

Greener than Thou: How the Rhetoric of the Green Food Market Reinforces
Socioeconomic Hierarchies through the Illusion of Moral Superiority

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ABSTRACT

GREENER THAN THOU: HOW THE RHETORIC OF THE GREEN FOOD MARKET REINFORCES SOCIOECONOMIC HIERARCHIES THROUGH THE ILLUSION OF MORAL SUPERIORITY

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The market for “green” foods has expanded in recent years, largely due to the powerful rhetoric it employs. The rhetorical strategy behind green consumerism draws on deeply embedded cultural narratives to assert a rift between consumers and nature, a rift that is both initially unavoidable and entirely resolvable through acts of consumption. Green consumption is thus presented as an opportunity for enlightenment (e.g. living in harmony with nature) and political activism (e.g. protecting nature by supporting sustainable agriculture). Drawing on the theories of Lyotard and Debord, this thesis suggests that these two features create an occasion particularly well-suited for acts of *differential* representation. Consumption, in other words, provides consumers with the feeling of social responsibility and spiritual ascendance, which together create an illusion of moral superiority. By definition, this superiority only has meaning with reference to an amoral other, a role inhabited in this case by non-green consumers. This discourse is

particularly problematic because of the significant price difference between green and non-green products—individuals without the financial means to purchase green products are recast as amoral consumers. A moral hierarchy emerges on top of the existing socioeconomic hierarchy, creating what appears to be a morally justified elite. It is ultimately this discourse, rather than a desire for environmental reform, that sustains green consumerism.

PREFACE

“HUMM FOOD® (HŬMM’ FŌŌD): *Real food that creates an unmistakable feeling of health and well-being. Often accompanied by an inexplicable and irresistible urge to, well, hum.*

I created LäraBar® because a healthy body, mind and spirit are derived from what you eat. I believe that food is healthiest and most satisfying in its simplest, most natural state. Made from 100% real food, LäraBar® is energy in its purest form. A magical harmony of fruits, nuts and spices, LäraBar® harvests the best natural ingredients to lift your vitality and sustain energy with every bite.”

This message appears on the packaging for LäraBars, a line of all-natural energy bars that touts its short list of “raw” ingredients. “Raw” is a relatively new buzzword in the green food industry. It means what one would expect—food that hasn’t been cooked—but it represents a step up from the previous ideal of “whole” foods. Raw foods are that much more untouched; they are wholer than whole. The cherry pie-flavored bar I’m holding contains only dates, almonds, and cherries, and promises to be unprocessed, non-GMO, and vegan. It also promises to “enliven the soul.” I’ve been invited to make a deal, it seems: If I accept the terms laid out on the wrapper, LäraBar will grant me the sensation of enlightenment. In a situation where sensation is the only currency (how else, after all, can we gauge our spiritual ascension?), this is an attractive arrangement, further facilitated by the interchangeability that LäraBar grants physical and spiritual notions of

purity. Eating a not-impure energy bar will, in other words, catalyze my spiritual purification.

When explicitly stated, this physical-metaphysical reaction sounds absurd, perhaps even more absurd when considered alongside the dramatic language used employed to propose it. *LäraBar is energy in its purest form. A magical harmony of fruits, nuts, and spices...* “Magical,” in fact, might evoke precisely the suspension of disbelief the transaction requires. Judith Butler uses the term “magical efficacy” to describe the role of discourse in attributing material results to rhetorical acts, a blurring of the boundary between a statement and its actualization (Butler, 21). The marketing tactics of LäraBar are hardly an anomaly in the green food business, suggesting that these attempts to pitch the assumption of spiritual nutrition are in fact successful. The discourse of green consumption is replete with constructed significance, which is often elaborately depicted if not verbalized on packaging. To walk down the organic aisle in the grocery store is to be inundated with what Michael Pollan refers to in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* as “supermarket pastoral”: marketing narratives that have become their own literary genre, wherein green food manufacturers use romanticized stories and images to elevate the standard consumer experience to one of moral and aesthetic value. Packaging features drawings of smiling cows, green pastures, and women doing yoga beneath crescent moons. These images create a kind of simulacrum, a “reenactment of joy” (Silverblatt), in which consumers experience the illusion of spiritual oneness with their food—the act of purchasing and consuming food is portrayed as an opportunity to foster both a corporeal and moral bond with the earth.

Attentive marketing is undoubtedly responsible for the ease with which consumers accept the suggestion that eating organic tomato sauce will bring them closer to the soil from which the tomatoes came. But how have consumers come to value a bond with soil? It seems that soil and other elements of nature have, at some point in the process of consumption, taken on a set of qualities outside their physical properties. The chemical composition of soil contains nothing to catalyze enlightenment, regardless of whether it has been organically farmed or not, and yet consumers regard it as spiritually alchemic, paying a premium for tomatoes still dusted in dirt. Could it be that the premium has become the value in itself? Just as designer handbags are valued precisely because they signify something valuable (as evidenced by the popularity of imitation designer handbags), could it be that organic products—many of which have been shown to provide few if any benefits to the consumer or the environment—are similarly valued because they produce an elite?

INTRODUCTION

Food is not just food. When my cat eats his dinner, it is a pure act of replenishment and what seems to be enjoyment. It is—or appears to be through the lens with which we distinguish ourselves from animals—facile, instinctual, the fulfillment of a biological equation. When we sit down to dinner, however, we consider the calories we are about to eat, the number of food groups represented, the vitamin A and vitamin C and omega-3 fatty acids that may or may not be adequately supplied by our chosen side dish. Moreover, we consider how the food looks and how it makes us feel. Do we serve fancier cheese because we are entertaining coworkers? Do we serve frozen yogurt for dessert because we felt guilty about buying ice cream? Does our roast measure up to the photographs in *Gourmet* magazine? Are our apples the shiny, red spheres we've come to expect?

Jennings and Jennings succinctly describe what's happening here: "We no longer simply partake of the apple as part of the bounty of nature but constitute the fruit as an entity defined by its social and scientific purposes" (174). This is the power of rhetoric: interactions between culture and language bestow new meanings on words, meanings that reconstitute what they were originally employed to describe. Pomegranates are not the fruits of a Persian shrub; they are "superfoods," excellent sources of antioxidants, the

symbol of summer in Vietnam. They are among the fruits of paradise in the Qur'an and the forbidden fruit itself according to many Jewish scholars (Haught).

Food is not just food, which means that eating is not just eating. And unlike other forms of consumption, eating is a biological necessity. It seems, then, that this intersection of biology and rhetoric obliges us to consume meaning, to accept and absorb the rhetorical baggage of what was, before language, simply sustenance. This is perhaps even more pronounced in practice than it is in theory. Power lunches, eating disorders, holiday feasts, diet crazes—the social roles of food seem to have surpassed the biological in popular consciousness. Eating is one of the few things that all human beings engage in on a regular basis. It is a rare source of common ground, however superficially, and thus provides tremendous opportunity for cultural analysis. How we reconstitute our food, and how the food reconstitutes us—how it *acts*—reflects many of the underlying frameworks of society.

Countless scholars have attempted to describe not only how, but also where or when meaning-making occurs. Kenneth Burke, for example, addresses popular consciousness in relation to the “symbolic environment.” As opposed to his other three environments (natural, manufactured, and social), Burke’s symbolic environment operates with a currency of cultural significance. It gives relevance to narratives, basis to morals, and social implications to objects. It is where cultural meaning happens. Green food draws its value not only from this symbolic environment but also from a set of material expectations. A variety of complex, culturally produced needs and fears

motivate green purchases, but they do not displace material selling points such as improved health, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability.

Green consumption becomes problematic when the distinction between symbolic and material worth is blurred—that is, when constructed narratives escape the symbolic environment and begin to reshape the material world. These narratives take on the appearance of justified material “truths,” which in turn produce Debord’s concept of spectacle: a kind of hyperreality in which the façade has entirely replaced the underlying structure. The power of the spectacle is in its ability to prevent our recognition of the symbolic environment as symbol.

In this analysis I will examine the mechanisms that facilitate and perpetuate the specious material significance of green foods, and I will discuss the societal implications of this significance. How does society shape narratives of green consumption, and how do these narratives then reshape or reinforce the frameworks of society? This question calls for an analysis that draws not only from rhetorical theory and cultural studies, but also more applied studies in green marketing, which represent the material aspirations, as it were, of green symbols. I will thus situate green food and its consumption within Burke’s symbolic environment, merging Lyotardian critiques of capitalism and Debordian concepts of commodity with analytical assessments of how capitalism and commodity play out in the material world of green consumption.

