



You are What You Eat: Narratives of the Food System

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## Preface

There are many ways to know and understand food. So many in fact, one could write a thesis on it. The idea for this project is rooted in the discontent I've felt reconciling the vastly different ways of "knowing" the food system that I have had access to in my life. Contrasting the academic theory I have received studying food at Quest University with my lived reality growing up in a dairy farming family and my summer employment - on a small diversified commercial produce farm and a non-profit organic farming initiative - has altered the way I think about my own, as well as others', understandings of the food system. Living and working in the food system has provided me with strikingly different problems and perspectives than what was discussed in a Quest classroom. I began to question if and how it is possible to recognize both the academic theory and the practical knowledge as equally valid and important contributions to our collective understanding of the food system.

Academically, I have studied the relationship between food and health by engaging primarily with the disciplines of nutritional science, critical food studies, and human geography. My studies focused on contextualizing the biological processes of nutrient metabolism within the human body. I then focused on situating that body within the larger social, political, and economic contexts for the purpose of understanding who has access to what type of food and the impact that has on their health. This framework for linking food and health across disciplines brought me to the realization that dialogues about food and health look very different in a molecular and cellular biology class than they do in a social science classroom. This experience, as both a STEM and social science student, highlighted for me how the scope of content covered along with the framing of the discussion within and between disciplinary boundaries results in vastly different narratives about the relationship between food and health within academia.

Food, as I quickly learned, is a subject matter that fascinates most everyone and as a result provides a very easy sales pitch. Because of the ubiquity of food in our lives when I explain my studies to people, they are quick to engage with responses and questions. We all have a personal stake in the food system because we are all reliant on this system to live. The very personal connection consumers have with food and the empowerment of the consumer to vote with their fork or their dollar is precisely what makes food studies simultaneously so exciting, because everybody has opinions about food, and so exhausting, because everybody has opinions about food.

This document lays the groundwork for an interdisciplinary exploration of the ways in which we "know" food and the food system. In an attempt to integrate academic theory and practice, connect food system actors with consumers, and recognize voices outside of academia as legitimate sources of knowledge my summer fellowship project was the creation of an interview style podcast; called *Savory*. It's about the people and processes behind food production and the politics that shape our understanding of the food system. What follows is a summary of the most salient and pertinent theoretical underpinnings of *Savory*. It is by no means holistic or conclusive representation of the realities of the food system or the many ways to "know" food. It is not a guide on how to eat or behave. It is simply an introduction to questioning the realities of the food system and the ways in which we are expected to "know" food as consumers in a 21st century North American context.

**Chapter 1** explores the critical academic theory that inspired the production of *Savory*. In this first chapter, I argue that the modern North American industrial food system and hegemonic nutritional practice operate through numerous processes of decontextualization which conceal the processes of both food production and knowledge production from the consumer. I open in section 1.1 with an introduction that seeks to gain critical distance from the current system. Following the introduction, this chapter is divided into three ways of “knowing” or conceptualizing food. **Chapter 1** utilizes critical food studies theory and seeks to (re)contextualize the realities of the food system and the production of different ways of “knowing” food.

In section 1.2, I open with a brief historical context of the modern food system that frames the discussion of *food as a commodity*. In this section I discuss the effects of commodification on food production and consumption. With specific focus on how commodification shapes agricultural practices and the implications of the commodification of food, and the role of market, in food procurement. I also briefly discuss the rise of alternative food networks as responses to the discontents of the conventional food system. In this section I argue that the modern food system systematically decontextualizes food, distancing consumers from the realities of food production. I end with a brief discussion of how this commodification is the dominant political and economic reality and thus shapes North American food culture.

In section 1.3, I further the discussion of food culture by situating nutritional science as a cultural way of knowing food. In this section I discuss *food as a biological entity*, I focus on the role of hegemonic nutritional science in standardizing food body relationships and shaping dietary discourse and culture. I argue that dominant Western, scientific hegemonic nutritional science reduces foods to their nutritional and caloric components and thus decontextualizes nutrients from diets and diets from larger cultural contexts. I argue that the decontextualization and standardization of hegemonic nutritional advice privileges scientific ways of knowing, perpetuates complicated and confusing advice for the consumer, and diminishes the biosocial complexity of body of the consumer.

In section 1.4, I return to the political realities of the food system with a focus on food consumption through a discussion of *food as a political entity*. This section is an examination of the politics of food and the role of nutritional discourse is shaping moral eaters. I argue that the same time these processes of decontextualization remove consumers from the realities of food and knowledge production dominant neoliberal ideologies utilize the rhetoric of consumer citizenship to create an imperative of moral consumption.

**Chapter 2** of this document provides dives into the details of *Savory*. I open with an overview of what a podcast is and why I chose a podcast as the medium for this project. I conclude with an update on the current state of *Savory* is at the time of writing this document.

