Michael Pollan and Ethical Eating

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Abstract

In this thesis I analyze the whole of Michael Pollan's books and other media appearances as a cultural technology, in the sense theorized by Foucault, Laurie Ouellette, Tony Bennett and others. I argue that Michael Pollan's work can be seen a technology of an ethical form of neoliberal citizenship. In my first chapter, I point out that while Pollan attempts to defend his program through a rational economic model of cost-benefit, there is a morality to his program beyond economic rationality. In my second chapter, I argue that, though perhaps the moral dimension of Pollan's program opens up possibilities for a progressive politics of food, this moral dimension is a highly classed one. In the final chapter, I look at the ways in which Pollan, while purporting to address a race-, class-, and gender-neutral audience of equal Americans, defines a problem-cause-solution constellation that allocates blame on a racialized and gendered basis and calls upon readers to pay "karmic debts" accrued through failure to pay the "hidden costs" of the industrial food system, by freely choosing the pleasurable exercise of labor.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION **1**
CHAPTER 1 .... **10**
Michael Pollan's Work as a Technology of Ethical Citizenship **10**
CHAPTER 2: **46**
Michael Pollan and Professional Middle Class Lifestyle **46**
CHAPTER 3 .... **91**
Exclusions, Obligations and Ethical Eating **91**
CONCLUSION **125**
BIBLIOGRAPHY **130**

INTRODUCTION

From the late 1980s through the beginning of the 21st century, author Michael Pollan was moderately visible as a nature writer and popular cultural critic. By the turn of the millennium, he had published several books and his essays appeared with some regularity in the *New York Times* and other "quality" magazines that largely targeted the liberal professional middle class. With the 2006 publication of his hugely successful *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (TOD), however, Pollan became a national celebrity. In the book, Pollan explores the US's troubled industrial food system and what he calls "our national eating disorder." The book is a piece of investigative journalism-cum-travelogue in which Pollan immerses himself in four production processes, from farm to plate. First he tracks the journey of a steer fated to become a McDonalds hamburger. Second, he visits big organic farms in California, whose produce is sold at CostCo and Whole Foods Market. Third, he describes a brief sojourn at a small-scale, sustainable farm in Virginia. Finally, for the pièce de resistance, Pollan himself—under the tutelage of a few newfound foodie friends—hunts, forages, and prepares an enormously time-consuming feast to conclude the book. Pollan went on to write *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (IDOF), which appeared two years later, again to critical acclaim and consumer popularity. The book is presented, in part, as an answer to the "now what?" question, given rise by previous book. Although this second book contains much of the same content as the first, this content is boiled down to serve a deliberately pedagogical function: "to help us reclaim out health and happiness as eaters" (Pollan 7). On the one

hand, IDOF is aimed at helping readers break through what Pollan calls the "ideology of nutritionism"—the overly complex and confusing conglomeration of nutrition and marketing messages telling US Americans "what to eat." On the other hand, the book contains explicit tools—instructions, tips, and guidelines—for making ethical food choices. Finally, more didactic still is his most recent *Food Rules: An Eater's manual* (2010), a pocket-sized eater's guide with a series of 64 guiding principles for making ethical and healthy food choices.

Evidence for Pollan's incredible popularity among the book-buying public is not difficult to come by. At the time of writing, all three of the food books remained on *The New York Times* bestseller lists (Penguin Group USA). His books are both cited and recommended on a host of ethical lifestyle, environmental and food justice websites and blogs. He was even the subject of an Internet campaign that petitioned President Obama to appoint Pollan secretary of Agriculture (Friest). Thanks to the apparent salience of the particular way he offers his food-ethics message, Pollan has come to be seen as a food expert. He has now appeared in a broad range of media sites, including food-related documentaries (*King Corn* (2007) on the omnipresence of corn in the food system, *Food Fight* (2008) on the California movement to escape from the industrial food system begun in the late 60s, *Killer at Large* (2008) on the "obesity epidemic," *The Vanishing of the Bees* (2009), *PolyCultures: Food Where We Live* (2009), *Food Inc.* (2008), an exposé of corporate agriculture, and *Eat at Bill's: Life at the Monterey Market* (2009)), on television (*The Daily Show*, *Oprah*, *The Colbert Report*, *Real Time with Bill Mahar*, *The Charlie Rose Show*, and *ABC News*) as well as on the radio (*Democracy Now!* and

multiple shows on National Public Radio). Videos of Pollan's speaking engagements at colleges and universities, at natural history museums, theaters and libraries, at churches and Jewish community centers, and even at Google's headquarters can be found on YouTube—links to many of which appear on Pollan's personal website (MP Speak).

One could argue that Pollan's present stardom is due to a kind of trendiness of ethical eating. Indeed, the swell in books by other authors writing on the ethics of eating would seem to support this claim.[1] Yet, Pollan has garnered far greater visibility and has appeared in a broader range of media sites than any of the other authors. One could also reasonably attribute Pollan's popularity to the ways in which his program claims to offer solutions to today's problems of food, health and the environment in ways that fit comfortably with neoliberal strategies of individual responsibility. Indeed, his books do link up with contemporary worries about obesity, food safety, global warming and pollution. Further, the solutions he offers are overwhelmingly personal, most famously, the subtitle of IDOF: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" (Pollan).

Pollan and his program for ethical eating have been sharply criticized from multiple sites for its individualism, its consumer focus (as opposed to a worker or citizen focus), its neoliberal logic, for its elitism, and for its sexism. Many of these critiques are persuasive and align with my own analysis. However, I also argue that dismissing Pollan's work on any of these grounds risks neglecting to consider the productive

[1] For example, Marion Nestle's *What to Eat* and *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, published in 2006 and 2002, respectively; Jane Goodall et al's *Harvest for Hope: A Guide for Mindful Eating* (2005) includes critiques of the industrial food system and dominant ways of knowing about food; 2007 saw the publication of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Vegetable Miracle*: *A Year of Food Life,* which chronicles her family's year-long experiment with subsistence farming and includes recipes, histories, exposés of various aspects of the industrial farming.

dimensions of his program. Instead, I approach Pollan's work as a "technology of the self" in the manner theorized by Michel Foucault and as a "cultural technology" as elaborated by scholars including Tony Bennett and Laurie Ouellette. For Foucault, technologies of the self "permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, EF 146). This work on the self can be understood as the exercise of ethics. Foucault illustrates this concept in relation to the ancient Greeks, who understood ethics as a problem of freedom. They "problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem. But ethical in the sense in which the Greeks understood it: *ethos* was a way of being and of behavior. It was a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others" (Foucault, Ethics 29). He goes on to note "Extended work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an *ethos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary" (Foucault, Ethics 29). For the ancient Greeks, ethics was not a strict morality or a value system in which certain behaviors or thoughts were coded good or bad. Rather, the exercise of ethics depended on constant reflection, mastering one's desires and reigning in excesses for the purposes of living a beautiful life.

While Foucault, here, is discussing technologies that are take up by individuals to self-shape as male members of a ruling class, cultural technologies, Tony Bennett explains, also function to "organize a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry" (Bennett 63),

becoming part of what Ouellette calls a "citizen training process" (Ouellette, Viewers Like You: How Public TV Failed the People 107-108). Thus, technologies can link up with "living a beautiful life," as for the Greeks, but also with broader governmental aims and objectives. Viewing Pollan's work as a cultural technology—in other words, taking seriously the productive dimensions of the minutia of everyday life—can shed light on the broader aims and objectives with which his work links up.

In this thesis, I approach Michael Pollan's work as a case study for ethical eating lifestyle literature at present. I aim to answer how, as a cultural technology, his work is productive—especially in the ways that it imbues the mundane details of everyday life with moral/ethical/political import. I analyze the ways in which his work opens up space for a progressive food-related practice and politics as well as the ways in which it closes off progressive possibilities. In other words, I do not dismiss it *because* of its focus on day-to-day details, *because* it is classed, *because* it is gendered, or *because* it places such emphasis on consumer choice. Rather, I am interested in the particularities of the ways in which the classed, gendered, consumerist, and mundane aspects of Pollan's writing offer possibilities for and limitations to a progressive politics of food.

Ethics and Governmentality

In chapter one, I consider the relationship of Pollan's work, as a technology of citizenship, with neoliberalism. Laurie Ouellette has pointed out that present-day technologies of citizenship link up with particularly neoliberal aims and objectives. They "construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the

collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility" (Ouellette, Reality TV 232). Such technologies aim to train individuals "to function without state assistance or supervision as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals" (Ouellette, Reality TV 232).

Although in some ways, Pollan's work is reflective of the neoliberal trends Ouellette sees in other sites, Pollan's writing also differs from other neoliberal technologies of citizenship. His program can be understood as calling on individuals to govern and care for themselves through the use of the tips and techniques in the books. However, the moral dimensions that undergird Pollan's program are an uneasy fit with the morality of neoliberalism. Pollan's close attention to individual's daily food practices links up with real concern about the broader social and ecological effects of the industrial food system, such attention is also indicative of a deep concern with the interior of the individual: her or his particular attitude toward and affective investment in the practices and her or his ways of knowing. I argue that Pollan's work calls upon individuals to govern themselves through the ethical practice of freedom and choice in ways that link up with what I call a particularly ethical form of neoliberal citizenship. This form of citizenship must be analyzed in its specificity in order to make sense of what is at stake in Pollan's program.

Professional Middle Class, Taste, and Lifestyle

While theories of neoliberalism can help to make sense of parts of Pollan's program (the individualism, the consumer-based solutions, for example) it remains

difficult to explain the significance of the departure of Pollan's "morality" from "economic rationality" through neoliberalism alone. To make sense of the moral dimensions of Pollan's program, in chapter two I turn to Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction, his concepts of habitus and lifestyle, as well as Barbara Ehrenreich's analysis of the professional middle class. Far from being neutral or universal, the morality of Pollan's program has its basis in professional middle class tastes, longings, memories and anxieties. Pollan seems to address a class-, race-, and gender-neutral audience of equal US Americans. Yet, despite the seeming inclusivity, Pollan's work defines US America's "food problem" in terms that are uniquely salient to the professional middle class. In turn, the solutions Pollan proposes are uniquely appealing and possible for this same class formation. This, I argue, sheds light on the ways in which the morality of Pollan's program links up with the reproduction of the professional middle class. Rather than dismiss the program on these grounds, however, in this chapter, I analyze the ways in which the particular class character of Pollan's program—and its incredible popularity—can tell us something about this formation at present and help think about the possibilities and limitations of the ways in which the program might be taken up.

Material constraints to living an ethical life: the hidden costs of choosing freely

While in chapter two, I argue that the implied definition of living an ethical life is uniquely appealing to a particular class formation, in chapter three I argue that it is not only in terms of appeal and taste that this definition is exclusive; additionally, living an ethical life requires material resources, time resources, and an ability and willingness to

engage in significant extra labor. I chart the ways in which Pollan's equation of 'extra expenditure' with 'living ethically' produces norms, exclusions and obligations. Pollan's definition of the "food problem" allocates blame on a gendered and racialized basis. His solution to this problem is predicated on the assumption that the exercise of ethics is synonymous with the ability to choose freely. By assuming that living ethically is a matter of freely choosing correct food practices (and products), Pollan fails to account for the unequal distribution of resources and the fact that the gendered division of household labor remains unequal. For many individuals, food practices are not simply chosen freely, but are carried out in the context of varying degrees of material, time, and familial constraints. I argue that without an analysis of these constraints, lifestyle programs like Pollan's can profess inclusivity while in fact extending the possibility of living ethically on an exclusive basis that is aligned with existing hierarchies.

My hope for this thesis is not to foreclose the possibilities of a politics of the everyday. Rather, I aim to make visible the productive dimensions of ethical eating lifestyle literature as a particular manifestation of such a politics. I approach the following chapters from the position that the food system is neither just nor sustainable. I also believe that the quotidian practices of everyday life do indeed matter. I do not doubt—nor do I wish to dismiss—that living an ethical food life is meaningful in the lives of individuals. Nor would I dispute that individuals committed to these practices have effected changes on a community-level, have worked to increase access to fresh foods, and have produced new forms of sociality. However, I am deeply critical of the ways in which a politics of the everyday can function to reproduce existing hierarchies.

The seeming inclusivity and accessibility of a politics of lifestyle can obscure the inequalities that inhere in within it.

CHAPTER 1

Michael Pollan's Work as a Technology of Ethical Citizenship

Introduction

In the past several years, there has been a swell of instructional literature devoted to ethical eating. These works are concerned with the industrial food system and its ill effects on our psyches, bodies, and the environment; they emphasize ecological sustainability, eating locally, taking one's time, and particular ways of knowing. Among them are books by nutritionist Marion Nestle, whose work includes titles like *What to Eat* and *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, published in 2006 and 2002, respectively. In a similar vein, in 2005 Warner Books published Jane Goodall et al's *Harvest for Hope: A Guide for Mindful Eating*, which includes critiques of the industrial food system and dominant ways of knowing about food. 2007 saw the publication of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Vegetable Miracle*: *A Year of Food Life,* which chronicles her family's year-long experiment with subsistence farming and includes recipes, histories, exposés of various aspects of the industrial farming, and paeans to community supported agriculture (CSA).