Advertisements as sources and products of cultural narratives

In advertising, the presence of Burke's symbolic environment is most readily apparent in visual cues, which are at once material and symbolic. Roland Barthes discusses the relationship between the inert "literal" image and the active "symbolic" image, arguing that the former supports the latter—the literal image gives form to society's collective but amorphous desires, and this form is manifested in the symbolic image. So while both images are anthropogenic, the literal image (the image being shown) is actively created by an individual or institution, whereas the symbolic image (the image being *seen*) is the literal image reinterpreted through narratives that it evokes. Barthes uses the example of an ad for Panzani pasta and pasta sauce, featuring a string bag full of market-fresh food. The image, he says, depicts

...a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined...To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where 'shopping around for oneself' is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more 'mechanical' civilization (136).

We needn't venture far from Barthes' example to see how cultural narratives shape society's response to green rhetoric. To use a parallel example, Walnut Acres describes its "Marinara with Herbs" variety of organic pasta sauce as "Just like Grandma would make. If Grandma was Italian and had her own organic vegetable garden and was a gourmet cook and designed attractive labels for her food." Assuming this is something viewers can identify with, the description, although lighthearted, immediately evokes

both the grandmother seal of quality and imagery very similar to what Barthes described: natural, whole foods that are fresh from their producers and indicative of a less mechanized lifestyle. More importantly, though, it reiterates that these things—a grandma’s cooking, a less mechanized lifestyle—are desirable.

To understand how food acts, we must first examine the sources of this action—how we come to ascribe certain meanings to certain foods, and how these meanings produce different kinds and degrees of social response. Food is so steeped in culture (and culture in food) that one could not begin to catalog the countless pathways through which foods have arrived at their present meanings. Because of the relative newness of topic at hand (green food, which only emerged with any significance with the advent of organic agriculture in the 1960s (Pollan 101)) and the nature of culture in question (in this case Western culture, which in the last 150 years has, according to Pollan, undergone “the most radical change to the way humans eat since the discovery of agriculture” (10)), it seems most productive to focus not on historical associations but instead on where new associations are made: advertisements.

Advertisement as a source of symbolic reconciliation

Like all elements of popular culture, advertisements both shape and are shaped by the societies in which they reside. But unlike newspapers, television, and other cultural institutions that subtly, often subconsciously, reiterate capitalist values, ads are direct instruments of capitalism: they have the explicit purpose of creating an occasion for consumption. As Corbett stresses, however, ads are not merely sales pitches; rather than

selling the products themselves, they sell the lifestyles in which such products would be indispensable. They produce a situation in which their product is implicitly necessary to fulfill desires and resolve deficiencies already established by deeply embedded cultural narratives, narratives from which the advertisement constructs new values and, in that, new narratives.

Take, for example, ads for sports utility vehicles (SUVs), a particularly popular subject for analysis among rhetoricians (Hope 2002; Olsen 2002), perhaps because they so thoroughly encompass the strategic contradictions that so often make green marketing effective. The ads follow a formula typical of contemporary marketing strategies: they present a problem (in this case, a society-driven rift between humans and the natural world) for which the product being marketed (the SUV) is implicitly or explicitly the ideal solution. In accordance with this formula, SUV ads focus heavily on characterizing nature, presenting it as an alternative to the suggested mundane rigidity of life in suburban or urban settings. Furthermore, they provide a basis for their solution by naturalizing the idea that humans can and should transgress the bounds of society. This goal is largely figurative—by off-roading to one's 9-to-5 job, one does not meaningfully abandon societal institutions—but is presented literally (indeed, often as off-roading: disregarding society's infrastructure).

Instilling in the consumer a sense of entitlement has two functions: it gives consumption a greater sense of urgency, and it produces undertones of domination not unlike those associated with the familiar narrative of manifest destiny. In fact, SUV ads in particular represent nature more specifically as wilderness, drawing from and

romanticizing a number of characterizations from early American narratives. Nature is the frontier. It is vast, challenging, and indomitable. Here, the necessary irony of green advertising is not only evident but expressed. Ads sell these alleged qualities of nature to customers, evoking and perpetuating narratives in which they are universally desirable. At the same time, the ads must make nature attainable in order to sell it; they must provide a means of dominating that which they've marketed for its indomitability. This paradox is at the heart of the human-nature relationship: the conflicting narratives of harmony and domination (Olsen, 184). Green advertising provides its own particular solution—offering nature up as a site of transformation, as a kind of service. Nature becomes actively symbolic, no longer a physical destination but instead a symbolic portal, allowing consumers the opportunity to flee the constraints of society without stepping outside society's bounds. Discussing this portrayal of nature as transformative, Olsen points to a Toyota 4Runner slogan, "Adventure. Every day." (183). This slogan completes the transition of power from the symbolic environment (transformation via nature) to the material (transformation via nature via SUV) in its suggestion that SUVs can bring the wilderness to suburban drivers in suburban conditions; no longer merely a means of escaping, SUVs become the escape itself.

SUVs are therefore marketed as instruments of resolution, of placing the consumer and the wilderness in harmony rather than opposition. The domination of nature present throughout the ads (SUVs often appear in off-road settings, effortlessly crossing mountains, streams, and other natural barriers) does not appear to be a paradox, but instead a reconciliation facilitated by the product being sold. SUVs, the ads suggest,

are a means of reuniting their drivers with nature, an act that transcends rather than embodies the contradictions of the human-nature relationship. As Olsen explains:

The SUV is presented as a way of managing several cultural dialectics embedded in man's relationship with the environment. The consistent use of elevation (physical, natural, socioeconomic) and other images in these ads suggest that we no longer need to manage these dialectical tensions because we can transcend them. This transcendence ushers in a state of liminality. We are at a place of no boundaries and infinite possibilities about where we will go, what we will do, and who we will be (191).

Although existing narratives provide a great deal of the necessary rhetorical power, justifying a certain product as a worthwhile solution is a complex endeavor. Perhaps more complex, however, is justifying the validity of the problem presented, a problem that is reshaped if not fabricated to suit the needs of the marketer (Corbett 153). Many green advertisements require consumers to assume that a closer connection with nature is desirable and achievable, but societal institutions, ranging from processed foods to suburbia itself, represent a barrier. Perhaps these assumptions seem natural, but why might that be? Our ideas about what constitutes nature, what one does to connect with nature, and what value one derives from this connection are largely reflections of existing cultural narratives rather than our physical needs. (Interestingly, green advertisements often conflate the culturally constructed idea of "natural" with *nature*. Nature, once the goal, becomes a symbol for "naturalness" or "purity"—for a freedom from society's imprint. Nature, ironically, becomes the symbol for that which has no symbol.) Green advertisements are no less guilty of fabricating needs than the notorious infomercials

aimed at convincing unassuming consumers that they *require* kitchen appliances and exercise equipment they'd previously never heard of. Many people consider themselves wise to such tactics, but a quick comparison of one's recent purchases to one's needs indicates otherwise. Human wants and needs are often vastly different, and much of this difference can be attributed to advertising and, more broadly, capitalism.

Commodity is itself a kind of spectacle, one that blurs—or perhaps constructs—the relationship between value and need. As Guy Debord explains in *The Society of the Spectacle*,

The reality of this blackmail—the fact that even in its most impoverished forms (food, shelter) use value now has no existence outside the illusory riches of augmented survival—accounts for the general acceptance of the illusions of modern commodity consumption. The real consumer has become a consumer of illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression (23).

In short, Debord is arguing that while we treat many of our purchases as if they were directly linked to our survival and have built an economy reflecting this, commodity in fact derives its exchange value—what consumers are willing to pay—from the *illusion* of need. As exemplified in advertising, capitalism creates artificial need as a way of manipulating the desires of the consumers who sustain it—it relies on differential wealth and, in that sense, survives on its ability to market differential survival.

This kind of Marxist critique applies particularly well to the green food market. LäraBars, for example, cost roughly five times more than Quaker granola bars, and have twice the calories. The difference in price, then, is not associated with sustenance only,

but rather with the notion of increased survival—that LäraBars will noticeably improve one’s physical wellbeing and, as the marketing strategy implies, spiritual connectedness. Whether or not consuming LäraBars significantly enhances one’s ability to survive is secondary. What’s important instead is that value is derived from a social differential. Consumption is competition: consumers invest not in the material thing itself but in an advantage or, more accurately, in a *perceived* advantage.

A testament to the power of this spectacle, people frequently purchase what they want before they purchase what they need. Advertisements therefore focus on creating needs rather than fulfilling them, and this creation of needs is what gives them their rhetorical strength. Their ability to sell products is thus secondary in significance to their power to reshape public consciousness. By leading existing narratives through a series of subtle permutations, advertisements quietly turn constructions into public assumptions—they lead consumers to defer to and eventually adopt an alternate construction of reality.