### *Statement of Positionality*

The ways in which we “know” food are situated within, reflective of, and often (re)produce the value systems of our society (Biltekoff, Murdy, Kimura, Landecker, Guthman, 2014; Guthman, 2011). The pursuit of knowledge, even scientific, is not an objective endeavor (Sundburg, 2005; Biltekoff, 2014 p. 18). The value we place on academic and ‘objective’ ways of knowing over other ways of knowing is reflective of historical and current power relations embedded in our culture and society (Longhurst, 2001, p. 13).

My attempt to question the ways in which we “know” food is inherently influenced by my own embodied social position within this project and within the communities, systems, and spaces I address in this work. As a fourth generation American, raised in a family with (previous) farm ownership, having never experienced food insecurity, and living with a chronic, diet-related disease - I am intimately connected with the topics I address. The privileges of my participation and positionality, as a white, cis-gendered female with formal education informs the production of knowledge about and representation of subjects within this work. By using plural pronouns (we, us, our) I am intentionally recognizing the possibility of my own participation within the cultures and social issues I discuss.

## Chapter 1

### *1.1 Introduction*

In navigating the nourishment of our bodies, we structure our lives around food. At an individual level, this can involve carving out time in the day for eating, cooking, grocery shopping, and meal planning. Scaling these individual practices up to broader populations and cohorts we can begin to examine food cultures. For example by contrasting the ways in which Quest University students might navigate nourishment, (e.g. with limited personal kitchen space in dorms), with the ways that high paid technology employees in the Seattle area might navigate nourishment, (e.g. online grocery delivery from Whole Foods), we can see how incorporating specific spatial and temporal elements into our analysis provides us with tangible frameworks for analyzing individuals' relationships to food and examining how this relationship is situated within a specific historical, political, economic context.

While we as individuals incorporate food into our daily lives in accordance with our socio-economic realities and cultural preferences, governments shape their policies, budgets, and practices to ensure that citizens are receiving adequate nutrition. As food historians Bentley and Hobart state: "civilizations rise and fall based on their ability to keep their citizens fed. Just as gathering, preparing, and eating food frames our daily lives, it also profoundly shapes national, global, and cultural histories" (2014). Keeping populations nourished is no simple task. Governments know that nutrition is an integral part of nation-building and national development (Kimura, 2014). In a modern North American context government do not directly provide food - instead they have policy and regulations to ensure that this essential product is provided through the market. As individuals, we source our food from the market. Thus, to accomplish the seemingly straightforward task of eating, individuals exist within a dynamic relationship with both the market and the state.

This dynamic relationship, between the individual, the market, and the state, is implicit in the structure of our food system (e.g. the existence of USDA guidelines and regulations for food safety) but may not be explicit to the average consumer (e.g. food safety regulations are not necessarily common public knowledge). The most central implicit reality of our food system is the collective understanding and acceptance that food is a commodity. The commodification of food, in combination with the dominant scientific understanding of food as a central determinant of health, perpetuates specific ways of knowing food. The next three sections of Chapter One work to unpack these ways of knowing food by directly discussing the modern political, economic, and cultural realities of both the food system and the production of different ways of knowing.

### *1.2 The Commodification of Food*

The commodification of food has profound effects of many aspects of the food system, including production, processing, distribution, retail, and consumption. Food is no longer simply a basic human need, but it is also an opportunity for profit. Agriculture and associated food industries are big business in North America, accounting for 5.4 % of national GDP (USDA, 2016). In the last hundred years or so, the North American food system has undergone substantial changes as the processes of modernization have unfolded. During the 20th century, scientific advancement, technological advancement, and industrialization in agricultural practices provided cost-effective methods to increase yields, maximize profits, and provide consumers with affordable, safe, and reliable products (Bentley and Hobart, 2014).

### *1.2.1 A brief history of the Modernization of the North American Food System in the 20th Century*

The food system is rooted in a simple premise; in an agricultural economy there is a division of labor. A portion of the population is dedicated to growing food which allows other people to have specialized professions outside of sourcing food (Harvey, 2014; for more on division of labor). Take that concept, give it a couple thousand years and it turns out that the simple food system economy ferments into a complex interconnected web of actors and institutions. In order to understand how we got to where we are today, I am going to offer a very brief history of the modern food system. Historicizing the food system allows us to distance ourselves from the everyday and begins to put into perspective how our current food system operates within a specific contextualized political, cultural, and economic moment.

In the early 1900s, farms were small, diversified (e.g. growing multiple commodities, on average five per farm), and 41% of the American population was directly employed in agriculture (Dimitri, Effland, Conklin, 2005). Twentieth century advances in agricultural production in North America were immense as consolidation of land allowed for specialization of labor forces and investment into mechanization. After WWII, North America experienced rapid industrialization and advancement in scientific knowledge. Integration of scientific knowledge, such as the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides greatly increased yields (Guthman, 2011). At the same time, the number of farms decreased while the total size of each farm increased (Dimitri et al., 2005). Consolidation and the advancement of science and technology has allowed private ownership - of land, growing practices, and intellectual property rights (e.g. seeds) - to exist in the hands of a privileged few (Dowler, 2010, 201). As farms grew and consolidated their practices, there was less diversity of production on each farm, allowing farms to specialize their efforts by focusing on producing only one commodity. Mechanization on farms has greatly reduced the amount of human labor needed on farms; in 2018, 1.3% of the American population was directly employed in agriculture (USDA, 2018). This proved to be a more efficient type of farming; and, given the pressures and volatility of the agricultural market, only those turning a profit, and thus farming efficiently can persist. The goal of the food system in the 20th century was to cheaply produce as many calories as possible. This type of heavily scientifically and technologically integrated mono-culture farming is what today is referred to as the 'conventional' food system.