One of the most visible, widely read, and prolific authors within this genre is Michael Pollan. He has come to be seen as a figurehead for an alternative food movement that conceives of ethical eating as a lifestyle choice. In 2006, Penguin Books published Pollan's enormously popular *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of*

Four Meals. In the book, Pollan follows four meals from farm to plate. Without offering readers heavy-handed advice, tips, or recommendations for being ethical eaters, Pollan puts forth a first-person narrative of personal discovery, from which readers are ostensibly free to draw their own conclusions and take action, or not, as they see fit. He begins with the industrial food system, and follows corn, as it becomes both high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), an ingredient in a great many processed foods, and as it is fed to cattle on feedlots called concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). He concludes the chapter by eating a McDonalds' hamburger. To be sure that he gets the full sensory effect of this all-American, fast-food experience, he eats his burger in his car speeding down the highway. He then moves on to organic production—comparing "industrial organics" to small-scale, more sustainable organic production. From industrial organic ingredients, he cooks himself an expensive, but ultimately unsatisfying meal (his asparagus, for example, having traveled from Argentina, tasted like "damp cardboard" (175)). The small-scale organic meal, "everyone agreed…tasted wonderful" (273). And finally to "foraging"—both hunting and gathering—ingredients with the help of some European foodies he knows in California. He then prepares a lavish feast for his family and friends. This final meal was delicious, but also has a spiritual function, reminding Pollan—through his enormous investment of time and energy—of the "real costs" of a meal that doesn't rely on the industrial foods system, the "true costs of the things we take for granted" and the "incalculably larger debts we incur when we eat industrially" (410). These narratives are interspersed with historical and contextual explanations of the

policies, institutional structures, and ideological conditions that enable and perpetuate the industrial food system and what he calls "our national eating disorder" (1).

His next food book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, also from Penguin, appeared in 2008. The book is largely an elaboration on "our national eating disorder." Halfway between a digest and an exegesis of the *Omnivore's Dilemma*, it is a handbook for interpreting the former book and for taking action. Because, the argument goes, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* sent readers into a spiral of confusion—newly aware of a massive problem, they felt ill-equipped to confront it—*In Defense of Food* aimed to "help us reclaim our health and happiness as eaters" (Pollan, IDOF 7). More direct in offering readers explicit tools for making ethical food choices, this second book proposes a program, a set of instructions for changing food practices and attitudes to become happier and healthier eaters.

Pollan's third and most recent food book, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (2009) is even more didactic. In it, Pollan skips the narrativizing altogether and jettisons his formerly exploratory, self-reflexive tone to assume an expert position. From here, he offers readers a list of explicit food Do's and Don'ts. Measuring only four-and-a-half by seven-and-one-eighth inches, the volume fits easily into a purse or pocket. While the *Omnivore's Dilemma* is a whopping 411 pages, and the more digestible *In Defense of Food* is 201 pages, *Food Rules* is a mere 139. During a *Daily Show* interview, Jon Stewart quipped that *Food Rules* is "fun-sized"; Pollan agreed, noting "you can read it in an hour" (Pollan, Daily Show 2/17/10). After a 10-page introduction telling readers, more or less, "how to use this book," *Food Rules* puts forth approximately one rule per

page. The pithy imperatives are numbered one through 64, some of which apparently speak for themselves (rule 20: “It’s not food if it arrived through the window of your car” (Pollan, FR 43)), while other are followed by a single paragraph of explanation (a full, albeit diminutive page of text expounds upon rule 23: “Treat meat as a flavoring or special occasion food” (Pollan, FR 53)). Like *In Defense of Food*, *Food Rules* is an effort to combat how “complicated” food has gotten (Pollan, FR ix). Despite a plethora of expert advice, he argues, “we *still* don’t know what we should be eating” (Pollan, FR x, emphasis in original). Pollan’s message and its increasing didacticism are mirrored in his regular articles in the *New York Times* and blog on NYTimes.com as well as in his appearances on broadcast and cable television.

Pollan’s Critics

Alternative food literature, Pollan’s in particular, has been criticized for its elitism and individualism, and its failure to depart from neoliberal market logic. Julie Guthman and Chad Lavin, for example, have leveled such charges against Pollan’s work. While the authors acknowledge and appreciate Pollan’s attention to larger structures—factory farms, government subsidies, for instance—they take issue with the ways in which his program places the onus of responsibility on individuals in relation to their consumer choices.

In her essay, “Commentary on teaching food: Why I am fed up with Michael Pollan et al.” Guthman situates Pollan within the spate of “how to eat” literature that has appeared in the last few years. She voices concern over the tendency of these authors to

wander outside of their areas of expertise, their "near hysteria" surrounding issues of obesity, their failure to acknowledge histories of "Americanization and social scolding in relation to ethnic food ways and bodies," and finally, the authors' lack of attention to the social justice dimensions, not only within the broader systems they critique, but also in the very programs they offer. Significantly, as Guthman points out, these books ignore the social justice implications of positing "organic" and "the local" as having an intrinsic moral rightness, rather than historically and contextually specific concepts with their own politics of exclusion and inclusion (Guthman 261). For Guthman, this literature—and Pollan specifically—is especially pernicious because it sells the "fantasy" that individual food choices can be meaningful as political or environmental action; such choices will likely not effect change within circuits of production and consumption in the food system. Instead, she argues, we must address larger structures of inequality "so that others may eat well" (Guthman 263). For her, political action appears in opposition to individual consumer choices. "What is so painfully evident here and in many other of the new food books, is how food politics has becomes a progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics that devolves regulatory responsibility to consumers' via their dietary choices" (Guthman 264). I will return to the significant question of "regulatory responsibility" later in this chapter. Here, however, I wish only to emphasize that for Guthman such a "devol[ution]"—consumer choice—constitutes an "anti-politics."

Chad Lavin similarly positions the politics of consumer choice as depoliticizing (in contrast to the political engagement of "workers" and "citizens"). For him, the inadequacy of Pollan's writing lies in calling it otherwise. In his essay, "Pollanated

Politics, or, The Neoliberal's Dilemma," Lavin argues that Pollan's work has gained purchase because it links up with individuals' lived realities within neoliberalism, in which the only solution imaginable is a consumerist one: "In explaining the omnivore's dilemma, Pollan performs the neoliberal's dilemma: in order to politicize the US food system, he must revert to the obviously inadequate, arguably elitist, and ultimately depoliticizing language of consumerism" (Lavin 59).

Arguably, in this essay Lavin reproduces a framework for meaningful politics that places citizens and workers in opposition to consumers, where only the action of those in the former groups can be considered legitimately political. Lavin also neglects to consider the ways in which these concepts are gendered, raced and classed, as well as the complexity of their overlaps and intersections. There is a politics to consumer action—and the specific kinds of consumer action Pollan suggests—that ought to be taken seriously in its own right.

Despite their dismissal of consumer action, I find much of Lavin and Guthman's critiques persuasive; they link up with some of my own objections to Pollan's work. For example, in chapter 2 of this text, I argue that Pollan's work has a very specific class character that relies upon and reproduces professional middle class ways of knowing and thinking. I argue that Pollan presents these ways of knowing and thinking alternately as *normative* on the one hand, and on the other, as a *moral-ethical ideal* to which his readers ought to aspire. In chapter 3, I analyze the limitations of Pollan's program in terms of (material and geographic) access to the foods and practices he recommends, the implicit whiteness of his program, and labor the program demands—especially gendered and

racialized domestic labor.

However, to dismiss Michael Pollan on these grounds would fail to consider the complexities and contradictions surrounding the relationship of his program to neoliberalism. Further, it would fail to take seriously the functioning of Pollan's work as a technology, in the Foucauldian sense, of a specifically *ethical* form of neoliberal citizenship. I suggest that neoliberal technologies of ethical citizenship call upon individuals to take responsibility for what are identified (often explicitly) as the broader failures of neoliberal capitalism. Individuals are called upon to work on themselves, their ways of knowing and ways of living because of problems not of their own making *per se*, but problems in which they are implicated if they conduct their food conduct without giving it thought.

Pollan's books, columns, blog posts and other media appearances offer individuals recommendations for becoming more ethical selves through work on their daily conduct and the way that they think about that conduct. His work is instructional, a kind of consumer education that teaches readers both the "why" and "how to" of a particular way of being ethical in the present. In both of these capacities, Pollan's work ought not be understood as a- or anti-political. However, this is not to say that his work should be celebrated. Rather, I argue that Pollan's work is productive of subjectivities, modes of living, and ways of thinking, in ways that open up some possibilities for effecting social and environmental change at the same time as it shuts down others. Pollan's work offers readers a way of being ethical citizens in a neoliberal age.

Ethics, Technologies, and Neoliberalism

I understand ethics as the thoughtful and deliberate exercise of freedom through the practices of everyday life. This understanding is informed by Michel Foucault, who describes the role of ethics for male members of the upper echelons of ancient Greece. For these Greeks, the exercise of ethics linked up with governing the self and conducting one's conduct, in order to live a beautiful life. This differs from morality, which I understand as the stated or unstated system of values that undergirds an ethics.

Placed in a broader context, Pollan's work can be viewed as a "cultural technology," understood in terms of the concept put forth by Michel Foucault and elaborated by scholars including Tony Bennett and Laurie Ouellette. For Bennett, cultural technologies function to "organize a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry" (Bennett 63). Through engagement with such technologies (Bennett is interested in the exhibitionary complex in particular), individuals come to know themselves, and thus regulate their own behavior so the state or other governing bodies do not have to.

As a cultural technology, or a set of tools and techniques that individuals can take up to work on their conduct to become more ethical selves, Pollan's work becomes part of what Laurie Ouellette calls a "citizen training process." She understands this process in relation to Foucault's concept of governmentality, or "the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Foucault, Ethics 41). Ouellette points out that governmentality can be understood as the ways in which individuals are called upon to self-regulate in line with broader norms and governmental aims. For her,

“Governmentality refers to efforts to shape, guide, and reform the conduct of others—and the way that we regulate ourselves according to such norms—in order to accommodate certain ‘principles and goals’ that often intersect with democratic ideals” (Ouellette, Viewers 107-108).

Foucauldian scholars have pointed out the ways in which present-day technologies of citizenship link up with particularly neoliberal aims and objectives. I understand neoliberalism as the turn toward “Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” that began in the 1970s and was aggressively advanced by the policies of Reagan administration (Harvey 3) and continues today with the increasing substitution of public-private partnerships for public services and a State-provided safety net. Neoliberalism entails a state apparatus whose primary role is to ensure the “proper functioning of markets” (Harvey 2). In this context, as Ouellette points out, technologies of neoliberal citizenship “construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility” (Ouellette, Reality TV 232). Ouellette goes on to point out that such technologies aim to train individuals “to function without state assistance or supervision as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals” (Ouellette, Reality TV 232). Present-day technologies of citizenship often call upon individuals to take responsibility for themselves so the State or other governing body will not have to. According to Ouellette, these technologies are aimed at “free choice” and “lifestyle maximization” in a way that imagines individuals like

> the choice-making "customer" valorized by neoliberal economics. Both presume "free will," which means that those individuals who fail to thrive under neoliberal conditions can be readily cast as the "author of their own misfortunes." (Ouellette referring to Rose 233)

Pollan's work departs from neoliberalism on several counts. In offering his work as a technology of ethical eating, Pollan puts forth a critique of neoliberalism—specifically its deleterious health and environmental effects. This critique becomes part of the body of knowledge necessary for reflecting appropriately on one's food choices. Further, as an ethical technology, Pollan's work differs from neoliberal technologies of citizenship not aimed at living a beautiful life. As an ethical technology, on the other hand, Pollan's work is not centrally concerned with producing risk-averse, self-maximizing citizens who will not be an economic burden to the State. Rather, Pollan speaks to individuals who are ostensibly already thriving under neoliberalism. Despite a mode of address that claims to address *all* Americans, Pollan speaks only to those for whom freedom can be understood in relation to the reflective, careful, laborious, and personally costly exercise of freedom.

Yet Pollan's mode of instruction also links back up with neoliberalism. As a technology of citizenship, Pollan's program calls upon individuals who are capable of living ethically precisely because they are conceived of first and foremost as *choosing* individuals: "omnivores." For him, the freedom to choose in a marketplace of food possibilities both enables and requires the exercise of ethics. This ethical form of neoliberal citizenship must be analyzed in its specificity in order to make sense of the

possibilities and limitations it presents to an effective environmental and food justice politics.

Pollan's Work as a Technology of Citizenship

Pollan's food recommendations, as Guthman and Lavin argue, are overwhelmingly focused on the consumer and offer consumer choice as a mode of politics. Readers are addressed as freely-choosing in a marketplace of food options. Individuals get to vote three times a day, "with our forks" (Pollan, Eat). Though correct in pointing out that Pollan's work lacks a call for collective action or worker's rights and similarly lacks sustained attention to social justice and the food system, neither Lavin nor Guthman seriously considers the functioning of this work as it offers readers tools and techniques for making everyday decisions. Neither investigates what, in particular, is gained or lost when the mundane tasks surrounding food are imbued with ethical import. Neoliberal conceptions that equate freedom with individual choice do not constitute an anti-politics, but rather a mode of politics that, like any other, shuts down possibilities as it opens up others. As Nikolas Rose notes,

> The fact that freedom is technical, infused with relations of power, entails specific modes of subjectification and is necessarily a thing of this world, inescapably sullied by the marks of the mundane, does not make freedom a sham or liberty an illusion; rather it opens up the possibility of freedom as neither a state of being nor a constitutional form but a politics of life. (Rose, POF 94)

My concern, thus, is not to argue that Pollan's work (as a case study for ethical eating instructional literature) suggests a false form of citizenship. Rather, I aim to take seriously this mode of engagement and to tease out the specific possibilities and limitations it presents. I am interested in the particular stakes that emerge when work on (and scrutiny of) quotidian food practices are offered as the means to living an ethical life.