Corbett provides the national effort to curtail littering as a useful example:

Just as advertising can change habits, it can help create rituals and taboos... Through national advertising campaigns begun decades ago, litter was labeled as an environmental no-no. While cleaning up litter makes for a visually appealing environment, the automobile from which the trash is generally tossed cause far more environmental harm than almost all types of litter. (153)

This scenario follows the trend of public campaigns focused on low-hanging fruit, a trend reflecting the tendency—not as uncommon in social movements as one might expect—to prioritize action over outcome. Consider the power of other political symbols,

ranging from photographed handshakes to Kennedy's "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," and it becomes clear that public figures are often judged by (and thus prioritize) their ability to produce symbolic action, more than the outcome such action brings about. The same is true of markets: In an economy that fluctuates markedly in response to the fears and expectations of consumers and economists, it makes sense that symbolic currency is operable in material transactions. Killingsworth and Palmer suggest that the ideology of green consumerism follows a similar trend, representing a form of environmentalism grounded in the cultivation of values—a transformation of individual ideals—rather than the initiation of environmental reform. Referring to popular guidebooks that provide instruction on green living, they explain that “the ‘salvation’ promised by titles like *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* signifies not so much the salvation of the physical Earth but rather the salvation of earthly consciousness, a state of mind, or state of being, that depends on a continuing connection of human identity with the material Earth” (221).

A marketable state of mind in many ways suggests a market for narratives—the desire of individuals to adorn themselves with additional meaning, to furnish or refurbish their symbolic environment. The recycling campaign, which I will discuss later in this paper, demonstrates this further. In the private sector, certain aspects of the green food boom (e.g. the persistent demand for green products in the face of reports that many allegedly green foods, although several times more expensive, do little to improve one's health or the environment) are the quintessential manifestations of an ad-generated symbolic environment. The SUV represents an even more apparent example, whose

hypocrisy has only recently begun to shift its place in green discourse. One of the more environmentally *unfriendly* vehicles on the road, the SUV was embraced as a symbol of environmental authenticity; like so much outdoor “gear,” SUVs were (and in some cases still are, as evidenced by the persistence of their wilderness-focused advertising strategy) a financial investment intended to read like an ideological commitment. Consumers become so entrenched in the symbolic environment that external disruptions (whether studies on the health benefits of organic produce or reports on the carbon footprint of SUVs) do little to change their behavior, and little to adjust the symbolic nature of the products in question.

How does this entrenchment occur? From where do advertisements obtain the power necessary to so thoroughly convince consumers of their message? In the case of green advertising, we can see countless examples of “green” ads putting nature to work. By tapping into the powerful myths and narratives that have long characterized humanity’s relationship with the natural world, ads attempt to manipulate this relationship in a way that makes implicit the necessity of their products. A well-known example of this tactic is the “nature-as-backdrop” approach to advertising analyzed by Corbett. Showing products in natural settings is an attempt to conflate the product with a particular aspect of nature, which in turn evokes a certain social meaning bestowed upon it by larger cultural narratives. Nature, then, is reduced to a kind of mediator between consumption and social significance. Visiting the shampoo section of the drug store will confirm this: elements of nature like spring rain, ocean breezes, and wild honeysuckle appear countless times both in the names of products and as pictures on packages. But

these elements are evoked only as icons—a glance at the list of ingredients, even on products labeled “all natural,” reveals, expectedly, that the role of rainwater is limited to the outside of the bottle. As in celebrity endorsements, nature’s presence is entirely superficial—and widely recognized as such—but nevertheless effective. This efficacy is a testament to the power of cultural narratives and the symbolic environment in which they operate. So strong are the connotations of rain (purity, rejuvenation) that they are oftentimes entrusted to govern the decisions of consumers. The fragrance of rain elicits an emotional response, a desire to absorb everything that rain signifies, and the bottle of shampoo provides an opportunity to do just this—through consumption. (Another learned response: rain frequently stirs up earthy aromas or wormy odors, but rarely the kind of scent produced by bath products. The “rain” fragrance, like the cloud-free rain pictured on the package, depicts not what rain smells like, but what rain *should* smell like. Through advertising, the artifice of freshness becomes the prototype.) In short, “green” ads sell nature, which is already fully stocked with marketable social significance, rather than products. Nature becomes the commodity.

Narrative as a source of value

The social significance that gives nature its “value” comes from a variety of narratives and myths. In “Marketplace Mythology and Discourses of Power,” Thompson illustrates this phenomenon with his analysis of ads for natural health products. Ads, he says, frequently draw rhetorical strength from familiar narratives, assuming the persuasive power of these narratives as their own. In his analysis, he describes how health

product advertisements evoke the narrative of the Garden of Eden through “an alluring metadiagnosis about the deep causes of illness” and by portraying “a return to nature (via holistic health practices and a natural lifestyle) as the metaphoric path to wellness” (164). He suggests that nature is mythologized as Eden, an important Judeo-Christian symbol of purity from which humankind separated itself. In the Edenic narrative, Adam and Eve partake of forbidden knowledge and therefore fall from grace—the consequences of this original sin are represented in their banishment from a life of harmony with nature. Reworked by the Romantic tradition, contemporary manifestations of the narrative equate the embrace of modernist thought (that is, a perspective anchored in science and rationalism) with the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. More literally, they equate an alienation from nature with the exile from Eden, thus implying a clear and morally desirable solution: a return to nature is a return to grace.

Here we see how narratives transcend their origins: the concept of a return to grace, in spite of its biblical foundations, retains its cultural significance regardless of whether or not members of a given culture embrace the Bible itself. This transcendence, in fact, marks the assimilation of narrative into collective consciousness. It represents the instant in which a story becomes an assumption, revising the societal framework through which language, images, and other signifiers are processed. Rhetoric relies on narratives to exist, even while it drives new narratives into existence—it is the site of meaning creation, and thus the site of tremendous power struggle. In a capitalist society, the rhetoric of consumption has the power to admonish and empower individuals, depending

on the products they choose to consume, and it derives this power from an array of cultural narratives, which it reiterates and resignifies through its own discourse.

The commodity, then, is not the product itself but rather the symbolic power of the product. The green foods market exemplifies this: a product's "greenness" derives its value from the suggestion that it will facilitate the consumer's reconnection with nature. Greenness also signifies political action, insofar as it appears to preserve nature in its idealized state. In the capitalist framework that designates consumption as the principle avenue for political action, green consumerism ostensibly provides individuals with a means of countering the increasingly tangible impacts of industrialization on ecosystems (e.g. deforestation, climate change, and water shortages). As threats to the environment become more apparent, so too has the consumer demand for green products, even when, as Killingsworth and Palmer point out, political ideologies have not shifted significantly in response (224).

Here it becomes clear how the rhetorical power of ads comes not only from the previously established narratives they evoke, but also from new narratives that they construct. In green consumerism these constructions often take the form of a kind of fantasy in which all political ideologies are entirely compatible with environmentalism. In "Environment as Consumer Icon in Advertising Fantasy," Diane S. Hope explains that green products provide consumers with a

...means to deny the terrible dilemma of the commodity culture—the reality that over-consumption accelerates the pace of environmental degradation. Thus the fantasies portrayed in visual advertising are at the

heart of a cultural vision in which an idealized natural earth is the righteous reward for consumption of commodities (164).

Undoing consumption with more consumption certainly seems counterintuitive, but green consumerism has been at the heart of the mainstream environmental movement since it became mainstream. In his discussion of “the ruse of recycling,” Timothy W. Luke suggests that green consumerism represents a “domestication” of certain types of ecological radicalism that dominated environmentalist discourse in the 1970s. This behavioral shift was, according to Luke, the result of the much larger rhetorical shift that followed the Nixon administration’s suite of major environmental policies. No longer could environmentalists focus on “the Man”—government action led to corporate compliance and thus placed the responsibility for any remaining action squarely on the shoulders of the individual. As Luke explains, “The rhetoric of ecological responsibility slowly shifted from a vernacular of ‘Big business is dirty business’ to dialectics of ‘Factories don’t pollute. People do’” (156). And, following the capitalist tradition of activism through consumption, society adopted the mindset that consumer decisions would ultimately make or break the environment.

Constructions of “greenness” in the public consciousness

The idealization of green products, then, is the product of both established cultural narratives and green advertising’s reconstitution of these narratives; green consumerism has been propelled in recent years as a form of activism fully operable within the parameters of capitalism. Interestingly, many popular assessments of what it means to

buy green perpetuate this discourse while in the same breath denouncing capitalistic institutions. The glorification of the farmer's market, for example, embodies the ironic but popular desire to resist capitalism through consumption. In "Pizza as Praxis: Bridging Nature and Culture," Retzinger echoes this desire:

In bringing food producers and consumers together in a shared space, farmers' markets visibly unite the city and country, helping to undermine the divides that are integral to the system of industrialized agriculture that dominates the contemporary rural landscape—and the contemporary supermarket.