While the 41% to 1.3% drop in agricultural labor marks a very clear shift towards removing the bulk of Americans from the realities of food production, there are many ways to interpret this information. Dimitri et al. allude to the narrative that industrialization liberated people from the many laborious hours of food production and allowed them to pursue other professions - thus bolstering the national economy (2005). There is a tendency of some (upper-middle class) food writers to romanticize the simplicity of the industrialized past (for instance Pollan, 2006). The romanticism of the small, diversified production homestead conceals the grim reality that agricultural labor laws in the United States have always been exploitative. There is a very clear history of racial and social oppression linked to agricultural economies in the United States. Early colonization relied on slave labor for commodity production. The land upon which the food system exists in North America is the traditional and ancestral land of First Nation groups. The food system I address here, both historical and modern, is a Western food system and as a result the approach to the land, the economic ideology influencing agricultural practices, and the stories we

are told (e.g. who writes North American food system history and what people are highlighted in that history) are of limited scope.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, in North America today farming is a business and for farms to stay in business they have to turn a profit. Given the low profit margins of agricultural commodities and the natural volatility of agricultural markets farming is a risky business. Governments know that the food system is essential for economic development and thus they create policy to ensure that the population has food. In North America food subsidies and international trade policy protect domestic farmers from the volatility of the market (Bentley and Hobart, 2014; Guthman, 2011). Naturally farmers have vested interest in the production of agricultural policy. Producers of certain commodities pay for industry representatives to lobby for policy that is beneficial for their commodity (e.g. dairy, beef, and eggs) (Nestle, 2007). Agricultural policy that upholds the conventional food system is increasingly becoming a source of political contention (Pollan, 2006; Guthman, 2011) as explored further in the following section.

### *1.2.1 The Political Rise of Alternative Food Networks*

The goal of conventional food system, producing as many calories as possible as cheaply as possible, and its effects, are a source of much modern critique (e.g. Pollan, 2006; Guthman, 2011; Nestle, 2007). The need to maximize outputs and profits while minimizing input and expenses has resulted in conventional food system practices where long-term environmental costs of production are not incorporated into the cost of food and farms utilize cheap labor to keep production costs low (Dowler, Kneafsey, Cox, Holloway, 2010). These are just a few of the discontents of the modern industrial food system.

Discontents with the industrial food system have inspired food system activists to advocate for alternative farming practices (e.g. the organic farming movement) (Guthman, 2014). Alternative food networks (AFNs) demand changes in agricultural practices to be more socially and/or environmentally sustainable. AFNs often advocate for supporting a local food production and farms who utilize ecological farming practices (e.g. organic, no-till, permaculture, etc.). ANFs also advocate for 3rd party verifications to ensure that farming practices are ecological or ethical (e.g. fair trade, organic, non-GMO, etc.). The multifaceted issues that drive ANFs are not always cohesive purpose which is why Holloway argues that the “alternative”-“conventional” divide is problematic because it does not consider the nuances and intersections between “alternative” and “conventional” farming practices (2007, p. 78). I would further that argument by challenging the presumed relationship between alternative farming practices and sustainability.

If we associate alternative farming practices as the path to environmental sustainability and social equity, then the alternative-conventional divide necessarily becomes a sustainable-conventional divide. When we create a divide between sustainable and conventional farming practices, we limit space for the conventional food system to incorporate more sustainable practices into the conventional mode of production and distribution. As it stands today, though not always a cohesive movement, alternative food system approaches have often only addressed the

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<sup>1</sup> My intention in writing this brief historical contextualization of the food system was ultimately to evidence that not very many people today are involved in food production and as I argue throughout this chapter, that has profound effects on how we nourish ourselves. However, in researching the facts to present this history I have come to realize that this story of modernization - and how we feel about it - is not universal, and by re-telling this story by using USDA statistics I am very much reproducing a shallow and problematic narrative. This is not the full story of modernization, unfortunately that story is outside of the scope of this work. (see McCarthy, Guthman, 1998)

practices of the food system, rather than the larger systemic causes of these practices. And alternative food movements often utilize market-based strategies (e.g. buy organic or buy local) which limit participation to those with additional flexible income to spend on food (Guthman, 2014). I believe in order to further a sustainable and equitable food system we will need active participation from both alternative and conventional food producers and networks.