Michael Pollan's food writing aims to give individuals the tools to work on themselves to become more ethical eaters in line with broader ideals that shift over time.[2] The particular pedagogy of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is one of demonstration. Rather than offering explicit tips and techniques for eating ethically, Pollan describes his own *becoming-ethical*. In this book, becoming ethical is centrally concerned with ways of taking pleasure, ways of thinking, and particular ways of knowing. He argues, for example, that *The Omnivore's Dilemma* "in the end… is a book about the pleasures of eating, the kinds of pleasures that are only deepened by knowing" (Pollan, TOD). The book gives readers the knowledge to distinguish "authentic" pleasures from "inauthentic" ones. A McDonald's hamburger, for example, can only be enjoyed if eaters are in a state of "perfect ignorance" (Pollan, TOD 410)—ignorance of the conditions of production and their animal welfare and ecological effects and, crucially, ignorance of the ways in which production violates what Pollan sees as nature, or "ecological logic." On the other hand, the pleasures offered by a meal hunted, foraged, grown, and prepared entirely by oneself, and eaten in the company of loved ones, are the pleasures of "perfect knowledge"

[2] The broader aims and objectives with which Pollan's work links up change between 2006 and 2010. Thus, while the "democratic ideals" to which Ouellette refers are not irrelevant here, I am reluctant to offer generalizations about this connection for reasons that will become apparent later in this chapter.

(Pollan, TOD 410). Although Pollan does not recommend living an ethical life through emulation of his preparation of the latter meal, he does offer this spectrum of pleasures as way for readers to assess the authenticity of their own eating pleasures. The pleasure—synonymous with ethics—depends on knowing the "true cost" of a meal, "the precise sacrifice of time and energy and life it had entailed" (Pollan, TOD 409). If you make these sacrifices yourself, you can know them personally. On the other hand, readers can also know them vicariously through Pollan. They can "get back in touch" with the real—authentic pleasures that have been obscured by the ideology of nutritionism and by our "national eating disorder." To close the book, Pollan asks readers to "imagine for a moment if we once again knew, strictly as matter of course, these few unremarkable things: What it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in true accounting, it really cost" (Pollan, TOD 411). Insofar as Pollan's book functions to answer these questions, it gives eaters the tools to reflect upon their food practices, assess the authenticity of their food-pleasures, as the means to being ethical eaters. In this book, it is explicitly reflection *per se* that becomes the means to living an ethical life.

Yet this reflection is necessary only insofar as humans are omnivorous creatures. The title of the book itself, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, refers to a problem faced only by freely choosing individuals. For Pollan, omnivory is an ontological truth: the function of being a freely choosing individual is a characteristic of being human, not a contingent upon access or ones position with respect to global hierarchies and power structures.

Because humans have been endowed with omnivory, they must reflect upon their food choices in order to conduct themselves ethically.

The close attention to one's own individual food practices—the careful and reflective exercise of freedom—as a means to living an ethical life bears remarkable resemblance to Foucault's description of the role of ethics for the ancient Greeks. For the Greeks, a "whole art of living" developed around ways of caring for and knowing oneself. Proper care of oneself was the purview and prerogative of the free individual, the ethical exercise of one's freedom. For Foucault, in the "Greco-Roman world, care of the self was the mode in which individual freedom—or civic liberty, up to a point—was reflected as an ethics" (Foucault, EF 28). Ethics can only be practiced through the exercise of freedom. "A slave" Foucault notes "has no ethics" (Foucault, EF 30), for "ethics is itself the 'practice of freedom'" (Foucault, EF 28). Practicing this care of the self required knowing oneself, scrutinizing and working constantly on oneself through the mastery of particular rules and techniques, to conduct oneself in ways that ensured the wellbeing of others through the exercise of freedom.[3]

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[3] Pollan's program can be understood as ethical in this sense especially because readers are addressed as free-er than others. While some people lack the means to put this ethics into practice—and indeed *because* other lack the means to put these ethics into practice—the free reader must take responsibility for this freedom. Furthermore, insofar as living an well-thought and deliberate life through ethical food practices is a way of demonstrating that one *cares*, that one recognizes one's freedom and exercises it carefully so as not to abuse it—abuse it by unjustly dominating others (or in this case, unjustly availing oneself of artificially cheap foods).

"The Greeks problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem. But ethical in the sense in which the Greeks understood it: *ethos* was a way of being and of behavior. It was a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others" Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003).

To understand *The Omnivore's Dilemma* as a technology in this sense requires readers to exercise a great deal of creativity to fold these ways of thinking into the practices of daily life. Nevertheless, Pollan calls upon his readers, centrally addressed as freely choosing individuals, to exercise this freedom responsibly. The responsible exercise of this freedom requires particular ways of thinking and particular knowledge. This early approach might be called exploratory, rather than overtly didactic. Pollan positions himself as discovering *with* his readers, rather than imparting expert and predigested knowledge *to* them. For example, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan explores what he calls "industrial organics," agricultural operations that qualify to bear the USDA "organic" seal, but, because of their size, farming practices, and distribution strategies, may not, in fact be better for the environment or animals than conventional farms. In so doing, Pollan introduces commune-organic-grower-turned-General Mills-executive, Gene Kahn. He uses Kahn's voice—rather than his own—to explain the rationale for industrial organics. In response to Kahn's apologia, Pollan address the

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"Extended work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an *ethos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary" (p. 29) Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003).

"Slavery is the great risk that Greek freedom resists, there is also another danger that initially appears to be the opposite of slavery: the abuse of power…tyrant…rich and powerful man who uses his wealth and power to abuse others… [as per Greek philosophers] such a man is the slave of his appetites. And a good ruler is precisely the who exercises his power as it ought to be exercised, that is, simultaneously exercising power over himself. And it is power over oneself that thus regulate one's power over others" (p. 31) Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003)..

"The problem …to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ethos*, the practices of the self, that will allow us to play these game of power with as little domination as possible" (p. 40) Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003).

reader, asking, "Is there anything wrong with this picture? I'm not sure…" (Pollan, TOD 159). Thus, Pollan is explicit about his non-expert status. Before he makes an assessment of industrial organics, he investigates for himself, taking us along with him. He describes the ways in which he negotiated moral-ethical dilemmas, without making specific recommendations about how readers ought to behave should they find themselves in similar situations.

However, if Pollan aimed to offer readers tips and techniques for the ethical exercise of their food-freedom—or the tools for readers to self-shape as ethical eaters—*The Omnivore's Dilemma* might seem insufficient. As though coming to this conclusion himself (not to discount the political economic realities of books as commodities and Pollan's contractual relationship with Penguin Press), *In Defense of Food* begins with a concise and direct instruction: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" (Pollan, IDOF 1). The book aims to give readers the tools to negotiate what Pollan argues are the contradictory and confusing messages individuals constantly receive from "nutrition science on the one hand and from the food industry on the other" (Pollan, IDOF 7). The tips in the book are "a couple dozen personal rules of eating that are conducive not only to better health but also to greater pleasure in eating" (Pollan, IDOF 12). In this book, Pollan defends not only food, but his unique qualification to the dissemination of expert advice therein: "So on whose authority do I purport to speak? I speak mainly on the authority of tradition and common sense" (Pollan, IDOF 13). Yet a great part of the book is not these "personal rules" but a cultural history of nutrition science and its relationship

with the USDA. This history is aimed at giving readers tools with which to think through their food choices.

The book is an effort to help readers break through the ideology of "nutritionism" (a reductive way of understanding food in terms of its component nutrients). It calls upon readers to change their way of thinking. Particularly, Pollan argues "By gaining a firmer grasp on the nature of the Western diet—trying to understand it not only physiologically, but also historically and ecologically—we can begin to develop a different way of thinking about food…" (Pollan, IDOF 11-12). Unlike *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, in this book, ways of changing "our thinking" are directly articulated to ways of changing our practices. He offers "strategies for escaping the Western diet" (Pollan, IDOF 14). He wants readers to reflect on the interconnections: "Food consists not just in piles of chemicals; it also comprises a set of social and ecological relationships, reaching back to the land and outward to other people" (Pollan, IDOF 144).

Although *In Defense of Food* offers readers a set of explicit instructions, these instructions are aimed less at rigid practices and more at encouraging readers to devote more time, effort, resources and thought to their food practices. For example, in introducing the list of food "policies," Pollan acknowledges "Many of the policies will also strike you as involving more work—and in fact they do… In order to eat well we need to invest more time, effort, and resources in providing for our sustenance, to dust off a word, than most of us do today" (Pollan, IDOF 145). Pollan thus recommends devoting more work, more effort, more "resources" (presumably financial ones) and more time—in addition to more thought—as a way to have an ethical relationship with food. The

ethics of living that Pollan recommends is less concerned with the specific consequences of this extra expenditure, than the expenditure itself. Rules like “SHOP THE PERIPHERIES OF THE SUPER MARKET AND STAY OUT OF THE MIDDLE”, “GET OUT OF THE SUPERMARKET WHENEVER POSSIBLE” (Pollan, IDOF 157), and “COOK AND, IF YOU CAN, PLANT A GARDEN” (197)) encourage shoppers to avoid processed and packaged foods, and thus expend more time and effort in the practice of cooking and eating. All of the policies are intended to improve as Pollan argues, “our” health, “our” eating pleasure, and, more loosely, the health of the environment.

Thus, while in *In Defense of Food* Pollan is explicit about the broad practices readers ought to take up, the book remains reflective of Foucault’s notion of ethics outlined above. Pollan is interested not simply in the practices he recommends, but in the time, thought and resources readers devote to these practices. Readers are called upon to work on themselves to live healthier, happier food-lives. Like technologies of everyday citizenship that have been described by Sam Binkley, Pollan’s books call upon individuals to both to act and to step back from action, “to conduct oneself, but also to conduct that conduct…to make oneself more efficient, more productive, cleaner, more communicative, loving, civil, or giving… the unthought and thus unfree act is, in every case, transformed into the reflexive act—the act thought about and justified by thought” (Binkley 348).

Unlike *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*, *Food Rules* seems to be unconcerned with living a kind of beautiful food life. Rather, it is a template that

explicitly names the do's and don'ts of "how to eat." But although Pollan argues that these do's and don'ts are morally, politically, and environmentally significant, he is careful to emphasize the flexibility of his program. Do what works for you, he seems to say: "While I call them rules, I think of them less as hard-and-fast laws than as personal policies. Policies are useful tools. Instead of prescribing highly specific behaviors, they supply us with broad guidelines that should make everyday decision making easier and swifter" (Pollan, FR xix). He goes on to explain that the rules are "little algorithms designed to simplify your eating life. Adopt whichever ones stick and work for you" (Pollan, FR xx). He finishes up the introduction by recommending that, if nothing else, readers should chose at least one rule to follow from each of the three sections: "What to eat?: Eat Food"; "How should I eat?: Mostly plants"; and "How should I eat?: Not too much."

Although the stakes of making or not making ethically correct food choices may seem high, the flexibility of the program makes clear that the aim of putting it into practice is less to make choices that have particular political effects and more to live a well thought-out, deliberate food life. The tools in the book are aimed at enabling this thinking and deliberateness.

Technologies of Eating and Neoliberalism

The popularity of Pollan's work cannot be completely attributed to the appeal of living a beautiful food life. The success of Pollan's books occurs in the context of a broader problematization of food. His program is only one of the many technologies of

eating that are today being offered in multiple public and private sites as a solution to present-day food problems. By examining the ways in which Pollan's ethical eating program converges with and diverges from eating technologies not aimed at living a beautiful life, the particularities of ethical citizenship—as a distinct form within neoliberalism—become clearer.

Pollan is one of a number of "expert" voices telling us that the way America eats is an especially urgent problem. Most of these worries are articulated to health—and, more specifically, health care costs: the "obesity epidemic," food safety, food labels, school lunches, nutrition literacy. Supermarket aisles appear on the news as increasingly perilous. Concern over the unreliability of food labeling is a useful case in point. For example, as reported in *The New York Times* on June 3, 2010, The Kellogg Company had recently been under investigation for what the FTC called "dubious health claims" made about several breakfast cereals. In the settlement concerning the investigation, the company "agreed to stop making claims about benefits to 'cognitive health, process or function provided by any cereal or any morning food or snack food' unless the claims were true and substantiated" (Chan). The FDA similarly intervened when the General Mills company began printing on cereal boxes that, by eating Cheerios, individuals could "lower your cholesterol by 4% in six weeks" in May of 2009 (Melago). Another labeling strategy gone awry was the "Smart Choices" check mark that began appearing on packaged foods in the summer of 2009. The label was designed by and paid for by large companies within the food industry, such as Tyson Foods, ConAgra Foods, PepsiCo, Kraft, Unilever and General Mills (McKinney). In defense of the campaign, voices

within these companies pointed to multiple studies indicating that consumers have difficulty understanding the nutrition information printed on packaged foods and therefore needed a simpler way to make “healthier diet decisions” (General Mills quoted in McKinney). The label, however, came under fire from the FDA when it began appearing on Froot Loops and other sugary cereals. The FDA’s “Dear Industry” letter was covered in *The New York Times*, and the “Smart Choices” label was, in the words of Minneapolis *Star Tribune* reporter Matt McKinney, “ridiculed” on ABC News (McKinney).