...farmers' markets are sites of pleasure as well as politics, community as well as commerce, where rural and urban interests meet in mutual benefit rather than conflict. Farmers' markets thus serve as a visible expression of what Paul Hawken (2007) has described as a "blessed unrest," the fusion of social movements arising from concerns about the environment, social justice, and resistance to globalization, a movement that is changing—for the better—rural lives and landscapes as much as urban ones. Increasingly, the so-called "green revolution" in agriculture is giving way...to a "delicious revolution" (252).

The prevalence of Retzinger's sentiments suggests that the rhetorical shift towards green consumerism has not absolved big business of blame as Luke suggested. Buying green is therefore not only a form of material activism—financially supporting goods that are better for the environment—but an act of defiance against industry. Prothero and Fitchett provide a useful review of the ways in which green discourse portrays capitalism and environmental welfare in "deep irreconcilable conflict," wherein those representing environmental interests act as revolutionaries, taking on the unflinching behemoth that is industrialized capitalism.

This perceived conflict creates the first in a series of dichotomies that serve to distinguish the green from the non-green, a distinction that factors heavily into the social repercussions of green discourse. Luke observes, significantly, that green consumerism depicts the environmental crisis as entirely resolvable through conscientious consumption. But more significant, perhaps, is the inverse of this observation: “The whole ecological crisis is reinterpreted as a series of bad household and/or personal buying decisions” (159). By shifting the bulk of environmental responsibility to the consumer, green consumerism also displaced accountability for the environmental crisis: while industrial capitalism is arguably at the heart of the crisis, the guilt now appears to fall on those consumers behind the “bad household and/or personal buying decisions.” But what constitutes a “bad” buying decision, and what factors determine how these decisions are made? More importantly, how has the divide created by this discourse shaped social interactions and relationships?

The apparent option to buy (or not buy) green, an option further accentuated by the recent organic food boom, creates an elite group of consumers who, through the consumption of green products, perform their moral superiority while continually reconstituting what it means to be a “moral” consumer. Environmentalist discourse and advertising strategies conflate consumption with morality and enlightenment, respectively. The resulting product—the good for sale in the symbolic environment—is therefore moral stature and spiritual ascension. But following the emergence of two consumer groups (greens and non-greens), the product’s primary role (and, as I will argue, selling-point) shifts from moral enlightenment to moral superiority.

The green foods market is a particularly informative facet of broader green consumption because it demands the participation of all consumers. Unlike most other goods available for consumption, food is a biological necessity and, as such, forces all people into the role of consumer and thus into the green/non-green binary. And regardless of consumer intent—that is, whether individuals accept the symbolic implications that society assigns to different products—this binary redefines all purchasing acts as consumer *decisions* to either worsen or mitigate the environmental crisis.

Furthermore, the discourse of green foods, embodied in supermarket pastoral, operates on a different scale from that of most other green products. Although the construction of morality has been frequently noted throughout the green advertisement canon, as it were, marketing research recognized early on that green consumption was governed not only by general notions about morality, but very specific moral motivations. Perhaps a testament to the power that resides in the necessary subjectivity and fluidity of narratives, narratives evoked by green advertisements trigger different desires in different consumer groups, but nevertheless produce the same outcome: consumption.

A number of studies emerged to address this phenomenon, and to attempt to establish politically salient distinctions between green consumer motivations (e.g. Ottman 1991; Iyer & Banerjee 1993; Kilbourne 1995). The resulting analyses, however, deal with green consumption in its entirety (that is, without distinguishing between different types of green products) and arguably predate the recent array of marketing strategies that has given rise to supermarket pastoral. In contrast to many of the examples previously discussed in this paper, supermarket pastoral removes the sense of distance from nature

still present, albeit faintly, in SUV ads, which employ a kind of “natural-by-association” strategy and shampoo labels, which operate metaphorically (*Save Your Body*-brand “Pure Mist” lotion touts “a natural, neutral scent *as fresh as* the mist of a waterfall” [emphasis added]). Consumption becomes literal in the realm of food—one’s relationship with food (and thus food’s symbolic value) is corporeal, assimilative. In capitalist societies, consumers are defined by their purchases in the symbolic environment, but the material truth to the idiom “you are what you eat” lends food the implicit power to occupy and act in both the symbolic and material environments. The problem here is that while one’s physiology will indeed be influenced by the different nutrients consumed, the scope of *literal consumption* is extended beyond nutrition, as one might expect, and back into the symbolic environment. This extension assumes that a more natural physiology (achievable by ingesting fewer preservatives, artificial flavors, and so on) translates into a more natural self—that a spiritual connection with nature can be fostered not only in the symbolic but also the material realm.

Supermarket pastoral is anchored in this notion that individuals can eat their way to a more natural existence. It establishes spiritual enlightenment via return to nature as an overarching goal and consequently removes the need for and the relevance of distinctions between consumer motivations. Green consumers are no longer the “Planet Passionates,” “Health Fanatics,” or “Animal Lovers,” Ottman observed in the market as a whole, but rather omnimoral beings, beings whose vested interest in *all* moral implications of consumption are implicit if not expressed in their overarching mission of reconnecting with the Earth. Indeed, green consumerism has been so popular precisely

because it does not require individuals to give up their ideologies (Killingsworth & Palmer). The paradox of green consumerism, although effectively masked, makes it ostensibly compatible with all lifestyles, political views, and personal motivations, effectively bestowing upon the performance of green consumption the entire suite of moralist attributes, regardless of individual consumers' conduct in other aspects of life. Supermarket pastoral is the embodiment of this phenomenon—it creates a discursive aesthetic, a universal ideal toward which green consumers should aspire.

In its pursuit of this universal, the rhetoric of supermarket pastoral draws extensively on existing cultural narratives. Like language, however, narratives are not merely building blocks but dynamic participants in social interactions. Narratives *act*—to adopt them means to take on not only their form but also their function. The Edenic narrative, although often manifested in depictions of lush gardens and peaceful pastures, is powerful because it is tied to a fall from (and implicit return to) grace. This dichotomy of the fallen and the righteous is, according to Thompson, what ultimately fuels consumer desire for natural products. Similarly, in “Greening Capitalism: Opportunities for a Green Commodity,” Prothero and Fitchett discuss the use of another common narrative, suggesting that the constructed divide between corporate and environmental interests

...bears more than a passing resemblance to Barthe's (1972) now-classic essay on the mythology of wrestling. The underdog, armed only with the weapon of her or his principles, takes on the role of the freedom fighter who stands alone against the all-powerful, all-corrupt organization (46).

Again, difference is at the heart of the narrative's power, this time in the form of revolution. Indeed, green consumption has been popularized as a revolutionary act, albeit one in which the consumer is ultimately the nexus of the revolution. In other words, the site of change—the product of the revolution—is more in the agency of the individual consumer than the welfare of the environment. Certainly green consumption has both social and material implications, implications that are, one should note, entirely distinct. Socially, consumers redefine themselves through their purchases, contextualizing themselves (or being re-contextualized by others) in the arena of social interaction. Materially, consumption gives consumers the opportunity to reallocate resources within the market, to consciously or unconsciously use their purchasing decisions to support or withhold support from companies.

In the discussion that follows, I will argue that while the consumption of green food is often portrayed and/or regarded as a materially political act (what Pollan terms “voting with your fork” (2008)), it is in fact sustained by its social implications—its role as an agent of self-representation and, moreover, self-contextualization within a broader social hierarchy. Butler points to the dependant relationship between verbal signifiers and their enunciation—as if treading water, words retain their meaning, their connection to what they've come to symbolize, only so long as they are in motion, continuously receiving validation from the reenactment of the association. In turn, this reenactment is only possible when fueled by culturally produced motivations. In the case of green consumption, I will argue that the impetus behind the reenactment is a desire to cultivate not an ethical aesthetic of existence as much as a *comparative* aesthetic of moral

existence wherein consumers can derive agency from notions of moral superiority, and that it is this superiority, rather than material changes to the environment, that ultimately sustains the discourse. The revolution of green consumption, in other words, is not so much an exercise in social change as it is in social differentiation.

“VOTING WITH YOUR FORK”: GREEN CONSUMPTION AS A REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

Consider some of the most popular options Americans have for “going green”: recycling, using less electricity, buying hybrid vehicles, supporting local farmers markets, using reusable shopping bags. It isn’t difficult to discern a common theme—these approaches all engage individuals as consumers. Certainly other options exist (e.g. contacting policymakers, participating in environmental cleanup events) but they are not as widely practiced or advocated, and individuals who do practice them must often contend with the delegitimizing stigma of radicalism or the dismissive label of “tree hugger” (DeLoach et al 2002). Capitalism delimits our understanding of agency in such a way that consumerism is assumed to be our exclusive avenue for action. That society so eagerly embraced green consumerism—an oxymoronic notion, considering that the green movement is ostensibly an attempt to counter the effects of overconsumption—indicates how embedded this assumption has become.