### *1.2.2 Economics Impact How Consumers Navigate Nourishment*

For the consumer, food procurement was a different process in the late 1800's and early 1900's than it is today. Small corner stores sourced food locally and regionally and purchased in bulk quantities that varied in volatility (as there was no refrigeration and contamination and bacteria growth often compromised the quality and freshness of products) and affordability (as seasonal availability controlled non-fixed prices) (Bentley and Hobart, 2014). The cracker and pickle barrel stores gave way to markets stacked with individually packaged products. Industrial inventions such as refrigeration and freezing in combination new packaging technologies (e.g. cardboard with waxed paper and tin cans) allowed large food manufacturing corporations to become household names as products were mass produced, branded, shipped, and advertised on a national scale (Bentley and Hobart, 166, 2014) "The advent of the industrial system gave consumers the promise of purity, consistency, and a low cost they could rely on" (Bentley and Hobart, 167, 2014).

The supermarket was created as an embodiment of capitalist cultural and political ideals during the cold war (Bentley and Hobart, 2014). Supermarkets economies of scale increased selection of products and convenience while lowering prices. Because supermarkets are not bound to a regional market, they become a showcase for national brands and products (Bentley and Hobart, 2014). Consumers are able to purchase food with consistent quality and availability. Today, supermarket chains are standardized so that each retail location within a given chain has the same look, layout, and selection. In most supermarkets there is little, if any, local products. With the notable exception for niche markets in certain geographic locations (e.g. Whole Foods in urban areas). This lack of relationship with its geographic location decontextualizes the supermarket from its physical location. For example, if you woke up in a Walmart tomorrow would you know what town you're in?

In the supermarket chains produce is sourced nationally and globally creating a stable produce selection all year round (e.g. tomatoes are available year-round at supermarkets in Squamish). Within the produce section selection of produce varieties is simplified (e.g. there are only a few varieties of carrots, apples, potatoes, etc. even though there are hundreds of species of each). Dowler et al. argues that this standardization divorces foodstuffs from their biological origins by providing food that uniform (e.g. all carrots are orange, thus eliminating natural variety), safe, and predictable (in processing, taste, appearance, and cost) (2010, 200). The lack of seasonality in supermarkets illustrates how the supermarket is decontextualized from its physical location and how food is decontextualized from the realities of its production within the supermarket. These processes of decontextualization removes consumers from the realities of food production.

### *1.2.3 The Political-Economic Reality is a Cultural Reality*

The brief historical context provided throughout the previous sections illustrates how the political and economic commodification of food profoundly shapes the modern food system. The industrialization of agriculture removed the bulk of the population from the labor of food

production. At the same time the supermarket, as the site of food procurement for consumers, decontextualizes food from its origins. Consumers who purchase food from the supermarket are not only geographically removed from realities of food production but they are also removed from people who produce their food. This has resulted in a gap between food producers and consumers. People who are directly employed in agriculture and other food system workers are going to have a very different understanding of the food system and the process of food production. AFNs have risen in response to discontent with the conventional food system, such as this gap between farmers and consumers, however participation in AFNs is limited as alternatives tend to be more expensive. Although we, as consumers, are removed from the realities of food production we also know that the very personal choices of what to buy at the supermarket are also quite political - food labels such as “GMO” free, organic, low-fat, vegan, fair trade, just to name a few - are the tip of the iceberg for understanding how our food purchases affect, our own health and the health of those around us. As a result, the political and economic effects of commodification of food profoundly shapes food culture in North America. The next section furthers the exploration of food culture by examining a dominant cultural understanding of food, as a central determinant of our bodily health.

### ***1.3 The Role of Nutritional Science in defining Food-Body Relationships and shaping Food Culture***

A large portion of foodie culture in North America today centered around health discourse (Guthman, 2011). Public dialogue about healthy food is rooted in a nutritional science understanding of food and a Western understanding of health. The field of nutritional science emerged in order to understand the properties of food that are essential for life. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century nutritional knowledge about food has radically transformed medical practice, the food industry, public policy, and thus dietary patterns. This section opens with a brief examination of a nutritional science understanding of food as a biochemical entity. I then discuss the role that hegemonic nutritional science has played in (re)producing scientific understandings of the relationship between food and health and thus promoting a Western concept of health.

Nutritional science begins to unpack the complexities of food by breaking food down into its nutrient composition. For the sake of isolating variables and proving correlation or causation data, many nutritional studies examine food at the level of nutrients. Energy yielding macronutrients (proteins, lipids, and carbohydrates) and essential micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) are both necessary components for the metabolic reactions to occur in a cell (Lehninger, 2008). Without sufficient macro- and micronutrient intake, basic cellular processes are compromised leading to deficiency related diseases and conditions (e.g. scurvy, beriberi, etc.) (Lehninger, 2008). For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nutritional science was focused on isolating and discovering nutrients and characterizing their role in cellular processes and thus their role in the promotion or prevention of disease.