Individual labeling controversies are largely settled by typically neoliberal “voluntary” revision of the labels in question by the specific companies involved—not revision of regulation or State intervention. Corporations are allowed to regulate themselves while consumers, if they are to avoid the risks posed by the food system, must take it upon themselves to self-educate about the hazards, read labels, etc. Concern over labeling is inextricable from the worry that consumers are unable or ill equipped (or perhaps unwilling) to make what are viewed as healthful choices. Labeling is a problem, first, because the public is assumed to lack the skills to avoid being misled, and second, because it is understood as natural that individuals will by necessity confront the choice between healthful and unhealthful, safe and unsafe food, in their grocery stores. The “labeling problem” is not defined as the State’s failure to regulate corporate greed or evidence that the present-day food system ought to be reimagined. Thus, the solution to this problem likewise does not lie with the State or the industrial food system. Rather, the more broadly imagined solutions are technologies of citizenship (like better labels)

aimed at building consumer's nutrition knowledge and enabling the selection of more healthful foods among myriad unhealthful ones.

A more developed such "solution" is Michele Obama's *Let's Move!* campaign, described as "America's Move to Raise a Healthier Generation of Kids"; it particularly aims to "give parents the support they need, provide healthier food in schools, help our kids to be more physically active, and make healthy, affordable food available in every part of our country." (Let's Move! Home). The website recommends thinking "about how you get from one place to the next…choose to bike or walk with co-workers instead of drive … to play with your friends in the park instead of turning on the computer after school … to do sit ups while watching TV (if you must watch TV)…or to plant a garden with your neighbors instead of watching the grass grow, and eating those vegetables for lunch and dinner each day" (Let's Move! Blog). The *Let's Move!* blog includes words from celebrity TV chef, Rachael Ray, described as a "child health advocate," as well as postings from Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack who, on June 16, 2010, listed the steps the campaign calls upon individuals to take:

> The first is to reduce overweight and obesity by reducing overall calorie intake and increasing physical activity. The [2010 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee] said that the obesity epidemic is the single greatest threat to public health in this century.
>
> The second step is to eat more vegetables, cooked dry beans and peas, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and seeds. In addition, eat more seafood and fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products, and moderate amounts of lean meats, poultry, and eggs.

The third step is to cut out most added sugars and solid fats. Foods with added sugars and solid fats have unneeded calories and few, if any, nutrients. Also, to reduce sodium and eat fewer refined grains, especially desserts.

The final step is to "Meet the *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*." This means to get up and move more—lots more! It is important for overall health and it helps burn calories to keep weight in balance" (Let's Move! Blog).

The *Let's Move!* campaign, and particularly its website, can be understood as the kind of technology of citizenship that Ouellette describes. It calls upon individuals to take responsibility for their own health (and that of their children) so that the health care system, for example, will not have to. Significantly Ouellette is interested in technologies of citizenship promulgated in the private sector, while this is a public sector initiative (and is connected with policy changes in, for example, public schools and might offer hope for regulatory transformation). Yet as Wendy Brown points out, "The state is not without a project in the making of the neoliberal subject. It attempts to construct prudent subjects through policies that organize such prudence…" (Brown 43) or in this case, technologies that call upon citizens to exercise particular forms of prudence. "The state is one of many sites framing the calculations leading to social behaviors that keep costs low and productivity high" (Brown 43). In this publicly-funded *Let's Move!* initiative, citizens are called upon to work on themselves to become healthier and therefore less costly and more productive citizens. Just as one might put into practice the techniques of citizenship that originate in the private sector, individuals (addressed as

rational, calculating actors) can take up the tips offered in the *Let's Move!* campaign to empower themselves to successfully negotiate a food landscape fraught with perils. They can gain the tools to avoid the risks to personal health (for example, obesity) that are assumed to inhere naturally in the food system. If individuals fail to avoid these risks, however, it is they themselves who are at fault, not, for example, the state, not the regulatory apparatus, not the market, not the industrial food system. As Brown points out, neoliberal governmentality "convenes a 'free' subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices" (Brown 43)

To say that the technologies offered by the *Let's Move!* campaign are exemplary of particularly neoliberal ones is not to say that the dispersion of governmental functions across the population aimed at "good" nutrition is new. For example, during the First and Second World Wars, worries about the health and eating habits of those the home front were addressed through Victory Garden projects. Victory Garden publicity materials—published by state and non-state actors—called upon citizens to produce vegetables for themselves and their families to keep them healthy in the interest of a broader idea of national health (Zimmerman).

Thus, although Victory Gardens were aimed at improving the physical and psychological health of individuals, the broader objectives of the Victory Garden projects were explicitly linked to particular ideas of the nation and patriotic duty. The *Let's Move!* campaign, on the other hand, calls upon individuals to care for themselves in the interest of their own wellbeing, and—less explicitly—in the interest health care savings,

often articulated as tax-dollar savings that will benefit the individual. Following the tips proffered is rational, rather than attached to a broader morality or ethics (like patriotism, for example). The individualizing and cost saving aims of the *Let's Move!* campaign are a comfortable fit with neoliberalism which, as Wendy Brown explains, "produces rational actors and imposes a market rationale for decision making in all spheres" (Brown 40); it "equates moral responsibility with rational action; it erases the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences" (Brown 42).

The *Let's Move!* website is indicative both of worries about the riskiness of food today and of worries about the population's ability to make "good" food choices. As a technology of citizenship, it calls upon individuals to take corrective action on themselves and their practices. Though the notion that there are more or greater food-related risks today than in generations previous may or may not be true, there is significant evidence that some food risks are peculiar to the present. In addition to the labeling controversies noted above, global capitalism had arguably led to things like the 2008 melamine contamination scare for products imported from China, which led to the recall of products containing nondairy creamer (Barboza), and an FDA ban on all dairy products imported from China (Harris and Martin, U.S. Blocks Products With Milk From China; [National Desk]). Additionally, the FDA has warned of the link between high use of antibiotics in industrial animal-raising operations and increased risk of dangerous bacteria entering the food system (Harris, Antibiotics). Further, widespread distribution of produce from centralized wholesalers has spread a single outbreak of E. Coli

throughout markets in several states (Neuman). The jury is still out on the human health effects of consuming genetically modified crops, but avoidance of such crops—let alone determining whether a product contains them—in grocery products is nearly impossible.

There are certainly ways in which Pollan's problematization of food and eating link up with neoliberalism and neoliberal technologies of citizenship. For example, Pollan cites the riskiness of the food system among his rationales for offering his program. He specifically points to obesity, food safety, and the supposed widespread "confusion and anxiety" (Pollan, IDOF 6) that consumers feel when confronted with the plethora of food choices in the present. His program, he argues, is especially helpful in the present because "Every trip to the supermarket these days requires us to navigate what has become a truly treacherous food landscape" (Pollan, The Food Issue: Rules to Eat By). Pollan's tips aim to help individuals take responsibility for the risks to personal health they encounter by necessity when they venture into the supermarket. Pollan's problematization thus resonates with popular worries that the food system is itself dangerous and the belief that it is the job of individual consumers to navigate these dangers. It also resonates both with broader worries (on the part of the state, health professionals and institutions, for example) that the public is making "bad" nutritional choices and with anxieties about the public's supposed nutritional illiteracy.

In these ways, Pollan's program is like other neoliberal technologies. Yet the fact that Pollan offers advice aimed at helping individuals navigate this "treacherous food landscape" does not necessarily indicate that his program assumes individuals *ought* to bear responsibility for said negotiation, nor does it indicate that the dangers of the food

system are somehow inevitable. Rather his work aims to empower individuals with information that they have a "right to know," as he states in *Food Inc.* (2008). Indeed, quite often, Pollan emerges as a relative critic of neoliberalism. For example, instead of suggesting that the riskiness of the food system is a necessary reality, for Pollan this riskiness becomes a point of departure to level a critique of industry and, more particularly, of industry's relationship with nutrition experts:

> Deciding what to eat, indeed deciding what qualifies as food, is not easy in such an environment. When Froot Loops can earn a Smart Choices check mark, a new industry-wide label that indicates a product's supposed healthfulness, we know we can't rely on the marketers, with their dubious health claims, or for that matter on the academic nutritionists who collaborate on such labeling schemes. (Pollan, The Food Issue: Rules to Eat By)

Not only does he explicitly implicate industry, Pollan also argues that "our current predicament" is linked to a failure of government regulation. For example, on a 2009 episode of *The Charlie Rose Show* that brought several "expert" voices together to discuss "a number of food safety issues," including E. Coli and contamination, Pollan points out:

> we have… a Department of Agriculture, that has a conflicted role. It exists to promote American agriculture, to sell as much American beef as possible. Yet it also has the contradictory job of regulating that beef supply. So there's a fundamental conflict of interest in the Department of Agriculture that I think makes it very difficult for them to regulate meat. (Pollan, Fauci and McNeil).

Thus, for Pollan, the food problem is not simply one of individual failure to make "good" food choices. It is the deceit of industry and a failure of regulation. This is a moral critique of industry and corruption. The conflict of interest results in a violation of the consumer's right to know. In a sense, if Pollan is centrally concerned with consumers' right to know, the books themselves can be seen as an activist project giving consumers knowledge they are being denied by the powers that be. Insofar as the regulatory apparatus is failing consumers right now, tools that help individuals fend for themselves in the present are arguably useful things.

Yet while Pollan has appeared in multiple media sites weighing in on these issues as well as the intersection of food safety, health and global capitalism (for example, farm and health policy, the state's relationship with industry, and regulation) his structural critique is peripheral to the food ethics he offers in his books. Though not absent from his books, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *In Defense of Food*, and *Food Rules*, such issues do not figure as the central problematic. Instead structural concerns are part of a broad constellation of knowledge that gives meaning to the ethical lifestyle Pollan recommends. On the contrary, the central problematic is "our health and happiness as eaters." Happiness, to be sure, is contingent upon *knowing* about the broader structures that one engages in when one "eats industrially," yet it is individual happiness that Pollan's books, as technologies of ethical eating, aim to enable.

Conclusion

Given these characteristics, I argue that Pollan's writing is a technology of a particularly *ethical* form of neoliberal citizenship. Unlike the technologies of citizenship analyzed by Ouellette and others, as an ethical technology, Pollan's work does not target individuals who are failing to thrive under neoliberalism. Rather, he speaks to readers who already have the resources, skills and capacities to be successful neoliberal citizens. Only readers so endowed can realize themselves as ethical. Thus, the ethics of living that Pollan champions is not aimed at offering individuals the tools to thrive under neoliberalism or calling on them to take responsibility for their personal health and wellbeing so the state does not have to (unlike, for example, the *Let's Move!* campaign).[4] Rather, Pollan's program calls upon individuals (of some means) to take responsibility for the broader failures of capitalism. For example, in a 2009 segment on ABC's *Nightline*, Pollan says: "As we get in touch with the cost of growing food this way [that is, the industrial way], the cost to the public health, the cost to the treasury because of all the subsidies, the cost to the environment, I think people will realize: well, maybe we should spend a little bit more money on food" (Pollan, Food Fight).

At stake in making ethically correct choices about one's food-life is not simply personal health, satisfaction, happiness, risk-avoidance, etc. If individuals choose to practice ethically correct food consumption (and production), the argument goes, they will ameliorate the deleterious externalities of the industrial food system. If, on the other hand, they opt not to make the ethical choice, they perpetuate these externalities. These

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[4] Although as Pollan increasingly offers his program as a way for individuals to take responsibility for the effects of the industrial food system on the health care system, specifically obesity, his work can be understood as more like other technologies of neoliberal citizenship that Ouellette analyzes.

stakes are larger than the individual, yet are intimately connected to the mundane details of everyday life.

Although Pollan does not imagine his readers as personally risk-averse, he does address them as economically rational. For example, among the reasons Pollan offers to persuade readers to take up his recommendations is the "hidden costs" of the industrial food system. He argues that neoliberal "economic" or "capitalist logic" is not, in reality, economically rational. For him, the externalized health, environmental and animal welfare costs of the industrial food system ought to figure in consumers' economic calculus when making purchasing decision in the market. This is not put forth as a centrally moral argument, but one of a cost-benefit analysis.

In this sense, Pollan addresses individuals imagined as rational and calculating. However, he speaks to a listener/reader who is not imagined first and foremost as an individual motivated by risk aversion. Rather, this is a reader addressed as someone who *cares*—about the environment, about animal welfare, about fraud and conflict of interest. This reader cares not simply because it is economically rational to care about these things, but rather because of a broader morality in which certain practices can be judged to be right or wrong, just or unjust, etc. One might even argue that this is a public-minded morality aimed at addressing problems that have effects beyond being threats to individuals' ability to realize themselves as successful neoliberal citizens. Brown points out that the "model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options" (Brown 43). The citizen Pollan imagines differs from this ideal.

Though Pollan does not call for collective action, the moral dimension of his program articulate stakes beyond whether individual, rational actors do not become an economic burden to the State.

