvements resulting from, or uncertain futurity of, the initiatives that Whole Foods has spearheaded render a mirage that obscures the inherently negative effects of capitalism and its mandate for constant growth. In claiming that they are meeting their goal of “embrac[ing] our responsibility to co-create a world where each of us, our communities and our planet can flourish,” Whole Foods is able to gain recognition and popular approval—results that are proven by their corporate financial success.\footnote{Core Values.} With their brand ideology as their commodity, the company must never fully achieve its “higher purpose,” as, once fulfilled, there would be no purpose of Whole Foods. This is to say, if Whole Foods created the ecologically sustainable, fair, utopian society that undergirds the higher purpose of the brand, its stores would have no value because it would no longer be possible to offer something different—something ‘better’. In fact, in the most equitable circumstances, the ability to derive profit from the sale of goods is impossible, as the production of financial return—surplus-value—demands the exploitation of labor and resources. The achievement of the “higher purpose” of Whole Foods would be the end of capitalism, and this is the company’s foundational contradiction.

Because of the deleterious effects of modifying capitalism instead of proposing more equitable alternatives for food production and distribution, Conscious Capitalism and the actions taken by Whole Foods as a corporation should not be praised as more than the efforts of other companies. By viewing the work of Whole Foods as an investment in anything more than the reproduction of capital, the larger negative impact
of the company—that it reproduces the same structural problems that have always been part and parcel of capitalism—goes uninterrogated. In this, the expanse and predominance of the company’s retail empire is imagined as the only questionable effect of its rise, and this appears as a reasonable price to pay for the ‘better’ conditions that it facilitates, even in the eyes of some of the company’s the most critical opposition. The ‘responsibilities’ that Whole Foods takes on that appear to be counter to the traditional capitalist mandate to accumulate profit in the interest of corporate expansion are, in practice, a different means to the same end. Whole Foods uses altruism as a tool to produce value, meaning that it is not a selfless, other-oriented action, but a corporate investment that must increase in its financial return—it must be profitable. As a corporation, Whole Foods is first accountable to those stakeholders who are directly responsible for its financial wellbeing—its customers and shareholders. With the backing of affluent consumers and investors, Whole Foods is able to harness the advantages offered by the unlevel ground of capitalism to act in a paternalistic manner towards its other stakeholders and, in doing so, enhance the image of its brand as caring.

If we understand Whole Foods as giving back only in order to increase the value of its commodity, the premise that Whole Foods is, as its co-CEO Walter Robb claims, “a business that has a real purpose-focus,” is thus not paradoxical, as his words imply, but elemental to the company’s very existence. Whole Foods is only a business. It is not doing two things at the same time. It is doing only one thing—acting as a business.

Accepting that the corporate expansion of Whole Foods is necessary for the ‘betterment’ of society is ultimately agreeing to the perpetuation of inequality in the name of ‘good’. Whole Foods helps others—local producers, agricultural laborers near and far, and entrepreneurs in the developing world—by investing in the continuation of differences between individuals, cultures, and nations based on wealth, knowledge, and power through the reproduction of capital. Whole Foods participation in capitalism feeds into the reign of large firms and capitalist ideology across the globe. By ensuring the maintenance of capitalism by looking inward for solutions to social, political, and ecological problems, Conscious Capitalists circumnavigate their culpability in the continuation of the problems they proclaim to have an interest in rectifying. The irreconcilable paradoxes resulting from the practices of Whole Foods are inevitable because capitalism depends on the continuation of need, implying a lack that is in diametric opposition to wholeness.

To maintain a competitive edge as a business, Whole Foods must undercut its own mission. It must be less-than-Whole. It must act as a capitalist firm in accordance with traditional profit-oriented, self-interested capitalists. It must work to promote its commodity as something necessary and worth paying for to constantly increase its consumer-base. In order to produce value, the company must charge more for its commodity than it is worth, and when the commodity is the brand—something immaterial—the value is purely abstract, existing in the cultural realm and thus completely contingent on the meaning it holds. For Whole Foods, this meaning is the promise that a purchase from its brand means something more than the company’s
accumulation of capital—and this promise is false. *Everything* that Whole Foods does directly or indirectly feeds back into the company’s financial stability, which, as I have stated and cannot overemphasize, is contingent upon continuous expansion into untapped markets—the eternal deferment of wholeness.