This is not to say that consumption is not a valid means of political participation. Consumers have been made very aware by media, advocacy groups, and others that purchasing green food is an act of ethical consumption. There is material truth to this—individuals convert the consumer power granted them by capitalism (it is important to note that this power, although real and even quantifiable, is nevertheless *granted* to the

consumer by capitalism—a Debordian reading would suggest that it is not so much the manifestation of agency as it is of a relationship in which the consumer must engage in order to survive) into political power, the power to materially support the values they espouse, which are displayed or referenced in packaging and advertisements. Capitalism requires, however, that any information deliberately transmitted from producer to consumer be in the interest of profit, regardless of what the producer’s personal goals are. Zinkhan and Carlson provide the example of Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream, a company whose founders have expressed an intense personal investment in the environment, but whose business model must nevertheless align itself with capitalist principles. These sorts of companies, examples of what Zinkhan and Carlson dub “Caring Capitalism,” only stand to achieve their social goals by competing to their fullest capacity—no social change can come from a company that goes under. What’s more, the authors suggest that capitalism renders corporate action the exclusive avenue for social reform. Corporations, they say, “are the agents of our desires” (1).

This makes sense, given the earlier discussion on the delimitations of capitalism. If consumption is the individual’s exclusive means of political agency, it follows that corporations, as both products of consumption and manifestations of the expression it encodes, would perform the will of its constituents at the macro level. In becoming a consumer, then, one is forced to accept the political task of fund allocation. One might liken the process of consumption to that of congressional appropriations, wherein funds are reinvested according to the merit (or political weight) of the request, and these investments characterize the appropriating body.

When people talk about “going green,” this is largely what they are referring to: the use of their consumer power (which includes the choice *not* to consume, an important component of energy efficiency campaigns) to benefit the environment. Although the benefits that each consumer can provide are all but negligible, the cumulative effect of widespread changes in consumer behavior stands to have massive transformative power. This is the cornerstone of the green consumerism movement: if everyone makes a few small changes, together we can save the world.

In his discussion of recycling, Luke points to what is essentially the green consumerism manifesto, the “how to save the planet” guidebook, as perhaps the most accessible expressions of capitalism’s effects on environmentalism. These books range from the Earthworks Group’s bestselling *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, first published in 1989, to Christie Matheson’s *Green Chic: Saving the Earth in Style* and David Bach’s *Go Green, Live Rich: 50 Simple Ways to Save the Earth and Get Rich Trying*, both published in 2008. In spite of their widely varied secondary motives and promises (simplicity, stylishness, wealth), all such guidebooks, according to Luke, contain two overarching claims: the purported ease of mutually beneficial solutions (solutions, for example, that also save consumers money) and the implication that individuals can “save the world” by making a few minor changes to their daily consumption habits. Luke argues that these themes reaffirm the status of consumption as the exclusive source of political agency; in an attempt to realize the impossible blend of empowerment and convenience, the guidebooks shift the responsibility for environmental

welfare away from larger entities like industry and government and into the laps of consumers.

The possibility of minor personal changes precipitating major global reform was, needless to say, popular among a variety of individuals ranging from armchair activists to guilt-ridden consumers. The resulting discourse, according to Luke, mobilized the otherwise preoccupied masses and was responsible for a number of somewhat paradoxical trends in society, most notably the sudden, massive national interest in recycling. Recycling, he argues, is merely a way to justify continued overconsumption: “In the ruse of recycling, green consumerism, rather than leading to the elimination of massive consumption and material waste, instead revalorizes the basic premises of material consumption and massive waste” (170).

In addition to coming off as a bit of a ruse, green consumerism is the source of a major social divide. In upholding the assumption of consumer-as-agent, it creates a dichotomy based on consumer choices: depending on what they purchase, individuals are agents of either environmental reform or environmental destruction. Therefore, the gap between the consumer and the effects of consumption is entirely obscured—green products become causes in themselves.

And the decisive blow to the non-green consumer: If green consumption is the key to environmental salvation, it follows that non-green consumption is the key to environmental collapse. And following the “you are what you eat” mindset, the result of this series of accusatory significations is the implication of the non-green consumer as an accomplice in the environmental crisis.

This kind of act of representation is what makes green consumerism a functional source of social action—although the significance of its material impacts is questionable, its role in reconfiguring or crystallizing social relationships gives it a tremendous amount of power in the symbolic environment.

“I AM WHAT I EAT”: GREEN CONSUMPTION AS IDENTITY FORMATION

When a consumer purchases an organic apple, what is happening? The organic food industry gains a small amount of financial support, support that is, importantly, withheld from traditional Agribusiness. Similarly, the consumer demonstrates an interest in organic products, which may, if echoed by other consumers, encourage grocery stores to increase the availability and prominence of organic products. More importantly, though, the consumer is buying into the narrative of greenness. Although “going green” is characterized largely by the ostensible political effects of green purchases, it has a secondary set of effects on the level of the consumer, effects, I will argue, that are considerably more integral to the prevalence of green consumerism.

Green consumerism is sustained not as much by the suggested material implications of one’s purchases, but by the opportunity for representation it affords (I’m talking primarily about self-representation here, although the representation of others is of equal consequence, as I’ll explain in the following section). Moisander and Pesonen draw from Michel Foucault, terming green consumption “a politics of the self,” the cultivation of a personal and ethical “aesthetic of existence” (2002). In green consumerism, this aesthetic of existence revolves around narratives on humankind’s

complex relationship with nature, and how to reconcile these complexities—by way of consumption, naturally.

Phyllis and Debra Japp reflect on this endeavor in their analysis of *The Good Life*, a reality TV program that chronicles various individuals' alleged transition to what the authors term a "less is more" lifestyle (81). Each show features someone—typically a successful, midcareer businessperson who has become jaded with society's heavy emphasis on consumption—who "risks it all" to live simply and thus, the show implies, better. Typically this involves a move to the countryside, a gesture of reconnection with nature (individuals might start growing their own food, for example), and a shift toward a more simple and/or natural household décor. The program, as the authors point out, defines "the good life" for viewers, and in the process commoditizes its various components—rather than shifting away from consumerism, "the good life" simply revises the terms of consumption.

More important, though, is the motive behind the consumption. Although simple living has become romanticized through a variety of political, spiritual, and environmental narratives, it is, the authors argue, driven by its utility in cultivating an aesthetic of existence:

Overall, the simple life, 1990s style, appears dictated by personal needs and is framed almost entirely in the desire for fulfillment and personal growth. Converts do not renounce consumerism for religious reasons, for political dedication, or as a result of an environmental conscience. The quest is personal not political; secular rather than religious; self instead of other-centered. As defined by the oxymoronic *Simple Life Corporation*,

the concept means a journey, an awakening to self and one's inner needs, the removal of things that distract one from "finding" oneself (85).

Consumption is thus a means of finding or orienting oneself in the world, an entirely symbolic endeavor. Green consumerism, in its paradoxical opposition of consumption, is thus faced with the task of symbol-making through non-consumer activities. Wade Sikorski provides an account of one such attempt in his aptly albeit ironically titled essay, "Building Wilderness." Sikorski discusses the significance of building his own home and living off the grid in an effort to establish a kind of postmodernist paradise, in which subjectivity and alterity are preserved from what he considers the reductive confinement of society. This is, perhaps, an effective step away from consumerism, but it follows a similar pattern of reconstituting nature as a means of identity formation. Sikorski equates dwelling with nature, turning his exercise in home-building into a possessive endeavor. He is literally and figuratively constructing a symbolic nature and, in that, laying claim to it.

Sikorski's piece is in essence an assertion of symbolic worth. Although he is not engaged in consumption per se, he is making a case for the role of dwelling (and thus nature) as symbolic currency. His argument centers on revalorizing the notion of dwelling, a notion that he suggests was threatened if not forced into irrelevance by the Derrida-ian concepts of deconstructionism and *différance*. Sikorski argues that while these concepts question the validity of the universal, they do so by discrediting—and thus removing any possibility for—the subjective. Their arguments, in other words, at once dismiss and make unavoidable the existence of objective truth. Sikorski's discussion

therefore focuses on constructing the subjective, on reattaching abstractions to the material world as a way of giving them significance. He is attempting to restock and revitalize the symbolic environment, in his case by building and freely romanticizing a home on Montana ranchland. Sikorski's essay factors importantly into this discussion not because of its almost militant exertion of subjectivity, but because of what this self-conscious subjectivity says about the human-nature interface. Take for example Sikorski's depiction of the problem on which he writes:

This is a decisive occurrence: dwelling is no longer experienced as humanity's Being, a way of living in the world. Instead, harnessing the whole world to its cold and de-secrating logic, it becomes a slave to Man's distant economies and imperatives, and all possibilities for the wild anarchy of the world's worlding are concealed. Even so, this silence that conceals the poetic and sacred character of dwelling can yet be listened to, heard beneath the distracting noise of modernity's archy-itecture of definitions that it builds in the service of Man's reason.