The morality within Pollan's program is distinct from neoliberalism's morality. For Brown, among the most troubling aspects of neoliberalism is that moral action must be assessed and justified by rational economic calculus. This means "When democratic principles of governance, civil codes, and even religious morality are submitted to economic calculation, when no value or good stands outside of this calculus, the sources of opposition to, and mere modulation of, capitalist rationality disappear" (Brown 45-46). If economic rationality is the only mode for the judgment of action, "Civil liberties are perfectly expendable… unlike property rights, they are largely irrelevant to *homo oeconomicus*" (Brown 48). Here, Brown is speaking specifically about the ways in which the G. W. Bush administration rhetoric offered the defense of "our way of life" as a justification for what she calls the "imperial adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq" (47). Yet this argument can be extended to include other things that might be worthy of protection regardless of the economic costs or benefits of such protection: human rights, animal welfare, and the environment. Protecting the environment for the environment's sake, human rights for their intrinsic value, animal welfare not because it is economically rational to do so, but because of a non-economic rationality, cannot be defended within such a logic.

This is not to say, however, that neoliberalism lacks a morality. For Brown, neoliberalism has a very specific morality,

> in [equating moral responsibility with rational action, neoliberalism] carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action—for example, lack of skills, education, and child care in a period of high unemployment and limited welfare benefits. Correspondingly, a 'mismanaged life,' the neoliberal appellation for failure to navigate impediments to prosperity, becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency. (Brown 42-43)

She goes on to observe

> Neoliberal subjects are controlled *through* their freedom—not simply, as thinkers from the Frankfurt School through Foucault have argued, because freedom within an order of domination can be an instrument of that domination, but because of neoliberalism's *moralization* of the consequences of this freedom (Brown 44).

While I am not here making an argument about the ways in which neoliberal subjects are controlled, Brown's observations about the functioning of morality within neoliberalism are helpful for my purposes. For Brown, neoliberalism is not amoral, but has a very specific moral system. Neoliberalism's morality assigns culpability to those who fail to thrive within its terms. In other words, if an individual is unhealthy, unhappy, unemployed, homeless, etc., it is his or her fault, irrespective of the constraints he or she faces. The absence or failure of structural support systems is not subject to moral inquiry.

My assertion that Pollan's program has a moral dimension that differs from this may itself be in need of defense. Indeed, from 2006 to 2010, Pollan's mode of address has undergone changes such that he now places enormous emphasis on personal health and health care costs and very little emphasis on questions of the environment or justice. For example, in *Food Rules*, Pollan suggests that readers "Eat well-grown food from healthy soil" (Pollan, FR 67). By this he means readers ought to seek out organic, sustainably grown foods from local sources. Yet in the paragraph in which Pollan expands on this "food rule," he registers interest in these things only insofar as they affect flavor and nutrition, not in terms of their environmental or human costs (Pollan, FR 67).

While Pollan might thus appear to speak increasingly to a calculating, rational and entrepreneurial reader, I suggest instead that this changing mode of address is an attempt to manage the uneasy fit of Pollan's program with neoliberalism. Pollan's changing mode of address, his increasing didacticism, betrays an anxiety about readers' ability to exercise this ethics correctly, a worry about how readers might or might not fold his ethics into everyday life. I suggest that Pollan's recommendations become increasingly prescriptive precisely because his program has a morality that exceeds the economic rationality seeming to undergird it. Perhaps the neoliberal mode of address that speaks to readers as calculating, rational and risk-averse is insufficient to the project that Pollan envisions. Perhaps this is why Pollan must continually hone and reassert the program and its rationales, why he reiterates the very same set of rules and reasons in three separate volumes (plus as a *Young Readers Edition* of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*), in countless blog posts and columns, on NPR and on various TV programs. Perhaps this is

why he repeatedly airs the worry that readers are still not getting it right, as he does in the introduction to *Food Rules*. Here, Pollan addresses readers who, despite reading his first two books, "*still* don't know what we should be eating" (Pollan, FR x, emphasis in original).

Of course, the reiteration could be chalked up to the fact that Pollan's books are themselves commodities and Pollan himself functions as an increasingly profitable brand. However, a political-economic explanation, I think, falls short of fully grasping the significance of this trend. It seems likely that Pollan's shifting mode of address, the increasingly prescriptive character of his recommendations, betrays an anxiety about readers' ability (or willingness) to exercise these ethics "correctly." In other words, if these ethics are exercised by individuals acting solely in their capacity as "entrepreneurial"—if these are individuals who make food choices based on an assessment of personal costs and benefits—perhaps the "movement" that Pollan imagines cannot be realized. On the other hand, perhaps the "movement" might be similarly difficult to realize if these ethics were exercised by individuals whose actions are informed or governed by a moral framework *different* from Pollan's. A deliberate disavowal of the morality of the program is the process by which the program is tailored to speak to an imaginary ideal neoliberal citizen. Pollan assumes that this reader encounters the work in absence of an *a priori* moral compass. This is a reader who is at once rational and a moral/ethical blank slate. Conceiving of the reader thus also functions to disavow the raced, classed, and gendered dimensions of the program, which I will address in detail in the next chapter. In imagining his readers as calculating

neoliberal individuals, Pollan assumes they will take up his tips if he can prove that it is economically rational to do so. Yet, on some level, Pollan seems aware of the error of this assumption. Otherwise, would he feel compelled to continually defend, among other things, the expense of his program? In a statement Pollan reiterates—almost verbatim—in TV and radio interviews as well as in print media, Pollan reasons that

> I can buy a pound of rolled oats for 89 cents organic in my market. So the way to make money is to sell say something like Cheerios. Take those rolled oats, give them a little shape, give them a brand. Suddenly, you're charging 4 bucks for even less than a pound of rolled oats… You make a Honey Nut Cheerios cereal bar with a little layer of synthetic milk, you've seen these in the store. This is the latest way to sell cereal. That's even better. Then you're charging 10 or 15 dollars for a little thing of oats." (Pollan, Nightline).

For him, if consumers understood the falseness of the value added in the process that turns oats into boxed cereal, if they had the tools to see the economic irrationality of this, then they, like Pollan, would buy the rolled oats. For Pollan, the only difference between the oats and the processed cereal is, as he noted in another interview, added "excitement and novelty" (Roychoudhuri). Although the economic is offered as a rationale for making this choice, it is difficult to swallow the notion that Pollan buys the rolled oats because it is the economically rational thing to do. There is a moral dimension to these day-to-day decisions. There are possibilities in the thoughtfulness of living an ethical life. It links up with simple living, a hopefulness about the possibilities of living out one's political and moral commitments through lifestyle, that appears to be a direct

descendent of the ethical eating of the 60s and 70s, articulated most famously by Frances Moore Lappé in *Diet For a Small Planet*.

The morality of Pollan's program, of course, is not neutral. Further, veiling it beneath a the mantle of "rational choice-making" can obscure the specificities of this morality. In the following chapter, for example, I argue that the system of values that undergirds Pollan's ethical eating program has a very particular class character. In chapter three, I argue that this morality produces, among other things, gendered labor obligations. Nevertheless, it remains significant that Pollan's morality is a departure from that of neoliberalism. He places value on living a kind of beautiful and caring food life. Additionally, Pollan's critique of the industrial food system is, to an extent, a critique of neoliberal capitalism. By dismissing Pollan's program on the grounds that it is neoliberal, his critics fail to take seriously the departures of the program from other technologies of neoliberal citizenship. Similarly, by dismissing Pollan's program on these grounds, critics neglect to analyze the specificities of the ways in which Pollan's program *is* neoliberal. The manner in which Pollan's program both converges with and departs from neoliberalism suggests a specific form of ethical neoliberal citizenship. This mode of citizenship produces both possibilities for and limitations to effecting changes in a food system that is both unjust and unsustainable.

CHAPTER 2:

Michael Pollan and Professional Middle Class Lifestyle

Introduction

On January 21, 2010, Oprah Winfrey introduced her guest, Michael Pollan, as a "best selling food expert." She was doing a spot called "Food 101," which featured Pollan's just-published, pocket-sized eating manual, *Food Rules.* The episode highlighted a few of the "rules" in Pollan's book, for example, rules 1 and 2, "Eat *food*" and "Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food," respectively. Rules 7, 13, and 39, were also cited: "Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce"; "Eat only foods that will eventually rot"; and "Eat all the junk food you want as long as you cook it yourself." These rules were offered as ways of "voting with your fork" which, for Pollan is an exciting and empowering possibility: "if you vote for food that has been sustainably grown, humanely grown—whatever your values are, whatever values you want to support, but-but with consciousness—you will change the food system" (Pollan, Food 101). Much of the episode hinged on importance of "real food," but also addressed the high cost and complexity of shopping for this kind of food. Pollan explained that eating "real food," could be "boiled… down to seven words: eat food, mostly plants, not too much" and consists in meals cooked from whole ingredients. Preferably, "real food" involves local and/or organic ingredients procured

from the farmers market. It's even better if the "real food" is cooked from ingredients grown in one's very own vegetable garden.

The fact that Pollan is a "best-selling" author is incontrovertible. In addition to *Food Rules,* many of Pollan's previous books—*The Botany of Desire* (2001), *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), and *In Defense of Food* (2008)—spent considerable time on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In December of 2010, the latter two were at 27 and 35 respectively in the "Paperback Non-fiction" category, and Food Rules remained at number 10 in "Advice and Misc." (Best Sellers).

Pollan's status as a "food expert," however, is a bit more complex. Pollan indeed turns up in a broad range of media sites *as* an expert. For example, he has appeared variously explaining the industrial food system and/or how to make ethical food choices in documentaries such as: *King Corn* (2007) on the omnipresence of corn in the food system; *Food Fight* (2008) on the movement to opt out of the industrial food system in California that began in the late 60s; *Killer at Large* (2008) on the "obesity epidemic"; *The Vanishing of the Bees* (2009); *PolyCultures: Food Where We Live* (2009); the above-mentioned *Food Inc.* (2008), an exposé of corporate agriculture; and *Eat at Bill's: Life at the Monterey Market* (2009). In 2009, Pollan appeared on PBS's *Charlie Rose Show* as one of several "expert" voices weighing in on "a number of food safety issues," including E. Coli and contamination (Pollan, Fauci and McNeil).

It is important to note, however, that Pollan, a journalist and Knight professor of Journalism at UC Berkeley, arrived at his present status of "food expert" thanks to the incredible popularity of his prior food books: the *Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of*

Food. Pollan was already positioned to be successful in publishing these books thanks to the previous success of the *New York Times* essays from which these books grew. Prior to being a "food expert," Pollan identified as a nature writer, publishing several books and countless personal essays on gardening and US American culture.

The designation "food expert" implies that Pollan's message has a kind of mass relevance, if not appeal. Whereas in previous work, Pollan positioned himself as discovering with his readers rather than imparting expert advice to them, *Food Rules*, with its didactic mode of address and its prescriptive instructions purports to speak to a broad range of readers from a place of expertise.[5]

The release of *Food Rules* and Pollan's appearance on *Oprah* occurred in the context of increasing criticism of Pollan's writing on the grounds that it is elitist. Such critiques have come from reviewers (Norman) and bloggers (Adrienne; Lakin), as well as academics (Guthman; Lavin). It is not difficult to see that Pollan's recommendations for ethical eating involve considerable expense, not to mention leisure time for learning about food, for gardening (which also requires land) and for food preparation. Pollan himself has repeatedly responded to concerns about the expense of eating organic foods, both in interviews and in his blog on NYTimes.com.

In some ways, the *Oprah* spot and *Food Rules* can both be interpreted as attempts to speak to a broader audience than did his previous books and *New York Times* writing. *Food Rules* aims to offer readers explicit tools to negotiate a food-world "ethically," even in the face of a lack of knowledge or financial resources. Oprah's show does similar

[5] Interestingly, as the distance between Pollan's status and that of his readers has become greater and more apparent, his efforts to assert the (near) classlessness and mass accessibility of his program have redoubled.

work, but perhaps goes further than the book in its attempts to speak to a broad audience because, arguably, *Oprah*'s viewership does have a different composition from Pollan's typical audience: readers of the *New York Times* magazine, *Harpers*, *Mother Jones*, and other publications that target the liberal professional middle class.

Despite the shift in location—from the "quality press" to daytime broadcast television—and despite the shift in mode of address—from exploratory to expert advice—a recent look at the reviews on Amazon.com led me to wonder whether these changes had an effect on the composition of Pollan's audience. Although an unscientific measure of consumption patterns, it interested me that the individuals reviewing *Food Rules* on Amazon.com overwhelmingly identified as *fans* of his previous writing. Reviewers tended to register pleasure or displeasure at *Food Rules* based on whether it measured up to their expectations of Pollan. In the "favorite" positive review, for example, on December 29, 2009, Kristine Hale wrote, "This book is necessary..."

> It is amazing how complicated we have allowed our diets, and our understanding of our diets, to become. Even Pollan's most recent book In Defense of Food: An Eaters Manifesto - which seemed to be a pretty simple premise - ended up being a (wonderfully) complicated journey through our food system. So when I read that this book was coming out, I wondered if it was necessary given the wealth of information already covered. The answer is: yes, this book is necessary. (12/29/09)

Whereas, Krysta, the author of the "favorite" negative review, called *Food Rules* a "Waste of time and money." "I love Pollan's previous book" she says, "and I was looking

forward to this one. I got my hands on it as soon as I could, but sadly, I was disappointed… Why waste all that paper? … It's not worth $11. (1/4/10)

In *Food Rules* Pollan certainly seems to endeavor to speak to a broader audience than in prior work, and perhaps intends to respond to some of the charges of elitism. Yet, I had doubts about whether the book or Pollan's television appearances indeed represented a significant broadening of his audience.

Argument

In this chapter, I argue that the seeming broadness of Pollan's mode of address today—evidenced by the character of his recent writing and by his appearance on Winfrey's show—belies the extent to which his writing makes a set of assumptions that link up with the anxieties, longings and desires peculiar to the liberal professional middle class[6].