While we could look at any one of the Core Values of Whole Foods as a value-producing contradiction, the philanthropic programming the company facilitates is especially telling of the company’s interest in monetary return *over* the creation of more fair socio-economic conditions. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, Whole Foods receives more in the promotion of the *idea* of the Whole Planet Foundation than the organization, or the small entrepreneurs it supports, gain in return. According to the Foundation’s 2012/13 financial statements, the revenue that the Foundation earned *through* Whole Foods Market, from the sales of the Whole Planet calendar and the dividends from the Whole Foods stock owned by the Foundation (in combination with the return on its other investments in mutual funds), totaled less than one million dollars of the Foundation’s total income of $12,374,062 in 2013.\(^{486}\) The placement of the Whole Planet calendar and imagery of Whole Planet loan recipients in Whole Foods stores serves the Foundation by creating awareness of its mission and its importance, which, in turn, prompt charitable giving by others. On the other hand, the role of Whole Foods in the Foundation allows the company to claim that through its stores it is bettering the

\(^{486}\) This report was prior to the publication of the *Liberation Soup* cookbook, at which point the only Whole Planet commodity sold regularly in Whole Foods stores was the Foundation calendar. *Consolidated Financial Statements as of and for the Years Ended December 31, 2013 and 2012, with Supplementary Information and Independent Auditors’ Report*, Whole Planet Foundation, [https://www.wholeplanetfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Whole-Planet-Foundation-Financial-Statements_12-31-2013.pdf](https://www.wholeplanetfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Whole-Planet-Foundation-Financial-Statements_12-31-2013.pdf), 4.
circumstances of impoverished people in the developing world and, in this, Whole Foods customers are expressing care for others through their shopping. The good feelings afforded by ethical shopping leave the detrimental effects of expanding global capitalism uninterrogated, as the connection that Whole Foods renders between its stores and the Foundation’s work makes it appear as though capitalism, when done properly, can take care of everyone. However, the depiction offered by Whole Foods is a myopic view of the life of small entrepreneurs in developing nations—a tiny sampling of the most successful of Whole Planet’s loan recipients, who are but a miniscule fraction of workers looking to raise themselves out of poverty. These images allow the store’s customers to misconstrue the company’s role in the Foundation and the impact of the Foundation’s work.

In the company’s 2013 Annual Report, Robb and Mackey state: “Our two foundations [Whole Planet and Whole Kids] and Local Producer Loan Program continued to expand their good works. Whole Planet Foundation®… has partnered with various microfinance institutions to facilitate over $42 million in company, team member, supplier and customer-funded grants.”\footnote{Whole Foods Market, 2013 Annual Report, X.} Considering the quantitative data supplied in the financial documents is useful here. As of the time of that report, the Whole Planet Foundation had, since its inception in 2004, distributed $32.6 million in microloans and had authorized a total of $48.2 million, with the outstanding commitments dependent upon the progress and financial standing of existing loan
recipients. The fact that these funds have been dispersed over the course of a decade skews not only the work done by the Foundation, but also the significance of the contribution made by Whole Foods, especially in comparison to the company’s other finances.

In addition to the revenues the Foundation received from the sale of the calendar and their stock holdings, Whole Foods contributed $2,864,170 to the Whole Planet Foundation in 2013. While this appears to be a sizable donation, we must remember that the Foundation brought in over $12 million that year, meaning only about 20 percent of their total revenue came from Whole Foods Market. To further diminish the implicit generosity of this contribution, during the same fiscal year, the reported net profits of the corporation were $551 million and, after stock options and bonuses, Robb’s compensation totaled $3,249,728. In fact, in 2013 the total compensation granted to the seven person executive team of Whole Foods, including the single dollar that John Mackey pays himself, amounted to $11,315,019, or almost four times more than the contribution the company made to the nonprofit they established and for which it takes credit for providing the operational funds. And while the value of Whole Foods stock has been hotly debated since the 2008 recession, in the 2013 Annual Report Robb and Mackey provide evidence the company is standing strong with their proud proclamation: “During the year, we returned $633 million to shareholders through share buybacks and 