Investment into this scientific model of knowledge production led to incredible advances in health sciences during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As increases of life expectancy grew, from 47 years to 77 years, the knowledge that diet was a major determinant of health and chronic disease became prominent information (Nestle, 2007). The focus of public health nutrition for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was ensuring a safe and reliable food supply and adequate nutrition for all (Edelstein, 2006; Hite, 2014). Post WWII medical and nutrition research shifted from the contagious diseases to chronic diseases (e.g. diabetes and cardiovascular disease) (Nestle, 2007). By the 1970s cultural

shifts moved eating habits to the center of health discourse. Health was redefined around lifestyle and reconceptualized as largely within personal control (Biltekoff, 2014). As diet took center stage in the average Americans' pursuit of health nutritional science worked hard to inform consumers what nutrients and what foods were really "healthy" (Crawford, 2006; Nestle, 2007).

The standardized scientific approach of studying food a nutrient level works to unpack the health properties, good or bad, of certain foods through quantifiable measurements (e.g. calories). Food scholar Gyorgy Scrinis argues that this "*nutri-biochemical level of engagement with the body*" is overly reductive and tends to displace and undermine other ways of knowing food (2008). Nutrients and biomarkers (e.g. fats, calories, and BMI) are decontextualized from foods, diets, and bodily processes (Scrinis, 2008). This decontextualization works to create standard food body relationships and objective scientific knowledge food, nutrients, and health.

This nutritionally reductive approach is what Scrinis has coined the ideology of nutritionism; he argues that nutritionism happens at many levels (2008). First is *health reductionism*; reducing food to its effects on bodily health. This obsession with "healthy foods" may come at the expense of embedded sensual, cultural, or ecological qualities of food. Second is *food-level reductionism*; decontextualizing single foods from diets which results in the creation of "superfoods" (e.g. avocados) and foods that are vilified for their nutrient profiles (e.g. ultra-processed foods like oreos). Third is *nutritional reductionism*: identifying nutrients and their relationship to health and then furthering the specifics (e.g. identifying fat and then differentiating between types of fats). The multiple levels of nutritionism work together to standardize the scientific understanding of nutrients and their relationship to bodily health; a calorie is a calorie and a vitamin is a vitamin regardless of its food origin (Scrinis, 2008). The decontextualization of nutrients from foods, foods from diets, and diets from social and cultural contexts is prominent in nutritional advice. This is exemplified in the mandatory nutrition panel on the back of packaged foods and its relative size and location compared to the ingredients list, upholding the superiority of a nutrient level analysis of food for determining the health properties of food.

This quantification of nutrients in food and the standardization of nutrient-health relationships (re)produces an understanding of health rooted in a Western, scientific ideologies. By isolating variables and examining food at the level of nutrients scientists can produce 'objective' scientific knowledge about the health properties of foods via their nutritional composition. By counting calories and controlling bodily cravings, individuals are expected to achieve optimal health through the project of nutrition (Murdy, 2014, p. 38). In this way health is decontextualized from other social and cultural contexts and standardized into quantified ideals - Body Mass Index (BMI), cholesterol levels, etc. (Mudry, 2014, p. 38). Health is viewed as something that can be measured and managed. "Our bodily functions and requirements take a form that can be readily commodified, scientifically and professionally managed, and technologically integrated" (Scrinis, 2008). The reduction of health to numbers creates objective knowledge defining what a healthy body is (e.g. BMI between 18.5 and 24.9) and what a healthy body is not (e.g. BMI over 30). This conceptualization of health as strictly physical properties and quantities does not take into consideration the cultural, spiritual, emotional, mental health or wellbeing of the individual. This way of "knowing" food and the role of diet as a determinant of health is in and of itself a cultural way of "knowing" food. This type of nutritional rhetoric privileges this Western, scientific ways of knowing over other ways of knowing.

The forms of nutrition mentioned above is what Hayes-Conroy, J. and Hayes-Conroy, A. (2013) would refer to as “hegemonic nutrition” which can be characterized by three central assumptions:

“(1) that food body relationships can be standardized (as in through the standard of the calorie); (2) that nourishment can be reduced to macro- and micro-nutrients (as in Scrinis 2008) or “charismatic nutrients” (as in Kimura 2013); (3) that nourishment is universally equivalent and thus can be decontextualized from the political-economic, socio-spatial, and cultural locations in which it takes place” (Hayes-Conroy, 2014, p. 39).

This nutritional practice masks Western (masculinist, capitalist-driven, etc.) knowledge production as value-(and color-) free (Hayes-Conroy, 2014, p. 39; Haraway 1988; Smith 1999; Sundburg, 2005). The value placed on a scientific, nutritional understanding of food creates an inherent power imbalance in nutritional practice where those “in the know” (e.g. dieticians) work to inform the uninformed ‘other’ (e.g. “at risk” populations) on how to eat (Guthman, 2008). In this way nutritional knowledge is anything but objective. Nutritional knowledge is embedded within the value systems and power relations of the institutions that produced the knowledge.

In short, the decontextualization and standardization of nutritional advice privileges scientific ways of knowing. This scientific way of “knowing” food and understanding food body relationships is in and of itself a cultural way of knowing food. The following sections will address further how decontextualized nutritional advice perpetuates complicated and confusing advice for the consumer and diminishes the biosocial complexity of body of the consumer.