In Pollan's books, these assumptions are inextricable from the value system he offers to undergird his ethics. In chapter 1, I argued that Pollan's work could be understood as a technology, in the Foucauldian sense, of a particularly ethical form of

[6] Although I focus on class in this chapter, I do not aim to imply that the functioning of class in Pollan's work lacks raced and gendered dimensions. Pollan's work demonstrates a common paradox in instructional food media; it takes on a class-neutral mode of address at the same time that it promises class mobility. This paradox is inseparable from the race and gendered dimensions of such media. For instance, Amy Bentley points out that while Martha Stewart seems to address an audience not particularly raced, she nonetheless offers viewer a metaphorical and gendered whiteness, achievable through the uptake of tips in her media (that is, through labor): "While MS food is 'white,' it is a class-specific whiteness that transcends ethnicity and becomes accessible by cultivation rather than heritage. As such, MS food is based upon an invented artisan ethos only fully realized by those who have the luxury to perform the work, lending itself to elaborate conspicuous consumption" (Bentley 89-90). She goes on to argue, however, that this has a gendered complexity that also ought be taken seriously: "Yet many (women in particular) find the intricate world of MS food most gratifying for less decorous reasons. Instead of being solely about proving one's status, MS food infuses a sense of pleasure into the daily, often mundane activities of procuring and preparing food" (Bentley 90).

neoliberal citizenship. I suggested that the way in which Pollan purports to speak to an ideal neoliberal citizen—a rational, calculating, and risk-averse actor—hides the moral dimensions of his program. In other words, Pollan argues for the adoption of his recommendations for ethical eating on a *rational* basis (through encouraging readers to consider, for example, "hidden costs" in their broader eating calculus), rather than an explicitly moral basis (some eating practices are morally better than others). This strategy obscures the fact that the value system undergirding his program exceeds a purely economic rationality. By arguing that his particular value system is a rational one, Pollan disavows the ways in which such a value system relies upon and reproduces raced, classed, and gendered norms and exclusions. In this chapter, I argue that Pollan's value system is a morality that has its basis in professional middle class ways of knowing and thinking. In other words, Pollan's writing normalizes classed values as morally correct ones.

Although I suggest that this, in part, explains the incredible appeal of Pollan's program among a particular sector of the US population, I also argue that it is less useful to dismiss his program on the grounds of its classed character, its elitism, or its expense, than it is to investigate the particularities of his program for what it reveals about this class in the present—about its relationship to food, politics and lifestyle. Barbara Ehrenreich's analysis of the professional middle class and Bourdieu's work on class, distinction, and his concept of habitus are especially helpful for making sense of the functioning of class in Pollan's work. They are also helpful for understanding the ways in which Pollan's work might be particularly appealing to this class formation at present.

In other words, Ehrenreich and Bourdieu complicate the seeming classlessness of Pollan's mode of address. Through their work, I trace what I see as the classed tastes, anxieties, longings and knowledges that crop up in Pollan's early "nature" writing and continue to appear in his more recent food writing. Pollan's work is expressive of a professional middle class habitus and links up with the reproduction of this habitus by offering certain ways of thinking about, reflecting upon, and, crucially, *worrying* about the mundane details of everyday life as the means to living a beautiful food life.

Habitus and Professional Middle Class lifestyle

Barbara Ehrenreich explains that the professional middle class is composed of "people who are well educated, reasonably well paid, and who overlap, socially and through family ties, with at least the middling levels of the business community" (Ehrenreich 6). Although members of the professional middle class have certain financial means, their capital lies more in education than in wealth. Thus, rather than thinking about the functioning of class in terms of macro-level structures or economics alone, to make sense of the particular salience of Pollan's work among the professional middle class, it is useful to understand class in Bourdieu's sense: the range of dispositions that function to legitimate social differences (Bourdieu 7). Acquired through education and upbringing, these dispositions, or tastes, are "misrecognized" as natural, rather than obtained. Class is experienced, performed, and reproduced in the mundane practices of daily life, or lifestyle. The space of lifestyle, according to Bourdieu, is constituted through two things: first, individuals' capacities to enact practices and products that link

up with a particular class formation; and second the capacities to make classifying judgments about these practices and products (Bourdieu 170). Bourdieu calls that which generates such a system of classification—as well as the system itself—the habitus. As Angela McRobbie summarizes, the term habitus refers to "the sphere of active, lively, social life and to the ways in which we live our lives. It precedes the individual, giving to him or her a sense of the past, a memory of the distinctiveness of that specific milieu which is particular to that habitus" (McRobbie 133). For her, habitus "is the terrain into which individuals are born and through which they acquire, at a pre-conscious level, a whole set of dispositions" (McRobbie 133). It "comprises skills, information, these are the basis for action, they both permit it and curtail it" (McRobbie 134). It is useful to think Pollan's work through the concept of habitus in order to shed light on the kinds of action that his work opens up as well as the kinds of action that it closes off.

The habitus of the professional middle class has characteristics unlike those of other formations. Ehrenreich points out that the professional middle class is always already aspirational. It is only a "relative elite"—that is, elite compared to the poor and working class. Its elite status is "insecure and anxious"; the threat of downward mobility always looms:

> Its only 'capital' is knowledge and skill, or at least the credentials imputing skill and knowledge. And unlike real capital, these cannot be hoarded against hard times, preserved beyond the lifetime of an individual, or, of course, bequeathed. The 'capital' belonging to the middle class is far more evanescent than wealth, and must be renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment. In

> this class, no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor; they are visited, in each generation, upon the young as they were upon the parents. (Ehrenreich 15)

Unlike financial capital, the educational and cultural capital that defines the professional middle class cannot be entirely inherited. Although particular memories, skills, competancies, and dispositions are acquired through upbringing for *some* members of the professional middle class, individuals in each generation must, by dint of their own labor, reproduce themselves as members of this formation. Furthermore boundaries of the professional middle class are (theoretically) more permeable than those of, for example, of the elite. Attaining the credentials of higher education is in many ways central to belonging to the professional middle class. However, the *lifestyle instruction*—both explicit and implied—offered in literary sites and cultural institutions is equally crucial for crafting professional middle class selves. Such sites include the "quality press," which I take to include publications like *Harper's, The Atlantic, The New Yorker,* and books like Pollan's that target the same audience. National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, cultural institutions like museums, as well as colleges and universities can also be understood as sites of implicit lifestyle instruction. This kind of literature and these institutions not only offer information or knowledge. They also offer individuals tools for cultivating particular competancies, preferences, and ways of thinking that can be folded into the mundane details of daily life. This is what I mean by lifestyle instruction. Equipped with particular memories, skills and knowledges, individuals can negotiate these sites with more skill. At the same time, it is through engagement with these sites

that the professional middle class habitus is reproduced. Through the "quality" press and the university, individuals can both cultivate and put into practice—at a conscious or non-conscious level—professional middle class sensibilities, ways of knowing and ways of living.

Pollan's Emergence and Professional Middle Class Habitus

Michael Pollan is best known for his three best-selling food books—*The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), *In Defense of Food* (2008), and *Food Rules* (2009). He is also known for his food-themed *New York Times* columns, and his related TV and radio appearances. Pollan's celebrity might seem to indicate a broad base of appeal and universal (rather than classed) mode of address, yet his present celebrity is inextricable from his rise to visibility within a professional middle class habitus. Pollan carved out a literary/professional niche for himself working as the executive editor for *Harper's Magazine* during the eighties and nineties. At the same time, he began to establish himself as a nature writer. His work appeared predominantly in the *New York Times*, but also in other periodicals including *Harper's, House & Garden, Orion,* and *Mother Jones* as well as multiple literary anthologies (Pollan, CV). In 1991 the Atlantic Monthly Press released Pollan's *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. The book received several glowing reviews in the *New York Times* (Lehmann-Haupt; Kumin), appeared on the "New & Noteworthy" books list, also in the *Times* (Graeber), was named one of the best 75 gardening books of the century, by the American Horticulture Society, and enjoys continued use in Environmental Studies undergraduate courses (Pollan, CV). In 1997,

Random House published Pollan's *A Place of My Own: The Education of an Amateur Builder*, also to critical acclaim. The wildly successful *The Botany of Desire*, published by Random House in 2001, remained on the *New York Times* "Best Seller" list for many weeks.

Today, Pollan's work remains far more visible in these sites than others. In addition, he has been featured on PBS programs and has given numerous lectures at colleges and universities, which, I would argue, are also sites at which professional middle class habitus is both cultivated (that is, they are sites of skill-building) and put into practice (it is acted out in the mundane details of daily life). Although Pollan has also appeared on cable television (for example, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, both of which have an arguably larger but significantly overlapping audience with the "quality press") and broadcast shows (like ABC News and *Oprah*), to argue that this seeming broadening of Pollan's audience indicates a shift away from a professional middle class habitus would fail to take note of the ways in which the anxieties, longings, knowledges and tastes that appear in Pollan's early writing are not only continuous through his more recent food work, but link up with this very same habitus.

History

To flesh out the particular memories, assumptions, and hopes that Pollan draws upon as he imagines his readers and audiences, as well as to begin to make sense of the habitus his work occupies, it is helpful to trace his own history. Pollan's origins—especially his own account of them—are reminiscent of many representations of the

stereotypical postwar, upwardly mobile, suburban, nuclear family. He was born in 1955 and grew up on Long Island. His father was a lawyer and his mother was the daughter of a Russian immigrant who made his fortune buying up Long Island potato fields for suburban development (Pollan, SN 11).

The postwar context into which Pollan was born was, as Lizabeth Cohen points out, a time when consumer spending was encouraged as a means of exercising good citizenship:

> Wherever one looked in the aftermath of war, one found a vision of postwar America where the general good would be best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace. (Cohen 121)

Cohen calls the period between 1949 and 1973, "the quarter century of great prosperity" during which "median and mean family income doubled" (122). The construction and purchase of new homes increased drastically, which intensified markets for the myriad commodities related to homeownership (122). New car sales rose by a factor of four between 1946 and 1955 (123), and consumer credit grew sharply. The emergence of mass suburbia, which became increasingly race and class segregated thanks to systemic racism and the construction of newer and more expensive developments, is often described in terms of social, cultural, demographic and architectural sameness. In a caption under a photo of new suburban homes, Cohen notes "[r]ows of look-alike houses, often varying only by exterior color and a few decorative details sprouted practically overnight on what had recently been farmland outside American cities" (196).

This supposed sameness of America, represented by the mass suburbia and consumer culture, generated a host of specifically middle-class anxieties. Barbara Ehernreich points out that worries about the "softening" effects of abundance and mass conformity emerged among the middle class during this time period. Such worries, she argues, were linked to a struggle for class distinction when, in the 1950s, the supposed classlessness of America was continually articulated. "[B]y the late fifties, there were signs of widespread anxiety and discontent among the broad class of people who now had 'everything'—house, car, children, dozens of gleaming, purring appliances" (Ehrenreich 30). For Ehrenreich this growing unease was particularly concentrated among the intellectuals of the middle class:

> No group was more disappointed in the commodities that defined affluence than the intellectuals of the middle class… For one thing, they sensed uneasily that general affluence was eroding their traditional status vis-à-vis lower-level, white-collar men and even the blue-collar working class. In reality, the earning gap between professional or managerial men and blue-collar workers did not change much during the fifties. Yet one of the great boasts of the time was that developments like Levittown allowed a blue-collar worker to live next to a professor—and no one, comparing their houses, lawns, or cars, would ever know the difference. This was democracy, or, depending on one's point of view, the nadir of conformity. (Ehrenreich 37)

For her, the central question behind professional middle-class anxieties in the post-War era was: "How, in fact, could one signal a crucial status difference in a world where so many people had access to the same vast display of consumer goods?" (Ehrenreich 38).

In much of his writing, Pollan reacts against this very idea of mass culture in ways that link up with Ehrenreich's analysis. Yet before I offer illustrative examples from Pollan's texts, it is important to note that his reaction is also aligned with a specifically left politics rooted in the sixties and seventies counterculture. While Ehrenreich connects middle class anxieties to the limitations posed to social distinction by mass consumer culture, Paul Rossinow observes that in the 60s and 70s, these anxieties also had a quasi-political expression. Emergent countercultures and the New Left negotiated worries about conformity and mass culture through a (partial) rejection of consumer culture. The New Left of the late sixties was composed predominantly of white college students and recent graduates. They reacted against the Old Left and against middle class conformity and "artificiality." As a case in point, Rossinow offers Malvina Reynolds' 1962 song "Little Boxes," which "became an anthem of distain directed at post-World War II suburbia and its culture of affluent conformity" (Rossinow 105). The New Left, he notes, "wanted authenticity, which was the opposite of alienation… They wanted a different and more 'real' way of life than the dominant culture offered them" (Rossinow 109).

Like many in his generation, Pollan's white, middle-class origins link up with a particular set of liberal politics. These politics are often aesthetically defined against an image of "America," where "America" is conflated with mass consumer culture and an imagined homogeneous, middle class suburbia. As Pollan came of age, this middle class

critique of mass culture was becoming more visibly and audibly articulated. Although somewhat young to have fully participated in the 60s and 70s counterculture, Pollan, in a gently mocking tone, evokes his own teenage adoption of counterculture aesthetics—an aesthetics that became meaningful, in part, in opposition to the aesthetics of suburbia. He describes his fifteen-year-old self as an "aspiring hippie," donning "studiously sloppy clothes, [a] braided leather bracelet," a beard and long hair (Pollan, SN 32). Pollan speaks to an imagined reader who would find this caricature relatable, endearing, even. He addresses a reader who, too, might have reacted similarly against her or his middle class origins—origins assumed to be a norm—but has likely now rejoined the professional middle class.