---

488 Consolidated Financial Statements.
490 Whole Foods Market, Notice of Annual Meeting of Shareholders, 23-28. As per their “nineteen time” rule, Robb’s total cash payment was capped at $876,400, the remainder of his compensation is vested in the company to be awarded over time beginning in 2017.
dividends and still ended the year with a healthy reserve of $1.4 billion in cash and investments.491 This financial information suggests that the company could in fact do more if it were not held accountable first and foremost to shareholders and executives, who demand not only a healthy return on their investment, but also the ability for that investment to continue to increase in value.

In that wealth and financial growth remain of central importance, the ability and choice of Whole Foods to act in the interest of others means that the company must remain financially robust, having excess funds to offer. At the same time, Whole Foods’ ability to expand its philanthropic programming is necessary to illustrate the expansion of ‘goodwill’ as contingent upon corporate expansion, which also ensures that the company remains larger than those businesses it supports. This difference of scale is necessary to solidify the paternalistic role of Whole Foods within the natural foods industry, while its commitment to small business is necessary to affirm the company’s adherence to its founding countercultural ethics, specifically in caring for the local and global community. Because Whole Foods must attract and retain customers, it must ensure the continuation of recognizable difference between American consumers and producers in the developing world. This difference is made clear in its stores and on its website through the idyllic representation of the simple life of distant laborers, as I illustrated in chapter six. Fairness in this case means the continuity of social and economic disparities, which result in distant labors being able to live on less, in order to keep the prices of commodities ‘reasonable’ for Whole Foods shoppers. But Whole Foods also reproduces difference

491 Whole Foods Market, 2013 Annual Report, XI.
through the Local Producer Loan Program (LPLP). The intention with LPLP is not to enable entrepreneurs and small businesses to reach the same level of success as Whole Foods. LPLP businesses are just supposed to do ‘better’ than they were prior to the company’s intervention—they are to remain relatively small to retain their artisanal, craftsman, niche market quality, and in doing so add to the authenticity of Whole Foods as purveyor of new and unique specialty goods.

Once again, the hierarchal structure of capitalism must remain intact, which means that even if the leadership at Whole Foods wanted to enact egalitarianism, they could not. The system of dependency and indebtedness that is created through both programs ensures not only the reproduction of the hierarchy but also, and more importantly, the production of monetary value in the form of interest that is collected on these loans and social value in the form of altruistic integrity (that then translates into monetary value when recognized through the brand). Low-risk lending programs are arguably the best means for a financially stable company to enact ‘philanthropy’.

Outwardly, these initiatives appear to be other-oriented, with the company coming to the aid of those who cannot realize their dreams or potential, while on the backend they are not acts of altruism but interest bearing investments. While the Whole Planet Foundation as a nonprofit ensures the recirculation of funds based on its stated purpose of improving as many lives as possible, LPLP is an ancillary program of Whole Foods as a for-profit company that, however ‘purpose-driven’, is first and foremost responsible to shareholders. Attributing altruism, as unconditional care for others, to Whole Foods through the creation of LPLP is a complete paradox, as the assistance it provides is
available only to those who have already proven their fortitude, which is the condition for participation in the program. LPLP is, like Whole Planet, an asset to the company that would not exist if it did not have a financial value in excess of what is invested into it. Here, too, value is created in the dissemination of ideology about what the program is and what it means socially—ideology that adds to the cultural and economic value of the Whole Foods brand.

When Whole Foods launched LPLP, the Whole Planet Foundation had already proven successful in attracting contributions, in the form of both large/corporate and small/individual donations, showing the popular support for the development of business opportunities in the Third World and the potential for capitalism to allow businesses big and small, global and local to exist side by side. LPLP is a refashioning of the practices of the Whole Planet Foundation to create the same relationships of mutuality in North America but according to the terms of advanced capitalism, with individuals holding higher expectations for their businesses and being accustomed to higher standards of living. As such, LPLP provides its loan recipients with different terms and conditions, but they are beholden to the same belief that Whole Foods holds their best interests at heart and that it is through their relationship with the company that they will reach their goals.