If we cultivate this silence, this flight of the gods, Heidegger says, we can still hear the calling amid our life's cares that calls us to think building as dwelling, to spare, venerate, and free the wildness in our being on earth, and to understand building as a cultivating of the abyss. Without foundation, essence, or universal reality, the abyss is the true ground, the earth on which our world is built (31).

In addition to exemplifying the romantic component of green discourse—and illustrating perfectly Thompson's discussion of Edenic narratives as an opposition to modernism—this passage demonstrates the way in which the false alterity of "nature" lends itself particularly well to exploitation by way of capitalism, as well as the irreconcilable conflicts that result.

The appeal of nature might be described in terms of its location: a physical and symbolic site of escape from or opposition to the elements of society that are deemed problematic. This escape, though it entails physical movement from one location to another, is meaningful only because of its symbolic connotations. Of central importance to human-nature interactions, as we can see in both Sikorski's language and his expressed goal, is thus the conscious need to remove the boundaries between the material and the immaterial. This is glorified (or marketed) as a kind of transcendence, but it appears instead in the quietly peculiar suggestions that dwelling is "poetic and sacred" and that one should "venerate" the wildness in one's being. Sikorski makes no attempt to mask the religious undertones of his language or to temper his depictions of the conflict between modernity and spirituality ("the flight of gods," "the concealment of what is sacred")—he lays out his own set of universalities, a move especially evident in the final sentence of the excerpt: "Without foundation, essence or universal reality, the abyss is the true ground..." How can one pit universality and truth against each other?

Here, then, is the central conflict in human-nature interactions: nature is valuable to society insofar as it is unknowable—built upon the abyss—but the quality of being built implies design. Further degrading this quality of unknowability is the human need to locate nature in society, to make it a symbol, to consume it, to identify what is "true" about it. In "The Great Wild Hope," Chaloupka and Cawley point to the irony of environmental policy in its efforts to "keep the wilderness wild." In this sense, the notion of *différance* holds: our fingerprints are all over everything, and the very existence of the symbolic environment—of our consciousness, in fact—makes this unavoidable. The

more resolvable issue, perhaps, is our expectation of nature— that it stands to offer something outside of society.

Chaloupka and Cawley provide a detailed analysis of this expectation as it pertains to a surprisingly wide variety of natural texts, ranging from those of John Muir, who saw nature as a retreat from society and source of healing and rejuvenation, to Edward Abbey who saw nature as a base for social resistance.

Although Muir and Abbey value the natural world for different reasons, they both derive this value from nature's social significance. That nature is physically removed from society is only important insofar as it provides grounds for assigning additional cultural significance. Nodding to Baudrillard's argument that everything is design, Chaloupka and Cawley suggest that nature is a network of symbols, albeit symbols *designed* to provide relief from society.

Rather than fleeing society, we may have fled to its mirror (in the sense that it is a recognizable but reversed image), to a microcosm site. Wilderness could be such a site, a place where visitors re-enact a familiar and special pattern. It is a pattern that recurs throughout our politics; the romantic (the escape, the natural) teases the conventional (the settled, the already agreed upon). As it turns out, the romantic, having already entered into a discussion with the conventional, is no longer wild. The romantic ceases to be Other, at least in any recognizable form, and begins to offer testimony on how thoroughly Other can be incorporated (15).

At the heart of wilderness discourse, it seems, is this question of incorporating “the Other”—of, ironically, domesticating the wild for the sake of consumption, when the appeal and in some cases the material worth of the wild is derived entirely from its

apparent lack of domestication. Still, as the above passage suggests, society upholds the narrative, continuing to embrace the known as the unknown. Instead, individuals perform what Chaloupka and Cawley call a re-enactment; the proper way to interact with nature has already been established, rendering all subsequent interactions purely symbolic, the equivalent of scouting merit badges.

In this light, the green market might be regarded as a selection of prepackaged nature experiences. Consumption can take the form of excursions, camping gear, even SUVs and shampoo—anything that in some way offers an opportunity to “return to nature.” These opportunities, as Hope suggests, are marketed in a way that depicts if not defines the particular “nature” to which people hope to return. In the case of green food, supermarket pastoral is thus quite telling in itself: this is where people want to be.

Returning to the example of Walnut Acres, it becomes clear how nuanced marketing attempts to establish an immediate, if superficial, connection between the consumer and this idealized nature. Although they may receive little more than a passing glance, the company logo (a red barn on green hills, beneath a sunny blue sky) and slogan (“Live Pure”) attempt to draw consumers into the symbolic environment, constructing a kind of mirror in which these they can see their reconstituted selves within the pristine landscape. This is how want displaces need—purchasing these sorts of products is not merely a matter of acquiring sustenance. When shoppers choose organic pasta sauce over regular pasta sauce, they may be investing in their health and in more sustainable agricultural practices, but they are also buying into the spectacle of supermarket pastoral.

Supermarket pastoral represents a move from more material incentives like environmental welfare, although it very much incorporates them into its aesthetic. Its appeal resides in its promise to the individual—although the environment factors importantly into the message, its role is limited to backdrop. In this case, however, the backdrop is not for the product itself but for the consumer. Supermarket pastoral reflects back into the consumer gaze an *improved* version of the self, a version that evokes a more harmonious existence with nature and thus a kind of moral and aesthetic ascent.

To be sure, the representational effects of consumption are guided in part by the political implications of what is consumed, as evidenced by the judgment passed on individuals who wear fur coats or drive Hummers. Following the argument that goods are now conflated with causes, any act of consumption renders all participants advocates or opponents and files them into the appropriate community. Jean-François Lyotard suggests that capitalism represents this very intersection between politics and identity, the site at which representation takes place. The green food market presents a particularly interesting scenario in which to consider this act of self-representation because marketing strategies attempt to engage consumers not only on the level of individual aesthetics and morality (through Edenic narratives, for example,) but also on the level of *social* morality and responsibility. Self-representation, although always socially contextualized, gains an amplified undercurrent of self-consciousness and social comparison from the political and ethical narratives that accompany green food consumption. In other words, the connections (whether imagined or empirical) that green foods have to nutrition, environmental health, and animal welfare, politicize the act of consumption. To buy

grain-fed beef is to support Agribusiness—it is a *vote against* sustainability. Conversely, buying grass-fed beef supports sustainable practices and animal welfare, though not to the same degree as buying organic tofu. The decision to give or withhold support is made considerably more complicated by factors such as global trade (east of Ohio, wine imported from France is in fact more environmentally friendly than wine from California due to the difference in fuel economy between trucks and ships (Colman and Păster)) and ecological tradeoffs (increasing sustainability in one area may reduce it in another). The perpetuation and re-presentation of spectacle, however, depends on the empirical effects of capitalism only insofar as it affects the *perceived* effects of capitalism. In other words, although spectacle is assembled from pieces of reality, how these pieces are shaped and arranged depends entirely on one's perception, which in turn is based on one's existence within the spectacle that *created* that perception. In the words of Debord, "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation." (142). We exist physically within reality, and it is reality that we manipulate, but we exist cognitively within the symbolic environment—the realm of spectacle. Spectacle is the only thing we can experience.

Identity formation takes place in the symbolic environment, and is therefore characterized by an ongoing interplay with spectacle. Acts of self-representation do not occur in isolation, but instead reverberate throughout the spectacle, making it a truly three-dimensional phenomenon. Hence, to describe representation as a form of self-gaze, of seeing one's reconstituted self in the mirror of spectacle, is perhaps inadequate. Better suited to the occasion would be the metaphor of a theater, such as the one employed by Lyotard in *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*. This "theatrical-representational apparatus" is a

closed system, divided into three spaces (stage, backstage, and auditorium) and situated within (but in opposition to) a fourth space—the outside, open world—from which the entire apparatus can be viewed. Bill Readings notes the significance of this final space—it places the viewing subject, he says, inside the system (69). Viewing subjects, in other words, are simultaneously engaged in viewing the stage and *performing* the act of viewing. What’s more, Lyotard argues that representation is not a matter of illusion, but of *seduction*. Using the metaphor of a painting rendered in linear perspective (thus giving the appearance of a third dimension) he says those who view the painting know it is a two-dimensional work, just as those who view the stage are aware of the surrounding performative apparatus. In short, the viewing subject is consciously engaged in self-representation.