Interestingly, in Pollan's writing, there is no similar attitude of ironical full-disclosure in reference to his educational history. It still seems relevant, however, that from suburban Long Island, Pollan went on to attend Mansfield College at Oxford University, until 1975, and then received his bachelor's degree from the very expensive Bennington College in Vermont in 1977. In 1981, he completed a master's degree in English at Columbia University. The fact that Pollan attended a series of elite institutions does not figure in his writing. This reflects a broader trend in popular US discourse: the consistent unwillingness to acknowledge the fact in that some members of the middle class cultivate lifestyle through a trajectory like Pollan's, while others do not, which produces stratifications *within the middle class*. Of course, these stratifications are not entirely invisible. A particular brand of right wing populism, such as that advanced by those like Sarah Palin and leaders of the Tea Party, registers concern about the "liberal

elite" and the "liberal media." I do not wish to repeat that critique here. I do suggest, however, that the almost willful ignorance of these stratifications on the part of many who hold progressive politics places significant limitations on the possibilities of advancing such a politics (and likely helps to fuel right wing populism).

In line with this broader trend, Pollan's writing appears to address a broadly imagined middle class, of which he is a part. However, this inclusive mode of address is undermined by the themes he emphasizes in his writing, which, I will argue, are particularly salient to highly educated segment of the middle class.

While Pollan's politics have aesthetic and classed dimensions, it would be simplistic to dismiss them on these grounds. All politics are classed and, insofar as lifestyle is inseparable from political commitments, it is difficult to imagine a politics that does not manifest aesthetically. In fact, the lifestyle politics Pollan offers seems to have evolved from a more recognizably progressive political position. Although I do not here argue that Pollan's own history is representative of that of all his fans, I do suggest that the appeal of his present work is connected both to memories of disappointment at Reagan-era policies and to nostalgia for both the counterculture of the 60s and 70s and nostalgia for the promises of the Jimmy Carter administration. This nostalgia includes memories of a hopefulness that was maintained by many, even while Carter's approval ratings dipped at the end of his presidency. For example, Pollan was vocally left of center during and after graduate school, reporting and editing for various left-leaning East Coast publications, including the *Village Voice*. After finishing his MA, Pollan worked as senior editor for the now defunct *Channels Magazine*, a non-profit publication

covering the "revolution in the telecommunications industry" (Pollan, CV 1). The writing Pollan produced in the early eighties vociferously attacks Reagan-era regulatory rollbacks. A case in point is a 1981 op-ed printed in the *New York Times* on the "television revolution." In it, he comes down squarely on the side of regulation, explicitly arguing that Reagan-era policies were inadequate to preserving US Americans' first amendment rights.[7]

While the above op-ed is instructive for illuminating Pollan's political commitments, it was not this kind of writing that garnered him authorial success. Beginning in 1988, the year George H. W. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis and replaced Reagan as president, it seems, this position was less salient to *New York Times* readers. More salient was work in which Pollan took special interest in the mundane details of middle-class suburban life. He wrote about lawn maintenance, gardening, and homeownership as they linked up with what he saw as the "American" ideological terrain. In this writing, Pollan begins to articulate longings, anxieties and, in the words of Michel de Certeau, ways of "making do" within the constraints of what he sees as present-day realities (de Certeau). These ways of making do become the basis for his later arguments about food. It is precisely through this characterization of "America" and

[7] He responds to broadcasters and those in Washington who argued that the proliferation of electronic media technologies would allow "a thousand electronic flowers to bloom," in other words, that the technologies themselves would assure an "uninhibited marketplace of ideas." In such a media environment, went the argument, no regulation was necessary to protect citizens' First Amendment right to know (Michael Pollan, "Keep Television Regulated," New York Times 22 December 1981: A. 19.). Pollan points out that access to media technologies was far from democratic and that media concentration would result in a loss, rather than proliferation, of political diversity on the airwaves. He goes on to argue that then-current regulation was already inadequate to protecting First Amendment rights. He optimistically calls for "[v]igorous antitrust enforcement, strengthened prohibitions on cross ownership by conglomerates, and the designation of cable as a "common carrier" required to lease channels to anyone who could pay" (Michael Pollan, "Keep Television Regulated," New York Times 22 December 1981: A. 19.). However, he closes by acknowledging that such measures were unlikely to be considered in a Reagan-era political environment. For him, therefore, the only choice was regulation.

"Americans" that Pollan asserts—and, ironically, simultaneously works to disavow—the classed dimensions of his program.

This writing found an audience at a moment when the progressive politics of the professional middle class were being undermined by the right in a very particular form. As Barbara Ehrenreich observes, George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign advanced the notion that "liberal notions of economic justice and equality are only a camouflage for the ambitions of a narrow and selfish elite" (Ehrenreich 144). More specifically:

> Americans were presented with a striking inversion of class rhetoric; A multimillionaire Republican [George Bush]—scion of the old Yankee upper class and enthusiastic defender of the anti-labor economic policies of the Reagan administration—attacked his Democratic opponent for being, among other things, a member of an "elite."… The elite that George Bush charged his opponent with belonging to was the "liberal elite," and he was only echoing what had become since the 1970s the central intellectual insight of the American right: that liberalism represents the interests of an elite as opposed to the needs of "ordinary" "mainstream" people. (Ehrenreich 144)

Ehrenreich argues that this shift in rhetoric both reflected and fueled a "widespread uneasiness within the professional middle class—a growing awareness that this class was indeed an elite, estranged from 'ordinary,' working-class Americans" (Ehrenreich 146). She argues that this entailed growing cynicism about what remained of the progressive student movements of earlier decades. The left-leaning professional middle class increasingly dismissed such organizing as selfish and bourgeois. Ehrenreich suggests

that these trends functioned to enervate progressivism. If, for members of the professional middle class, an outward-looking progressive politics is tantamount to outing oneself as a member of the liberal elite, the turning inward of this formation's politics from collective student organizing to the minutia of everyday life makes sense.

This broader trend is reflected in a 1988 *New York Times Magazine* essay, "Gardening Means War." In the essay, Pollan explores his relationship to the realities of rural American homeownership. He paints himself as an urban transplant with naïve liberal biases against exerting too much human agency upon nature. These biases get called into question as he does battle with a woodchuck and other garden pests in his efforts to cultivate a vegetable garden. He narrates his attempt to strike a balance between "acquiescence"—total surrender of his crops to the pests—and "domination"—suppressing the constant advance of the wilderness into the cultivated space through chemical and other violent means. In the essay, Pollan expresses a desire to strike a balance between a holdover, "naïve" idealism from the sixties and seventies and the responsibilities of nineties adulthood. He presents this desire as a normative dilemma. The classed dimensions of the memories as well as the present "realities" are obscured through Pollan's exploratory mode of address: he is resistant to these norms and suffers considerable anxiety about choosing "nature's" other:

> I came to the country from the city and brought along many of the city man's easy ideas about the landscape and its inhabitants. One had to do with the problem of pests in the garden, about which I carried the usual set of liberal views. To nuke a garden with insecticide, to level a rifle sight at the back of a woodchuck in flat-

> footed retreat, to erect an electric barricade around a vegetable patch: such measures struck me as excessive, even irresponsible. (Pollan, Gardening Means War)

Thus, Pollan begins the essay by establishing himself as one with the resources to flee the city as a self-actualizing pursuit. He presents his longings to flee the city as a longing to live in a kind of harmony with nature. Pollan thus implicitly differentiates himself from those who aim to escape the "problems of the city"—a euphemism for racial diversity, poverty and crime, and the stereotypical motive of mainstream, upwardly mobile, suburban-bound white US Americans. Pollan's framing suggests that he is not one of *those* middle class Americans. At the same time, the framing of his "liberal views" underscores his distance from the kind of lived experience that might lead others to view the "violent" means Pollan lists as materially necessary (for example, those with material stakes in whether their gardens are productive). This framing also ignores the ways in which such means might link up with moral or aesthetic commitments different from Pollan's own (for example, the commitments of those with social or moral stakes in a productive garden, a garden that looks a certain way, or a garden with a certain social function). In other words, it is thanks to a very particular trajectory that these means are understood as violent.

Pollan disavows the classed particularities of his own flight from the city by, first, ignoring the question of resources and second, by presenting his specific kind longings as normative. However, there is also a kind of embarrassed acknowledgement of his own privilege in the broader narrative arc of the essay, and, I would argue, a barely discernible

desire to dispense with it. The essay's drama hinges on coming to terms with the nature-artifice dilemma. Pollan resolves this dilemma by explaining how he alleviated his own anxiety that was caused by opting for artifice. Ultimately, and unsurprisingly, Pollan's idealistic (read: silly and the product of privilege) notions bump up against his desire to keep the 'nature' at bay in the interest of a productive garden; he accepts a compromise. In concluding the essay, Pollan argues that managing garden pests without resorting to environmentally destructive means

> depends on my acting like a sane human, which is to say as a creature whose nature it is to remake his surroundings and whose culture can guide him on questions of esthetics and ethics. What I'm making here is a middle ground between nature and culture, a place that is at once of nature and unapologetically set against it; what I'm making is a garden. (Pollan, Gardening Means War)

Here, questions of negotiating middle class adulthood become ontological questions about the nature-culture divide and the nature of being (a 'sane') human. Pollan's mode of address assumes his anxiety about artifice—and about choosing artifice—is a universal one. However, as I will discuss shortly, this anxiety has a particularly classed history. Yet Pollan's telling of the journey to come to terms with this anxiety seems to be—at least in part—about shortening his own distance from the realities faced by *all* gardeners (not just privileged ones from the city).

The fact that Pollan airs classed anxieties here does not mean that the essay or the choices he details within it are apolitical. The airing of such anxieties, the aesthetic choices Pollan makes, and the language he uses to describe them, are inextricable from

commitments to peace and the environment that, in other contexts, are understood as political. However, the very fact that the essay presents these anxieties and practices as political, not to mention morally correct (rather than classed), also functions to erase the exclusions internal to this form of politics. A politics is imagined to be simply a set of beliefs that can be chosen based on moral commitments, rather than a one linked to a particular habitus.

The anxiety over choosing artifice is more explicitly linked to memories of the counterculture and the performance of middle class norms in "Weeds Are Us." Here, Pollan similarly takes on the voice of a romantic ingénue. The realities of middleclass homeownership bump up against his quixoticism as he ventures to allow blossoming weeds to share his flowerbeds with cultivated varieties. Wilderness begins to crowd out his annuals and, he observes, "Eventually I came to see that my weed-choked garden was ridiculous, even irresponsible. The garden plants had thrown in their lot with me, and I had failed to protect them from the weeds. So I ripped out the garden and began anew" (Pollan, WAU). He has learned his lesson and will not repeat this experiment next season. From now on he will weed.

In this essay, coming to terms with weeding represents learning to live with the contradictions of caring deeply about a particular idea of nature while also caring deeply about making a garden. At the same time, coming to terms with weeding also stands in for outgrowing the political and cultural idealism of the sixties and seventies peculiar to Pollan's class formation. The shifts in his aesthetic decisions are coded as realistic and necessary. He calls these decisions "responsible," implying that they are bound up in

performing good citizenship. Yet they are certainly not to be made without serious reflection—anxiety, even—as they are both reflective of a politics and have political effects. Such ways of performing political commitments through aesthetic choices is inseparable from class. Yet, by presenting these as moral-ethical questions, Pollan obscures the classed character of his mode of address. Further, by positioning himself as a kind of romantic, inexperienced idealist, he similarly obscures his own classed origins.

On an economic level, the classed dimensions of these negotiations are not difficult to tease out. For Pollan, to confront these ethical dilemmas at all requires sufficient financial capital to own a home, not to mention a yard, as well as the kind job (or other source of wealth or income) that enables the leisure to garden. However, as noted above, an economic understanding of class is inadequate to making sense of the specificities of the class formation from and to which Pollan speaks. Just as these anxieties are expressive of a politics in Pollan's writing, they are also expressive of taste. Taste however, as Bourdieu points out, is deeply connected to class. Preference for particular kinds of art, for example, is reliant on the fact that "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu 2). Thus, taste is central to the performance and experience one's own class position as well as judgment of others:

> [t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" (Bourdieu 6).

While ways of knowing, for example, vulgar from distinguished (or natural from artificial), appear as natural "tastes," such tastes are in fact produced and reproduced through, as noted above, education and upbringing. In turn, the expression of tastes reproduces class distinctions.

In some ways, Pollan's preoccupation with the natural and his longings to escape the artifice presented by his reality seem like a throwback. The wishes he expresses line up comfortably with the New Left of the seventies that Rossinow describes: a group who endlessly deployed "tropes of the artificial versus the natural, the real versus the unreal, the living versus the dead, love versus hatred, the whole versus the fragmented… as variations on the radical quest for an end to alienation" (Rossinow 110). Though writing in the 90s, Pollan's perspective seems better aligned with the broader, Carter-era fashion for "voluntary simplicity." Starting in the late seventies, voluntary simplicity among "young, educated middle-class people" was characterized by a preference for "natural," "functional," products that were recyclable or made from renewable materials, (Stanford Research Institute cited in Ehrenreich 225). Voluntary simplicity, according to Ehrenreich, became a means of signaling class distinction. By the seventies, "voluntary simplicity seems to have become the very hallmark of middle-class existence—not only as an ethic but a set of behavioral codes that distinguished the middle class from those above and below it" (Ehrenreich 226).