In that Whole Foods defines its mission and stores in contrast to Big Business and the conventional, industrial retailing of food, it must also position itself carefully within the food industry’s hierarchy. LPLP adds to the authenticity of Whole Foods by allowing the company to maintain its connection to independent producers and the small business sector while expanding the corporation. In ensuring the continuous and steady flow of
local products, LPLP affords Whole Foods the ability to tailor its stores’ inventories to regional markets, adding variety across the chain that makes the individual store to feel more like a local grocer than part of a corporate chain. In explaining the conception of LPLP, Whole Foods claims, “Since the beginning, we have remained committed to supporting local products and the people who supply them. In addition to featuring local products in our stores, we’re putting our money where our mouths are by providing up to $25 million in low-interest loans to independent local farmers and food artisans.”

It is, however, telling that Whole Foods was willing to “‘put [their] money where [their] mouths are” by in investing in small businesses at the same time they were receiving increased scrutiny for their predatory mergers and acquisitions within the natural foods industry, specifically in the retail sector, as I mentioned in the first chapter. By the time Mackey conceptualized LPLP in 2006, Whole Foods had already bought out or merged with eleven notable natural foods grocery chains, including Fresh & Wild in the UK, and purchased the Allegro Coffee Company, making its products exclusive to Whole Foods. With its largest merger on the public’s radar—the potential acquisition of Wild Oats—the company’s decision to expand their mentorship and support of budding entrepreneurs through LPLP appears as a means to neutralize some of the hostility towards the company. In extending support of small business to artisanal producers and local farmers in US and Canada through LPLP, Whole Foods could show that it was not the predatory corporation that their continuing practice of mergers and acquisitions would imply, and instead, its expansion is elemental to the development of American

492 “LPLP Details.”

420
entrepreneurialism. The company’s choice to invest in local producers and farmers is false altruism that acts to balance the negative connotations of corporate takeover with a commitment to the local economy. LPLP underhandedly serves primarily the needs of Whole Foods by making those local producers first and foremost accountable to meeting the stores’ inventory needs while paying back their debt to the company.

Ultimately, while many of the entrepreneurs supported by the Whole Planet Foundation and LPLP testify to the benefits of their participation in the programs, these programs add to the value of the Whole Foods brand, and, therefore, any expense or donation can be read as an investment in the company—a reinvestment in the means of production for the expansion of capital and thus not truly altruistic. These programs, like all of initiatives launched in the execution of Whole Foods Core Values, have a monetary value in their ability to add to the cultural value of the brand, which is still valuable, despite countervailing criticisms, hostilities, and cautionary tales. We, as a society, continue to show that there is a place for Whole Foods and what it offers. And I know this is true, as I sit among the diverse crowd in the Whole Foods Market balcony café at the company’s P Street location in Washington, DC at 4:30 on a Thursday afternoon, the store below bustling with customers. This store is always busy.

Yet, contrary to my experience at this Whole Foods store—and many others across the country—news reports of late indicate that the company is failing to attract an adequate number of shoppers, as seen in the company’s inability to deliver financially as promised. In fact, many journalists suggest that the company’s financial shortcomings are at least in part due to its lack follow-through on its mission, which has caused cracks to
appear in its ethical façade. The year 2015 has not been the best year for Whole Foods—not by a long shot—with the widespread media attention given to what appears to be the company’s most egregious ethical mishap to date: The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) found that Whole Foods stores there “systematically overcharge for pre-packaged goods.” Instantly, the uncovering of this information caused uproar among consumers nationwide as business journalists asserted that Whole Foods was guilty of far more than inaccurate scales, having knowingly over-weighed products and, thereby, committing “cheats and frauds” in the name of profit. The mocking nickname ‘Whole Paycheck’ was no longer a joke based on the company’s sale of high-priced luxury goods, as concrete evidence of consumers being ‘ripped off’ gave critics their ‘I told you so’ moment. Mother Jones journalist Inae Oh even titled her coverage of the incident “You Were Right. Whole Foods Is Ripping You Off.” For those who had always doubted the ethical premise of Whole Foods, the fact that the company’s stores had been overcharging their shoppers validated their decision not to shop there.