Consumption, then, is a performance. It is the rendering and re-rendering of oneself in the public eye. More significantly, though, it is the expression of “wealth,” the performance of difference. Consumers, in other words, do not simply represent themselves horizontally within society; consumption is a product of capitalism and thus requires that consumers orient themselves vertically within a social hierarchy. We accept this readily when considering goods such as cars, homes, and attire, but may not find it as readily apparent or acceptable when applied to other forms of consumption. This is, perhaps, because not all of these forms are marketed, at least explicitly, on the basis of a differential. One might expect food to fall into this category. Although a market for gourmet foods certainly exists, basic food stuffs like milk and eggs fulfill a biological need for sustenance, not the illusion of need. Nevertheless, the survival of goods in a

capitalistic framework requires that they be commoditized. Capitalism demands a differential and, in that, creates a binary.

GREENER THAN THOU: GREEN CONSUMPTION AS AN ACT OF DIFFERENTIAL REPRESENTATION

The act of consumption represents a moment of social delineation in which the spectrum of possible social identities shifts from analog to digital. Each purchase carries with it a suite of material and symbolic implications that make representation inescapable. Consumers may either buy or not buy a product, but regardless they are taking a stance. Even if this stance is not intentional, its inevitable economic consequences still implicate the consumer in the resulting political action. (The discourse of “educated” consumption speaks to this point. Every act of consumption has consequences for which the buyer is held responsible; claiming ignorance, no matter how concealed the consequences might be, is, according to this framework, inexcusable.)

What makes the consumption of green food so compelling is this interplay between the politicization of buying green and the romanticization of eating green, a relationship from which the narrative of supermarket pastoral emerges. By positioning food as the intercessory between consumers and a natural and moral existence, supermarket pastoral spurs a particular type of identity formation, the “I am what I eat” mentality that allows individuals to define themselves morally, aesthetically, and, moreover, self-consciously through the act—the performance—of consumption.

At stake at this intersection, however, is much more than the self-representation of individual consumers and their political role in shaping the trajectory of the market for green foods. The moral imperative associated with green food consumption markets and commoditizes morals themselves. More significant, however, is the source of this commodity's value: at stake is not merely one's own morality—a notion too abstract to have value in the absence of calibration—but one's comparative morality. The discourse of green food, by virtue of its green/non-green binary, creates a secondary binary of moral and amoral consumption. A mother who purchases organic eggs cares about the world, about chickens, and about her family. A mother who purchases regular eggs is conversely disinterested in welfare of these things. This divide has significant sociopolitical implications when accompanied by a steep price gradient such as the one associated with green food markets. Organic eggs, for example, are often more than twice the price of nonorganic varieties, and thus represent an option unavailable to low-income individuals. This is a limitation based on class, but it is just as often perceived as a decision based on morals, or lack thereof, reinforcing existing class-based social hierarchies with the illusion of a corresponding moral hierarchy. In other words, organic consumption reconstitutes the divide created by economic stratification as a divide based on moral standing. It constructs an upper class of enlightened consumers and a lower class of ignorant consumers, without regard for the comparative ease with which upper class consumers can achieve morality through green consumption.

This binary is both the source and the product of supermarket pastoral. The rhetoric of green marketing portrays the green consumer as compassionate, responsible,

naturally constituted, physically healthy, and spiritually enlightened. Marketing materials for green food products thus attempt to both address individuals who prioritize these values and to reiterate the values themselves, producing over time the narrative of green citizenship and, similarly, supermarket pastoral.

In line with society's propensity for Platonic dichotomies, the construction of the green consumer simultaneously produces its own antithesis, the non-green consumer. Non-green consumers are thus perceived not in terms of their own traits, but rather in direct contrast to those of the green consumer—society sees them not as complex individuals (to be fair, the same applies to green consumers) but rather as placeholders in the binary of moral and amoral consumption. They are precisely what green consumers are not: self-centered, irresponsible, artificially constituted, physically unhealthy, and spiritually disconnected.

This construction of the non-green consumer is perpetuated, albeit indirectly, by the discourse of green consumption. While marketing tactics focus on the green consumer, acts of representation within the green community often repeat and ritualize the binary, not only by musing over the ideals they ascribe to the food they consume, but also by reacting with disgust to the food that *others* consume. For example, *The Ethicurean*, a self-proclaimed responsible eating blog, featured a t-shirt that read, "DO YOU TRUST YOUR CHILDREN ALONE WITH HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP?". The message appeared in horror-movie-style writing above a cartoon of small child in bed, sleeping and oblivious to a menacing personified ear of corn about to pounce with ghostly hands. Another Walnut Acres caption, this one featured on jars of

their “Sweet Pepper & Onion” sauce, reads, “We recommend serving this with organic pasta. Any other pasta is kind of an insult to our sauce.” Fast food, not surprisingly, receives even less subtle treatment in green discourse, often appearing alongside adjectives like “gross” or “revolting.” A treehugger.com member referred to fast food hamburgers as “delectable little rat burgers,” and even Kal Penn, who played Kumar in the 2004 comedy *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, has made a point of distancing himself from his character’s less sophisticated gastronomical inclinations, calling fast food disgusting and stating that he tries to eat green foods as often as he can (Pasaoa). It follows that if someone subscribes to the “I am what I eat” line of reasoning, they will also subscribe to its corollary: “you are what you eat.” Describing the food of others as disgusting and dirty (or portraying it as a literal demon) is thus a thinly veiled personal attack that attempts to constitute its subjects and to subordinate them within a social hierarchy.

Were green consumption strictly a matter of personal choice—in other words, if one could just as easily obtain green or not-green products—this kind of attack would be grounded in personal preference rather than social distinction. As we’ve seen, though, consumption is at once the material allocation of power and use of power for acts of representation. In the Lyotardian discussion of capitalism, consumption is a performance in which one pays to perform difference convincingly. The desired difference, however, is particularly significant in green food discourse because it is ostensibly moral, rather than socioeconomic in nature. Although this difference continues to stratify society on the basis of socioeconomic class (by those who can and cannot afford green food), it

appears to instead divide on the basis of morality. It reconstitutes an upper class, in other words, that appears not only to be richer but also morally *better* than the simultaneously reconstituted lower class.

Interestingly, this dynamic has prevailed and the organic industry has grown in spite of recent reports in widely read publications that organic may not always be best for the environment or even one's health. The moral basis for green foods, in other words, is diminishing. The United Kingdom's *The Independent* published an article in early 2007 titled, "Organic farming 'no better for the environment'." The article, which detailed a report from U.K. Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs indicating that some organic farming practices are in fact worse for the environment, cited reputable sources and included statistics (for example, that organic milk "produces nearly 20 per cent more carbon dioxide" than nonorganic milk)—they provided everything necessary for a strong argument against organic consumption as a form of environmentalism. Nevertheless, 2007 was a year of record growth for the U.K.'s organic milk industry (Ebrahimi).

Certainly, many green food products offer environmental, health, or humanitarian advantages over their industrial counterparts; the synthetic pesticides and fertilizers banned from organic farming practices have an indisputably negative impact on both human and ecosystem welfare. Still, as evidenced by the UK government study above, the "organic" label alone does not remove the possibility of significant negative impacts, nor does it guarantee a product that is superior to the non-organic version. Organic eggs can just as easily come from caged chickens; Bt, a non-synthetic pesticide, can do a great

deal of harm to ecosystems; the resource demands of growing citrus locally far outweigh those of purchasing oranges from Florida. Furthermore, as organic foods grow in popularity, manufacturers are increasingly turning to industrial production methods—the very methods from which “organic” was to represent a departure. “Organic” does not represent one side of a binary, as we’ve come to think, but rather a spectrum reflecting the full range of sustainability. That the false sense of a binary persists suggests some degree of superficiality in the average consumer’s commitment to the values organic food has come to symbolize. A 2001 study commissioned by Walnut Acres, revealed that Americans “are confused about organic food but are confident that it is better.” According to the study, 75% of consumers thought “organic” and “all-natural” were synonymous, while 21% thought “organic” meant “low-calorie.” Still, 63% reported purchasing organic foods, indicating that organic consumers are, at least in some cases, basing their purchases on the label alone, as opposed to an understanding of organic farming and its implications.

The hegemonic undertones of green consumption transform this superficiality into a kind of hypocrisy. Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is considered by many to be the gospel of green eating, yet his criticisms of Whole Foods and what he calls “industrial organic” make little impact on consumer trends. As the green food market surges upward, many of Pollan’s readers admit to not practicing what he preaches. Mark Manford, for example, wrote in his SFGate.com column,

While it's terribly easy to accuse [Whole Foods] of being the very embodiment of pseudo-progressive ideals wrapped in pitch-perfect marketing that goes so far beyond a mere grocery store...there is indeed something more to this joint's existence, something that, in the age of bloated Wal-Marts and tract homes like a cancer and a president with a fifth-grader's vocabulary, is actually worth celebrating.