#### ***1.4 Food as a Tool for Neo-liberal Governmentality***

Parallel to the modernization and industrialization of the food system was the rise of neoliberalism. Ushered in by a conservative political movement in the 1980s, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the central tenets of neoliberal economic ideology is 1) the belief that free markets are the optimal way to distribute societies resources and as a result 2) limiting most forms of government because of a skepticism of the efficiency of government intervention (Farmer, Kleinman, Kim, & Basilico, 85, 2013). In the neoliberal state, the responsibility of provisioning for health was downloaded from the state to the individual (White, 1999; Guthman, 2011). This led to the privatization of social health services that were traditionally provided by the welfare state. “Neoliberal economic theory supported the notion that health was a commodity delivered within a market context instead of a right for all people...” (Farmer et al., 86, 2013). Neoliberalism has changed the way people negotiate their own health.

At the same time that neoliberalism was privatizing health care, and thus making it the individual's responsibility to obtain health care through market participation, the knowledge that food was a central determinant of health became central to health discourse (Nestle, 2007, Guthman, 2011). The prevalence of health consciousness in North America today can be rooted in healthism. The healthism movement began in the 1980s and, as it stands today, is a means of vigilant self-improvement for the sake of obtaining “health” (Crawford, 2006; Guthman, 2011). Healthism has aided in the devolution of health responsibility from the public sphere to individual responsibility through the ideology of self-improvement (Crawford, 2006; Kimarua, 2014). The healthism movement fully embraces diet as a means of achieving health. The healthism movement has also aided food companies in capitalizing on the commodification health, as individual consumers demand change in the food industry to support the health centric lifestyle (e.g. Whole

Foods). Neoliberal government policies utilize healthism and nutritionism rhetoric to download responsibility to the consumer.

Hegemonic nutritional advice, as discussed in the previous section, can be co-opted by the food industry to perpetuate confusing dietary advice. Nutritional advice frequently suggested eating less of certain nutrients instead of certain foods. For example, “eat less fat” instead of “eat less meat” which is the source of saturated fat (Nestle, 2007). This is mostly due to powerful lobbying from the food industry because “eat less meat” could mean less profit for large food corporations (Nestle, 2007). In today's neoliberal landscape food exists for profit, not for people. Food corporations have capitalized off of nutritionism, using nutrients (instead of ingredients) to promote their foods (Scrinis, 2008). Packages market health claims based off of one prominent nutrient in the processed food product, failing to examine the product as a whole (Scrinis, 2008). In this way food companies are able to label processed foods as “healthy” and sell “health” as a commodity in the supermarket. And the market for health is large because consumers are expected to eat healthy.

Health is viewed as a central tenet of good citizenship and a good life. An ideal neoliberal citizen is a healthy one, because a healthy person is more economically productive. Citizenship, according to White, exists within the social, political, and cultural contexts that define the power relations of a community and is defined as “that set of practices that allows a person to participate in the decision-making of [their] community” (1999) In the neoliberal state, participation in the market is central to citizenship, hence the rise of the consumer-citizen (White, 1999). There is a moral imperative to purchase and eat ‘healthy’ foods, in order to be a productive citizen. Bodies that are in control, making healthy choices, are productive, rational, and valuable (Longhurst, 2001). The dominant cultural understanding of healthy foods is rooted in nutritional science and because of this nutritional reductionism becomes a tool neoliberal policy can utilize because standardized measurements can easily be managed by privately. For example, in the U.S., health services refocus their efforts to provide information for the public to make “healthy” choices - such as Michelle Obamas Let’s Move Campaign - instead of directly providing access to healthy food or health care. This places the responsibility of eating well, and sourcing healthy food, onto the individual.

For an individual to manage their health through maintaining a healthy diet they need to be in control of their bodily cravings and desires. A slice of chocolate cake is an indulgence, a sweet tooth that must be managed, in this mode of “knowing” food and regulating a healthy diet. Eating a brownie is viewed as “caving in” and lacking will power rather than a pleasurable experience. A body that is in control is viewed as rational, ordered, and even civilized (Longhurst, 2001). In this system a person, and the value of their life and their body, is contingent upon their actions and abilities. Bodies that fail to adhere to this ideal of health are deviant and out of control (Longhurst, 2001; Guthman, 2011). People who are chronically ill, overweight, out of shape, etc. are viewed as a burden to the healthcare system and less as economically valuable laborers compared to their health citizen counterparts (Guthman, 2011). Therefore, it is the individual's responsibility to eat well in order to live well.

This conception of health, as something that is entirely within personal control, obstructs the systemic inequities and power relations of a person's social, political, and economic reality that influence the inherent biosocial complexity of the body (Hayes-Conroy, 2014). Market participation becomes central for an individual's ability to obtain health (both healthcare and

healthy foods) yet it is dependent upon income and wealth which is systematically unevenly distributed through the capitalist system (Guthman, 2011). Requiring health as a tenet of good citizenship without directly providing means of accessing healthy food or health care highlights the inequalities inherent to the capitalist system. The idea of ‘choice’ on the market distracts from the larger power relations. The experience of and ability to read a nutrition label and interpret scientific information about the healthfulness of foods is dependent upon an individual's level of education. Within North America institutions of higher education remain exclusive and exclusionary spaces. Access to nutritional information (e.g. Let’s Move Campaign) is one thing but the ability to incorporate this information into daily life is another.