Compounding bad press and “disappointing sales” seem to justify the fall in the value of Whole Foods stock. However, the company’s shares were on the decline prior to this event. Despite projections that this ethical infringement would have a ripple effect across the chain in which consumers would boycott Whole Foods stores across the US

---

and Canada, Whole Foods shoppers—those who *actually*, regularly shop at the company’s stores—seemed unshaken by the news, as many interpreted the mis-measurement to be an isolated mistake. In my experience, few Whole Foods shoppers in the DC-area demonstrated any concern about the specifics of the infraction or that any such infraction had occurred. It is thus no surprise that, less than two months later, when a California Whole Foods store was exposed on social media for the sale of six-dollar asparagus water, which consisted of a plastic bottle of water with three stalks of raw asparagus inside, the news was largely treated with satire.\(^496\) The willingness to accept the errors of and lapses in judgment by Whole Foods reveals just how valuable the brand is to consumers who continue to shop at the company’s stores and communities that find new worth when chosen for a store site. When approached with sarcasm, the failures of Whole Foods are treated with a knowing wink, as the shoppers circumnavigate both the company’s contradictions and the contradictions in their own consumption. In knowing that what makes Whole Foods desirable is the extravagance for which the company is chastised, sarcasm serves as a buffer against the cultural significance of status shopping. In consumers’ sarcasm the desire to buy ‘nice things’ is put in laughable contrast to the ability to ‘do good’, while the tension between these two desires remains an irreconcilable dilemma for shoppers and industry.

Managing this contradiction requires the prioritization of stakeholders, and the continued success of Whole Foods shows they do this well. If nothing else, the brand’s

continued relevance indicates that the company is able to deliver on its primary Core Value to “satisfy, delight, and nourish” its customers. With customers as the driving force of its business, this is what matters in that it is where value is realized. In reality, though casting a shadow over the media’s coverage of the company, what has become known as the “weights and measures scandal” has been nearly as inconsequential as the asparagus water, having little effect on the company’s sales or stock value, but this does not mean that Whole Foods is in the clear—whether in terms of their finances or conscience.

The question of the long-term financial stability of Whole Foods is complex. By defining the company’s commodity as the brand, I have come to differentiate what Whole Foods offers from other food retailers despite the superficiality of this difference. Accordingly, the ability to retain and grow in consumer appeal is the key factor in the continued success of Whole Foods. As a pro and a con—the achievement of part of its mission that works against its profitability—the natural and organic industry has grown beyond Whole Foods and the natural foods grocers that worked for its popularization. Market studies show that Whole Foods has lost command of the organic and natural foods retail sector, as an increasing number of Whole Foods shoppers are taking their business to the natural foods departments of conventional supermarkets like Kroger.497 We can see the effects of the market shift in Whole Foods stock during 2015, which, having appeared to recover from a dip in 2014, reached $56.72 in February of 2015, only to drop over forty percent by late summer. In a longer view, as of October 2015 at $33.65

per share, stock in Whole Foods is worth just a little over half of what it was worth when it reached its all time high in October 2013 at a value of $65.24 per share.\textsuperscript{498} The claim is that the devaluation of stock reflects the fact that, while Whole Foods was able to remain lucrative coming out of the 2008 recession because it was able to fetch higher prices for organic and natural foods, now, faced with lower-price-point competitors, the future of Whole Foods’ profitability is questioned as its profit margins have narrowed.\textsuperscript{499} With conventional retailers barking up the organic tree, Whole Foods sees price reduction as the best tactic to draw in and retain customers. Using the traditional economies of scale model, in which more customers buying more goods at lower prices proves more profitable than fewer customers buying fewer higher priced products, Whole Foods hopes to both cleanse its ‘overpriced’ image and create investor confidence.