...In other words, I don't care that Whole Foods isn't for everyone. I don't care if you think it's unbearably snooty or too white or subconsciously pretentious or that it caters only to a certain upscale clientele or that you can't buy giant bags of Doritos and four-gallon drums of Diet Coke there. Blind cynicism, in this case, is just way too easy.

Yes, Whole Foods is far from perfect. Yes, the large-scale "industrial organic" model the store adheres to, as Michael Pollan's 'The Omnivore's Dilemma' so expertly lays out, has its share of major drawbacks. Yes, maybe I've just been suckered in and drunk the organic Kool-Aid. And yes, far too many of the yuppie moms who shop there have the same \$400 strollers and the same Range Rovers and the same perky haircut. Whatever.

While Manford exemplifies, perhaps in caricature, many of the attitudes discussed previously in this paper, it is the "Whatever" that matters here. Pollan dedicates large sections of his book to the dissection of supermarket pastoral—the very spectacle that has emboldened Manford—but these sections are lost on the author, dismissed with a simple "whatever."

Could this reveal the underlying mechanics of green consumerism? Although Manford's prejudices are likely less latent than the majority of green consumers, he provides an amplified and unabashed recitation of the values and assumptions that drive many green purchases. Whole Foods is a kind of theater where consumers pay a premium for the opportunity to perform their greenness. The result of this performance may not lead to any significant improvements in health or the environment, but this does not

dissuade the clientele, because *it is not their principal interest*. (It's worth noting that this clientele, almost by definition, spends a comparatively large amount of time educating themselves about what they eat. Those who understand the importance of free trade coffee should also understand the irony in organic TV dinners.) Social relationships are forged and negotiated in the symbolic environment, so what matters is not good itself, or the material results it produces, but the symbolic significance of its consumption. Certainly, the significance in the symbolic realm is in many ways the result of actions in the material realm and vice versa (green consumerism exemplifies this), but the two remain unanchored to each other and on separate planes, parallel lines whose continued coexistence depends on their inability to intersect. This is what Debord refers to as the "autonomous movement of nonlife." The spectacle, in which our minds reside, at once mirrors and moves independently, autonomously from the physical reality (what Debord calls "life") in which our material selves exist. The autonomy of spectacle is what gives it its power—trivialities in the material realm may incite revolutions in the spectacle, and the green movement is again an excellent example of this.

As Luke points out, green consumerism has incited massive social movement but little environmental change. It remains strong, however, because of the immense social power that spectacle affords. We can see this in Manford's brazenness. The spectacle of green consumption sustains the hegemonic discourse that empowers him to attack other consumers with language like "bloated Wal-Marts" or, even more flagrant, "tract homes like cancer." Admittedly, this language abandons the pretense of green consumption, although later in the piece, Manford, without simile, evokes the same kind of images

(obesity, low-income lifestyles) simply by listing two food choices: giant bags of Doritos and four-gallon drums of Diet Coke. These images work because of the contextual framework in which they exist. They carry with them stigmas not only from the green food movement, but from the health food movement before it, stigmas that include the pathetic futility of diet soft drinks, the irony and ignorance of purchasing them with bags of fattening snacks, and the gluttony of empty calories. These stigmas are well-embedded sources of power for people like Manford, who find themselves, through the capitalistic performance of self-representation, in a position of dominance *defined* by its facilitation of stigma delegation. The allure of consumption, it seems, exists in its utility as a representational device, perhaps *the* representational device in capitalist societies. In capitalism, the distribution power is directly related to one's ability to represent oneself and others.

CONCLUSIONS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND IMPLICATIONS OF DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE

Green consumerism is therefore a powerful and relevant social movement because it provides an opportunity to achieve (the illusion of) *comparative* moral accomplishment. It is an occasion for establishing social difference, and it draws additional power from its employment and reconstitution of deeply embedded social narratives, narratives that have long guided and been guided by human understanding of morality. Green discourse thus carries with it the appearance of moral justification—when applied to consumption, it uses this sense of validity to substantiate and sustain the hegemony of the society's existing socioeconomic hierarchy. Purchasing a LäraBar is a performance of morality; it marks the purchaser as morally superior to other consumers who purchase non-green granola bars, including the many who cannot afford greener options. It creates the spectacle of morally earned social dominance.

So is it unreasonable to ask that individuals in a capitalist society willingly relinquish this difference and thus their positions of power? Possibly. How, then, can we disrupt this discourse of dominance? Is there any opportunity for agency available to individuals who cannot afford green food, or will the current nature of society prevent any form of subversion? In Judith Butler's discussion of linguistic vulnerability, she describes violent speech as a speech act in which a speaker attempts to reconstitute and

thus subordinate an Other, precisely the sort of speech act being performed by Manford. It is important to note, however, that the speech act is an *attempt*. While some theories grant violent speech an inherent efficacy, Butler argues that,

Those who seek to fix with certainty the link between certain speech acts and their injurious effects will surely lament the open temporality of the speech act. That no speech act *has* to perform injury as its effect means that no simple elaboration of speech acts will provide a standard by which the injuries of speech might be effectively adjuncticated. Such a loosening of the link between act and injury, however, open up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back, that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link. Thus, the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has its auspicious implications: it begins a theory of linguistic agency that provides an alternative to the relentless search for legal remedy (15).

In other words, the power of words lies neither in the signifier itself (in this case an utterance) nor the speaker, but in the narrative under which violence first adhered to the signifier in question. Butler describes a dynamic language resulting from dynamic narratives. Debord's discussion of spectacle also describes this coevolution of language, narrative, and reality. Each a dimension of contextual existence, they shape and reshape each other in the midst of an ongoing power struggle among social groups with no inherent power. Butler suggests that individuals who were once subordinated by violent speech can achieve liberation through alterity. By disrupting the suite of symbols used to characterize them, individuals who have long been dismissed to one end of the binary can achieve agency in spite of material restrictions such as economic class.

In green discourse, one might interpret this disruption as an occasion for disputing the meaning of "green." Acts of subversion might take the form of exposés,

pointing to the dubious associations that link “greenness” to the narratives that empower it and attempting to empirically disprove that “green” food improves environmental and consumer health. That the public has not yet embraced this level of analysis speaks to the tremendous inertia that rhetorics can produce, particularly when they operate within discourses as powerful and complex as those of consumption and environmentalism. At stake, then, is not so much the nature of green foods as the character of the green consumer, character that is, as demonstrated by the article in *The Independent*, constructed and negotiated in the symbolic environment. Since our consciousness operates in the realm of the symbolic, we base our decisions on simulacra and narratives—symbolic infrastructure—which speak to our deep-seeded desires and fears. Particularly in the case of green rhetoric, which is oriented in opposition to modernism, the empirical is relatively inconsequential.

This paper is a largely postmodernist critique, and perhaps it finds its limits here. The preceding discussion suggests that while one can to some degree subvert green consumerism by calling into question humanity’s relationship with food and with consumption, this subversion would only amount to reconstituting the existing spectacle. The notion of subversion itself seems problematic in that it suggests a movement towards reality, a movement, perhaps, away from the illusion of superiority upheld by a dominating class. It perpetuates its own kind of spectacle, one that presupposes an achievable reality—like all social exchanges, it occurs within the confines of the symbolic environment. Disrupting the discourse of green consumerism, in other words, would ultimately be a struggle centered on power rather than reality.

Postmodernism insists on a divide between the material and symbolic environments, a divide that is valuable in characterizing the socially problematic discourse of green consumerism, but ineffective in resolving it. One might argue, in fact, that postmodernist critique is oxymoronic in its adoption of the decidedly modernistic strategy of critique. It is a framework that acknowledges problems but not solutions. In the case of this discussion, we are faced with a very real problem (the symbolic and material environments, although entirely distinct, interact with each other through rhetoric, giving rise to a suite of societal repercussions) and the assurance that all forms of resolution will be false (the very existence of the symbolic environment indicates that any attempts to disrupt existing social hierarchies can only amount to a restacking of the totem pole).

A resolution, then, may only be achievable outside the bounds of the analysis as it has been presented. Where postmodernism suggests an impasse, we must locate a livable space *between* the symbolic and material realms, conceding some degree of validity to the previously contested constructions of commodity, value, and self-representation. Many theorists have responded to postmodernism in this manner—Foucault's concept of heterotopias is one such response. He further dismisses notions of the absolute by removing the sense of polarity that pervades distinctions between the symbolic and the material, locating the site of meaning-making not in the environment, but in the situated individual. Individuals, in other words, occupy the same spaces but experience and constitute them independently. Heterotopias acknowledge but diminish the power of the environment in meaning-making—in the case of commodity, prices may be derived from

the symbolic environment and agreed upon in the material environment, but the assignment of *value* is ultimately an individual endeavor. So while individuals may exert dominance upon each other in their shared environments, it is within the environment that these exertions are contained.

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