In short, the downloading of responsibility for the provisioning of health from the state to the individual in combination with the rise of the consumer citizen, has resulted in individuals seeking to “take charge of their health” through their diet. This cultural understanding of food as a tool for achieving health is rooted in a Western, scientific conceptualization of physical and bodily health. In this way, the neoliberal commodification of health is deeply interconnected with the commodification of food and our cultural understanding of the relationship between food and health. Hegemonic nutritional advice that is co-opted by neoliberal policy obstructs the biosocial complexity of the body and implicates the consumer as primarily responsible for their own health.

### *1.5 Conclusion*

It is impossible to detangle a person from their political, cultural, social, and economic realities. Where and how someone was raised; an individual's race, class, gender, education, etc. shape and inform the ways in which we “know” food. In the current conventional modern North American food system, food is decontextualized from its origins and from the people who produced it. The spatial and temporal removal of the consumer from the realities of food production results in an interesting power dynamic paradigm. At the same time that consumers are removed from the realities of food production they are morally implicated to care about food, specifically to utilize food as a tool for achieving health. Dominant cultural understandings of health and healthy food are rooted in hegemonic nutritional practice which values a Western, scientific conceptualization of health as bodily, physical and within personal control. According to the agendas of some Alternative Food Networks; individuals should care, and thus purchase food accordingly, not only for their own bodily health but the health of others and the health of the planet. The very narratives that empower consumers to change the food system through market participation disempower individuals who socio-economic reality impact their market participation (e.g. individuals who are low income and struggle with food (in)security as well as individuals who do not have the formal education to engage critically with nutritional science). In this way hegemonic nutritional advice negates the inherent biosocial complexity of the consumer.

I am presenting this chapter in humble recognition that knowledge is power. And that food is reflective of the power relations of our society. I think this critical academic theory has liberatory potential. By gaining critical distance from the everyday we are able to better examine and situate our daily rituals and realities in the world. We can see how current public discourses about nutrition and the food system are situated within a specific cultural, social, and historical moment in time. We are able to explicitly examine how hegemonic value systems (like neoliberalism) shape our current food system and daily realities. By explicitly highlighting this otherwise invisible social architecture that governs our lives we are able to begin to critique and question the “norms” of our food system and “common sense” of our society. As bell hooks has said “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and

direct our theorizing towards this end” (hooks, 1991). The academic theory covered in the chapter is limited in its potential to liberate so long as it remains inaccessible to a general audience. In an attempt to animate this theory and bring critical food discourse to a larger audience this summer fellow project was the creation of a podcast. The next chapter dives into the details of *Savory* and discusses the potential of podcasts as an accessible medium for communication.

## Chapter 2

### *2.1 What is a Podcast?*

The term podcast was first used in 2004 by Ben Hammersley in a Guardian news article describing the audible revolution of online radio (Hammersley, 2004; Sekhon, 2019). Podcast combines the “pod” from Apple’s iPod with the “cast” of radio broadcasting (Sekhon, 2019). Podcasts are downloadable audio files that are hosted and distributed via the internet. Podcasts started as an alternative media however the ability to “narrowcast” to specific audiences in combination with the relative ease of production and the ease of distribution podcasts have established themselves as a versatile, revolutionary medium for communication in the 21st century. In 2019, 51% of Americans have ever listened to a podcast with 32% having listened in the last month and 22% having listened in the last week (Edison Research, 2019).

Podcasts are delivered through Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds to multiple distribution platforms. This means podcast producers can publish their podcast in one place, but their audience is able to subscribe to the RSS feed through numerous platforms (e.g. Apple podcast, Spotify, Google podcasts, etc.) (Sekhon, 2019). Podcast series subscriptions allow episodes to be downloaded automatically, keeping the audience's feed up to date (Chadha, Avila, Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). This is how podcasts are able to broadcast to a wide audience with relatively little investment - a podcast doesn't have to purchase airtime like a radio show or adhere to the same media broadcasting regulations that large news corporations do. In this way podcasts provide a rather democratic source of communication, because nearly anyone can host a podcast.

Compared to other digital mediums (e.g. video production) podcasting requires very little technology and thus little financial investment. At its most basic a podcast requires a microphone for recording, a computer, and a software program for editing the audio (many of which can be downloaded for free). This relative ease of production is what allows nearly anyone with an idea and the motivation to be able to host a podcast. As of mid-2018 Apple podcasts had over 500,000 active podcasts in over 100 languages (Winn, 2019). Podcasts started as a primarily small, independent projects that individuals would create but now podcasts are also produced by many organizations such as large established media corporations (e.g. NYTimes and NPR), businesses (e.g. Rise and Grind by ZipRecruiter), and educational institutions (e.g. UBC Blue and Goldcast) - just to name a few.