But, problematically, while Whole Foods is a supermarket, we cannot consider it \textit{the same} as all other supermarkets. It does not have the same inventory and, therefore, is not competing on price alone. As I have explained, the value Whole Foods produces is not in the sale of commodities but instead, the types of commodities that are sold, including how they are produced and sold, who produces and sells them, and the meaning they hold in the socio-cultural realm. If we reduce Whole Foods to the sale of organic foods—if we believe that shoppers are only going to Whole Foods solely to buy organic food—then Whole Foods \textit{should not exist} at present. It is much easier for most people to go to a conventional supermarket or big-box store where prices are low and they can

\textsuperscript{499} “Whole Foods Stock.”
complete their shopping at a single location. Focusing on convenience and price, most analysts to claim that Whole Foods’ main flaw is that its prices are too high and its stores too exclusive. The notion that Whole Foods is no longer as valuable because they now have stiff competition on the products it offers is only justified if we remove Whole Foods from the cultural matrix from which it has arisen and exists. There was a point when Whole Foods was rendered categorically different from conventional supermarkets, and it strikes me as relevant to refer back to the distinction made by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in their 2007 attempt to block the merger between Whole Foods and Wild Oats, claiming that these stores “offer a distinct set of products and services to a distinct group of customers in a distinctive way.” The successful blockage of the merger underscores the validity of the FTC’s claim—Whole Foods is selling something more than groceries. In effect, the value of the company’s stock does not correlate directly with what actually happens within the walls of Whole Foods stores. And yet, to ensure continued investment in the company, we find the company changing its practices to meet the expectations of shareholders, even if that means sacrificing on its Core Values. In essence, the decisions made by the leadership of Whole Foods show that values are only valuable in that they produce value.

Even if we shift focus away from the consideration of ethics, this view of value is myopic—capitalism is inherently concerned with immediacy. The old adage ‘any press is good press’ comes to life through Whole Foods with the company’s ability to constantly intervene, performing damage control at the opportune time, adjusting its operations, and

making new promises to adapt to the needs of the market. This pursuit of media is always-already about profit. When the company swoops in to save its image, it is not about its commitment to ethics; it is about saving face to retain customers and investors. For example, in response to the weights and measures case, the company posted on the following on its website: “Our number one priority is to ensure that our customers have a great experience every time they shop at Whole Foods Market. Falling short of a great experience is not acceptable to us, and we are committed to doing better.”501 This retort is means for its leadership to assert their dedication to accuracy, employee training, and consumer satisfaction—a way to render their practices as exceptional to win consumer confidence as quickly as possible. But these promises lack futurity, specifically in the company’s unwillingness to actually invest in employee training and sufficient staffing, as I indicated in chapter five. A devoted and knowledgeable staff does result in increased customer satisfaction, and this was a key factor in the popularity of Whole Foods in its early days. However, to achieve this outcome requires a long-term commitment to team members, which is contrary to the immediate production of value.

The company’s lack of commitment to their team members is further evidenced by the September 2015 decision to cut 1,500 jobs company-wide “as part of its ongoing commitment to lower prices for its customers and invest in technology upgrades while improving its cost structure.”502 While the company has claimed that there are many positions available for the employees whose positions have been cut, in his report for


Mother Jones, Tom Philpott notes that the brunt of the layoffs have effected the company’s most experienced, full time supervisory staff, who have been offered subordinate titled roles with lower pay and the same, or expanded, responsibilities. The choice made by the leadership of Whole Foods to invest in technologizing operations in an effort to reduce human error simply removes a good portion of the human element from the company, and I am not referring only to the choice to operate the company’s stores with smaller teams. By focusing on technology instead of people, Whole Foods has become more like conventional supermarkets—seemingly but one step away from the automated self-checkout. By reducing the number of full time team members, Whole Foods cuts back on the overhead costs associated with benefits such as healthcare and cumulative leave. As I explained in chapter four, the company offers these benefits to longer term team members working over twenty hours per week, but, as according to Philpott, “the national annualized turnover rate for part-time Whole Foods team members was more than triple that of full-timers—66 percent versus about 18 percent,” there are fewer long term costs associated with hiring part time staff members. In effect, the commitment that Whole Foods once held to team members has proven tenuous when less than profitable, as the company’s success is now measured against that of conventional supermarkets who have historically proven their willingness to meet the demands of the market by “pushing down wages and sending workers packing.”