Over the last 15 years, the versatility of podcasting as a communication medium has been illustrated by the many successful podcasts which are diverse in format, content, purpose, and audience (Drew, 2017). Podcasts can be produced for a broader audience or have a more niche subject matter and people listen to podcasts for many reasons. Podcasts are easily downloaded and listened to on demand, which shapes listener preferences and habits (McClung, Johnson, 2010). Podcast listeners are younger (under the age of 55), enjoy the social aspects of podcasts, and tend to be more educated, and more affluent (Chadha, Avila, Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Mou and Lin, 2019). People often listen to a podcast while doing other things (e.g. household chores like folding laundry, doing the dishes, or commuting to work) and feel more productive when listening to a podcast then when engaging with other types of media (Perks and Turner, 2019).

## 2.2 Why this medium?

This summer fellows project was most closely aligned with the podcast genre of educational podcasts. Non-institutional educational podcasts are a popular genre on podcast aggregation sites (Drew, 2017). A podcast is a versatile educational medium given its ease of production and its accessibility to the listener as episodes can be accessed on a phone or laptop at any time (Drew, 2017). Because of this, there is increasing interest in podcasts as education medium from formal academic institutions and scholars. Highly successful educational podcasts (e.g. *99% Invisible*, *Stuff Mom Never Told You*, *Philosophize This!*), produced outside of the formal academic realm, utilize a diversity of design in terms of style, length, pedagogical approaches, and series structure which can both reinforce and challenge discourse about successful podcast design that exists within academia (Drew, 2017).

My summer fellows project was the creation of an interview style podcast about the food system; this podcast is called *Savory*. This work is about the people and processes behind food production and the politics that shape our understanding of the food system. The creation of this podcast was motivated by academic theory, explored in Chapter One of this document, in combination with my lived experiences growing up in a dairy community and working on in the food system and on farms and in non-profits. *Savory* works towards leveling the playing field for access to information about the food system. The podcast was created with the intention of connecting the audience with the realities of food production by interviewing people who are directly involved in the food system in a variety of ways (**Table 1**). These interviews work to animate the rather elusive concept of ‘the food system’ and validate sources of knowledge outside of academia as important perspectives.

I was drawn to the medium of a podcast because of the accessibility of the platform - the low start-up costs and the ease of distribution - as well as the unique intimacy and human connection that oral narratives hold. It was important for me to conduct interviews with people who are directly involved in the food system because personal storytelling provides a powerful emotional connection that can connect people across disciplines and backgrounds. The material weight of the academic theory explored previously is embodied in everyday realities for people who work in the food system, in both explicit and implicit ways, and by talking to people directly involved in the food system we can begin to see how the context of a person’s engagement, their lived reality, and the information and community they have access to, shapes how a person understands the food system. This podcast works to explicitly articulate the value systems that influence our cultural preferences and shape the ways in which we “know” food. *Savory* begins to explore and unpack the complexities, nuances and discontent of our modern food system by acknowledging a diversity of perspectives on the food system as of equal validity and significance thus creating space for effective, critical dialogues about the food system.

## 2.3 Design of *Savory*

The first two episodes of *Savory* communicate the academic theory explored in **Chapter One** of this document and lay the groundwork for understanding the food system as a dynamic, complex, contradictory, capitalist system that is an interconnected web of people, processes, policies, governments, and industry and thus worthy of critical public dialogue. The remaining episodes are interview episodes (**Table 1**). At the time of writing this document interviews are still



**Figure 1.** *Savory* cover art by Jessica Matyas

in progress and this podcast has not been published yet. Positions marked with to be determined (TBD) are people I am in conversation with and have interviews scheduled. Interview questions are specific to each person and their position/work within the food system, but all interview guides follow a general format of asking questions that would try to get at the individuals background, experience, motivation, and understanding of the food system (**Appendix 1**).

Producing a podcast is a collaborative and creative endeavor. Highly successful podcasts have large production teams to create the best audio quality and listening experience. Music for *Savory* is produced by Cameron Lee and visual design is by Jessica Matyas (@matyascreates) (Figure 1).

**Table 1.** *Savory* Interviews and Proposed Interviews

Position	Person	Location
Non-profit food system work	Michi Hunter	Squamish, B.C.
	Rosy Smit	Carnation, WA
Dietician	Gerry Casten	Sea to Sky Corridor, B.C.
Dairy farm employees	TBD	TBD
Dairy farm owner	TBD	TBD
Agrologist	TBD	TBD
Rancher	TBD	TBD
Food Policy	TBD	TBD
First Nations	TBD	TBD
Produce farmer	TBD	TBD

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Background/Motivation:

To start with, I would like to know a bit more about yourself and your engagement with the food system

How long have you been working in the food system?

Why did you start doing this work?

#### Experience:

How would you describe your role to the average consumer?

How often do you engage with members of the general public about your work?

What does a normal day on the job look like for you? Can you walk me through it?

Can you tell me about some challenges/issues you have faced in this profession?

How has this position/the food system changed since you started working in this field?

#### Perspective:

What do you think the biggest challenges of the food system are right now?

How do you think we should be addressing those challenges?

Is there anything else you would like to talk about that I might not have asked you?