503 Ibid.
504 Ibid.
505 Ibid.
So, what has changed for Whole Foods since the opening of their first large-scale natural foods store in Austin, Texas thirty-five years ago? The company’s physical, geographical expansion has resulted in the loss of a true team in which everyone knew each other and worked together towards a common goal—the type of team that helped the first Whole Foods store recover from a flood that left the property and its inventory in ruins in 1981, a story that Mackey retells regularly as testimony to the inherent communality of humans.\(^{506}\) On an interpersonal level, it is easier to place profitability over people when those people are distant actors that appear primarily as numbers on a spreadsheet. However, the pivotal change in the company’s accountability towards team members must be seen as the 1992 decision to become a publically traded corporation. With the appearance of Whole Foods on the stock market, the company’s leadership could no longer realistically claim to be guided by their mission and ethics—they are accountable to others whose interest is in the company’s value, regardless of how that might hinder their values.

Whole Foods increasingly chooses to pursue value over values, leaving its “Values Matters” advertising campaign to vanish in the shadow of the company’s contradictions. The company’s claim that “Values Matter” was to show the value of the Whole Foods brand. The recent decision by Whole Foods to focus almost exclusively on price is a complete turn from its previous position, which was that the prices at Whole Foods are competitive based on the quality of the products being offered. Accordingly, value is found in quality, not quantity, and this served as justification for why things at

\(^{506}\) Mackey and Sisodia, 5.
Whole Foods stores sometimes cost more. As stated by Robb in his conversation with Tracie McMillan only a year ago:

The cheapest food is not always the best deal for you, from the health perspective. Yes, you can buy cheaper food than what we offer at Whole Foods, but there’s often a trade off… I don’t know how to tell you the difference between pink slime and beef that’s been raised to our standards. It’s not the same product, but is it worth it to you?  

At present, it is clear that the company is losing sight of its values (and their leaderships’ ability to defend those values) in the pursuit of lower prices, which is evidenced by the lack of response to media requests for comments on a suit filed by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in September 2015. The animal rights organization found that, despite the stated commitment of Whole Foods to humane production, the company’s audits of suppliers are infrequent and that there are rarely ramifications when violations are found. PETA claims that by leaving less-than-humane meat on the shelves of Whole Foods, the company is deceiving customers and able to profit off of “sham” standards. But the dismissal of inhumane conditions and the desire to cut costs coalesces as the company attempts to hold on to their image as ‘better’ while sacrificing on standards to increase its competitiveness and ensure profitability.

And still, as the media and consumer groups ponder the rights and wrongs of Whole Foods in what appears to be the epic fall of the natural foods giant, the company is

507 Robb as quoted in McMillan.
not failing to profit—it just is not profiting as much as its leadership had promised. While Mackey asserts the connection between making ‘more money’ and doing ‘more good’, we must keep in mind, this is never the foremost concern for a publically traded company. Whole Foods must first show it is valuable as an investment, providing returns to shareholders, and this means that its stores must constantly increase their sales. During the third quarter of 2015, Whole Foods sales were only up 1.3 percent, nowhere close to the target of nine percent sales growth for the year and even falling short of their four percent growth in 2014.\(^{509}\) The company denies that this slowing rate of growth is a reflection of market saturation, as it continues to open new store locations, with well over one hundred US stores in development at present.\(^{510}\) But the fact in the matter is, more Whole Foods stores do not necessarily mean more Whole Foods customers, especially when these locations are increasingly close together. By entering new geographical markets altogether—like the Western New York region as I discussed in chapter four—the company has a better chance in increasing their sales than in putting more stores within a two mile radius in Washington, DC. With Whole Foods finding its place as a household name, it has become difficult to draw new customers to existing locations because most people have already made the choice to shop, or not shop, at the company’s stores.

---


\(^{510}\)“Whole Foods Stock,” note disclaimer at the end of this article, which states, “John Mackey, co-CEO of Whole Foods Market, is a member of The Motley Fool’s board of directors. Brian Stoffel owns shares of Whole Foods Market. The Motley Fool owns and recommends Whole Foods Market,” suggesting that the view held by the unnamed author is shared by Whole Foods Market leading me to attribute this claim to their leadership; “Stores in Development,” *Whole Foods Market*, accessed October 16, 2015, http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/company-info/stores-development.
Further, the decision to embark on a new initiative to open smaller, lower-priced stores under the banner “365” indicates that the company is questioning its ability to expand its share of the market with the opening more Whole Foods stores. However, the company’s plan to reach a ‘different’ demographic with smaller, less expensive, and less frivolous stores is contrary to the brand identity. As I have shown, Whole Foods exists at the intersection of luxury and ethics with their uniqueness based on their ability to superficially balance both, despite the undergirding contradictions in their practices. By surrendering one aspect of its identity, or showing its mission and status are less important than price, the company is at the helm of its downfall. By scaling back on their values for the sake of capital, Whole Foods is not enhancing its ability to compete with conventional supermarkets. Instead, it is losing what makes the brand valuable—distinction.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction shown in the success of Whole Foods is that, while consumers from all socio-economic classes mockingly refer to the senseless bourgeois offerings of ‘Whole Paycheck’, what attracts shoppers to the company’s stores is that they are different. Part of this difference is the price of what is being offered and the notion that this additional cost means something more—a sense of care that has social significance that both is personal, with a sense of status, and civic, with a sense of societal contribution. The question is then how to balance consumer demands for values and value. The fact that these two demands are irreconcilable plays out in the practice of Conscious Capitalism by Whole Foods. If the way the food industry cuts costs is by cutting corners at the expense of people and the planet, an ethical company will never be
able to compete with those that are profit-driven. A truly ethical company can never be interested in profit, at all, because the accumulation of profit requires exploitation. Conscious Capitalism is, therefore, not a contradiction but a premise based on an untruth—capitalism cannot be both optimally ethical and profitable.

Because Whole Foods cannot achieve its ethical mission, its leadership must consider how to continue the illusion that their mission is necessary and has the potential to be fulfilled in the future through the success of their stores. Countering the popular opinion that Whole Foods must lower its prices to survive in the current marketplace, the opposite appears to be true: Whole Foods must become more exclusive to increase the value of the company. If all other supermarkets now offer what Whole Foods has built its brand upon, then Whole Foods must continue to prove it can offer something different, not more of the same. If Whole Foods cannot cleanse its image as ‘Whole Paycheck’, then it should embrace it. In accepting its identity as a luxury brand, Whole Foods may have to close less profitable stores, open fewer new stores, and/or scale back on store size to focus solely on higher priced, hard to find, luxury items. These measures will help to restore the company’s ideological value, which is that better costs more because it is worth more. But under capitalism, saving the world is not work that can be done by anyone. Salvation has a price, making it reserved for the caring souls who are willing to pay it.


Feinstein, Deborah L. and Michael B. Bernstein. “All Over the Map: Grocery Store Enforcement from Von’s to Whole Foods.” Antitrust 22. 1 (Fall 2007): 53-60.


Hiscox, Michael J. and Nicholas F. B. Smith. “Is There Consumer Demand for Fair Labor Standards?: Evidence From a Field Experiment.” Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 2011.


http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2014/10/03/the_nyt_discovers_that_gowanus_is_a_hotbed_of_gentrification.php.


United States Census Bureau. “State and Country Quick Facts.”


---. “Current NOSB Members.”


---. “Former NOSB Members.”
http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=Template


--. *2013 Annual Report.*


--. *Consolidated Financial Statements as of and for the Years Ended December 31, 2013 and 2012, with Supplementary Information and Independent Auditors’ Report.*


http://www.npr.org/2013/02/11/171376509/is-sustainable-labeled-seafood-really-sustainable.
BIOGRAPHY

Allison Lakomski is the proud child of supermarket managers. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Criticism from Stony Brook University in 2004 and her Master of Arts in Gender and Cultural Studies from Simmons College in 2008. She has been an instructor in the departments of Cultural Studies and Women and Gender Studies at George Mason University. She currently resides in Washington, DC.