In opting for voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle, individuals could perform class distinction through their consumption choices. It involved a constant struggle

to define the 'tasteful' away from the common and mass-produced. As a result,

> the cultural gap between the classes was beginning to take a new form: not simply more, and more expensive, things for the more fortunate but the contrived appearance of less. For the middle class, a search for tasteful authenticity in red wine and unprocessed food. (Ehrenreich 132)

In the 90s, however, if we take Pollan's writing as a case study, we find that conformity to norms of middle class adulthood are taken as inevitable. Yet this conformity is behavioral in nature, not philosophical. It is almost as though one's soul must continue to resist, even as one's practices conform. Classed dispositions are not so much expressed through a counter-normative practice; rather, they are expressed through ways of articulating inner resistance: specifically, through the *longings* for the natural and through *anxiety* over choosing the practices of conformity.

Pollan's exploration of the American lawn is perhaps his most direct articulation of these anxieties and his most damning assessment of "Americans" writ large. Pollan's essay, "Why Mow?" offers readers ways of reflecting on their practices as a means of distinguishing themselves from the unthinking American masses. In particular, Pollan critiques the social pressures associated with suburban lawn maintenance and bemoans what he sees as a pervasive, suburban sameness, made material in the lawn itself:

> Once below Danbury, the lawn - now purged of weeds and meticulously coiffed - races up and down the suburban lanes, heedless of property lines. It then heads west, crossing the New York border; moving now at a more stately pace, it strolls beneath the maples of Scarsdale, unfurls across a dozen golf courses, and wraps itself around the pale blue pools of Bronxville before pressing on toward the

> Hudson. New Jersey next is covered, an emerald postage stamp laid down front and back of 10,000 split levels… (Pollan, Why Mow?)

Following this alarming image of a landscape overwhelmed by hygienic green, Pollan locates the problematic lawn as a particularly American phenomenon. “Nowhere in the world” he avers, “are lawns as prized as in America. In little more than a century, we've rolled a green mantle of grass across the continent, with scarcely a thought to the local conditions or the expense” (Pollan, Why Mow?). By way of his critique, Pollan distances himself from the American cult of the lawn, which, here, stands in for suburban mass culture.

Not only does Pollan critique the appurtenances of suburban life, his scornful criticism extends to lovers-of-lawns themselves: Americans. “[G]rass,” Pollan observes, “never dies or is allowed to flower and set seed. Lawns are nature purged of sex and death. No wonder Americans like them so much” (Pollan, Why Mow?). “Americans” of course make up a heterogeneous group and their relationship to the suburban lawn—both symbolically and materially—is likewise various. Here, this messiness falls away the lawn becomes a testament to Americans’ prudishness, and further signifies the artificiality of contemporary ways of living: “Our lawns exist less here than there; they drink from the national stream of images, lift our gaze from the real places we live and fix it on unreal places elsewhere. Lawns are a form of television” (Pollan, Why Mow?).

Yet at the same time, Pollan occupies the very space he critiques. In coming to terms with the lawn, Pollan resigns himself to an experiment in conformity—and confesses that there are pleasures to be had from such conformity: he bought a mower

> and started mowing. Four hours every Saturday. At first I tried for a kind of Zen approach, clearing my mind of everything but the task at hand, immersing myself in the lawn-mowing here-and-now. I liked the idea that my weekly sessions with the grass would acquaint me with the minutest details of my yard. I soon knew by heart the exact location of every stump and stone, the tunnel route of each resident mole, the address of every anthill. (Pollan, Why Mow?)

Pollan here establishes himself as insider and outsider to American mass culture. While dreaming of escape, he surrenders to negotiating the constraints imposed by suburban living as ethically as his imagination will allow. Yet, significantly, central to the permissibility of the pleasures of lawn maintenance are the ways in which it is linked up to the natural. This more natural way of knowing and thinking about the lawn is marked as distinct from ways of not-knowing, or not-thinking, of other lawn maintainers.

Pollan thus expresses worry about a kind of American cult of the lawn, an ideological problem that has claimed the consciousness of so many citizens. His worries, however, are not exceptional. In *Lawn People,* political ecologist Paul Robbins points out that what seems to be pervasive is not a wholesale swallowing of the lawn's mythology, but rather precisely the kinds of ambivalences and anxieties that come across in Pollan's text. As such, Pollan's piece is less an intervention to awaken readers from their false lawn-consciousness (though it is framed as such, as he historicizes the lawn, attempts to denaturalize it, to show that it is a social or cultural construct made material through the labor of Americans) and more a registration of a set of worries peculiar to those Robbins calls "lawn people." Robbins surveyed Columbus, OH residents to glean

attitudes toward lawn maintenance and the risks associated with it. He begins by describing his own anxieties about lawn maintenance:

> As a self-described environmentalist with absolutely no interest in gardening or home maintenance, I felt a twinge of guilt accompanied by ecological anxiety. This became most acute when I considered the option of actually applying some of the chemicals that were being marketed to me (perhaps at night when no one was looking!) Why was it that weeds had never bothered me until the day I was responsible for "caring" for a lawn? How did the needs of the grass come to be my own? Something was happening. In brooding about the grass, my role in its care, and my relationship to the vast economy designed to manage it, I was becoming a different sort of person, a sort of lawn person. (Robbins xi-xii)

He goes on to observe that the survey results indicate a "simultaneously zealous and anxious community" and that a previous national survey "suggests a nation of similarly ambivalent citizens"(Robbins xii). He points out that, while this ambivalence may seem unexpected, it is consistent with a host of

> similar ambivalent and anxious desires. Driving a sport utility vehicle (SUV) brings with it a complicated calculus of global environmental change, public safety, and one's own risk, drinking coffee presents a blinding array of options, from organic to fair trade, all linked to the dawning awareness of connectivity between simple daily behaviors and broader ecological and economic systems. Every checkout counter decision between "paper" or "plastic" appears to present a negotiation between the mounting landfills and clear-cut forests. And no one is

more intimately aware of such connections, it would seem, than the average people who face these ecologies and economies, and whose actions are so closely tied to those broader worlds. (Robbins xii-xiii)

For Robbins, "lawn people do not simply 'choose' to maintain their lawns, but instead act under the burden of reconciling a range of contradictions in both economy and community" (Robbins xix). Robbins is interested particularly in those who use chemicals on their lawns. The studies he cites suggest that urbanites, "women, older people, highly educated people, and people from higher social classes" tend to hold more environmentalist views that others. However, these views do not correlate with low chemical use—in fact those with higher incomes and higher property values were *more* likely to use chemicals. Instead such views and demographics correlated with increased guilt and anxiety about this chemical use (Robbins 2). That "lawn people" are centrally aware people, not the victims of ideology, gives lie to the notion that Pollan's piece is an intervention. Rather, Pollan speaks to an audience that likely shares his own anxieties and ambivalences.

It remains significant, however, that Pollan does not acknowledge this strong probability. That he generalizes about "American" attitudes toward the lawn functions to collapse the American middle class into a caricature of conformity and elide the stratifications internal to this class. Yet Pollan's professed inside-outside relationship to suburbia and his longing for "nature" and "the real" in opposition to television and mass culture undercut the notion of a homogeneous middle class: he speaks from and to a particular class formation *within* the middle class.

Pollan thus simultaneously claims and rejects an imagined, homogeneous American culture. At the same time, he simultaneously asserts and denies his own class position. These two interrelated moves speak to yet another peculiarly professional middle class anxiety. Ehrenreich argues that this class is anxious, not only about maintaining its class status, and about "going soft," but is also invested in the myth that it is not an elite. For her, the professional middle class is thrown into crisis when it is forced to confront the reality that it is, in fact, an elite, that it does not hold a universal perspective, that it is not representative of America writ large, and that it might be "out of touch" with the majority (Ehrenreich). The disavowal of elite status is in tension with the continual work aimed at reproducing the professional middle class and the constant assertion of class status.[8] Nevertheless, this anxiety indicates that the ambivalent inside-outside position with respect to "America" that Pollan claims has particular resonance with the professional middle class. Pollan, not unreasonably, imagines *New York Times* readers, and subsequently, the readers of the books in which these early essays reappeared, to share his own ambivalence. He also imagines them to share as well his resignation to make do within the conditions of relative affluence. For him, these ways

[8] Ehrenreich does not address this possibility (indeed, her hopes for the future of the left in the United States with which she concludes the book tend to substantiate my argument), but it seems as though the professional middle class, while concerned with the reproduction of this class, is also invested in the idea that the professional middle class has elastic boundaries, that the exclusions it produces can be remedied through educating the masses, raising their consciousness, to welcome them into the fold of the enlightened. Insofar as this is the case, even Pollan's earlier work can be understood as technologies, in the Foucauldian sense—for the reproduction of the professional middle class. These technologies are democratically available and any American might them take up to pull themselves out of alienation. The lifestyle of the professional middle class is not imaged in classes *per se*, but rather a moral-ethically correct set of political commitments (to, for example, social justice and the environment) that can be carried out thorough ways of living that do little to challenge social hierarchies or broader political and economic structures.

of making do are also a means of living out his political commitments through an ethical lifestyle.

Pollan's Food Books and Ethical Lifestyle Instruction

Pollan's early essays recommend ways of thinking and worrying as a means of at once living ethically *and* a means of asserting and denying class distinction. In some ways, one could argue that in Pollan's food books we can see a shift from advice aimed at this kind of reflection to lifestyle advice to inform actual food practices. Indeed, there is an increasing specificity and didacticism to Pollan's writing from the exploratory *The Omnivore's Dilemma* to the pocket-sized shopping guide *Food Rules*. Further, this shift has accompanied a second shift in which Pollan's mode of address evidences an increasing awareness of the material constraints that inform readers' consumption decisions. For example, Pollan no longer assumes homeownership or access to land constitutes a shared base of knowledge and experience from which to draw to make his writing salient to readers. He also acknowledges added expense of "ethical eating" insofar as it involves the purchase of whole foods—preferably locally grown, if not organic—rather than processed foods containing ingredients heavily subsidized by the government.

Nevertheless, Pollan's system for assessing the moral rightness of food choices remains the very same system through which he assessed gardening, weeding and mowing in his early essays. Starting with the essays that would eventually become *The Omnivore's Dilemma,* Michael Pollan offers a structural critique of the industrial food

system. He is deeply concerned with its "hidden costs": the failure of government regulatory apparatuses, the role of subsidies, the social, economic, and environmental problems created by the industrialization of agriculture. Yet Pollan defends these critiques by opposing "industrial," "economic," and "capitalist" logics to "ecological" and "biological" logics. He is less concerned with social and environmental justice, for example, than whether the logic of the food system (or capitalism) violates "nature." For him, there is a "fundamental tension between the logics of nature and the logics of human industry" (Pollan, TOD 9). An unspecified "we" is violating the laws of evolution and biology. In particular, Pollan criticizes government subsidies and the compulsion toward a particular notion of "efficiency" that obliges cattle farmers to feed animals corn mixed with animal byproducts and raise them in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). This wreaks havoc on the environment, makes the animals constantly sick, and increases the likelihood that food-borne illnesses will reach consumers (Pollan, TOD 77). For Pollan,

> The economic logic of gathering so many animals together to feed them cheap corn in CAFOs is hard to argue with; it has made meat, which used to be a special occasion in most American homes, so cheap and abundant that many of us now eat it three times a day. Not so compelling is the biological logic behind this cheap meat. Already in their short history CAFOs have produced more than their share of environmental and health problems: polluted water and air, toxic wastes, novel and deadly pathogens. (Pollan, TOD 67)

Yet, the functioning of CAFOs is problematic because, first, it makes meat artificially cheap, second, because of its newness, and third, because it violates evolution and nature. The "environmental and health problems" Pollan cites are evidence that violating nature has disastrous effects. Ultimately, for him, economic logic is irrational.[9]

Pollan is not indifferent to the social injustices of the industrial food system. But, he assumes that the fact that it is unjust will be less persuasive to his readers than the fact that it is "unnatural." For Pollan, a repeated refrain is that, what is *most disturbing* or *troubling* or *sad* is that we have changed the "fundamental rules of the game"(Pollan, TOD 7). "The game," of course, is "nature." Discussing the raising of cattle in CAFOs, Pollan observes, "One of the most troubling things about factory farms is how cavalierly they flout… evolutionary rules, forcing animals to overcome deeply ingrained aversions. We make them trade their instincts for antibiotics" (Pollan, TOD 76). Specifically, feeding cows "corn" for example, is problematic less because it makes them sick and causes them to produce more methane gas, and more because it "violates the biological or evolutionary logic of bovine digestion" (Pollan, TOD 77).

The industrial food system is at its "most troubling" not only when it violates ecological logic, but also when it alienates consumers from nature: "Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with other animals, and all that sets us apart… What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all

[9] Similarly, "The economic logic behind corn is unassailable, and on a factory farm, there is no other kind. Calories are calories, and corn is the cheapest, most convenient source on the market. Of course, it was this same industrial logic—protein is protein—that make feeding rendered cow parts back to cows seem like a sensible thing to do, until scientists figured out that this practice was spreading bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as mad cow disease" (75). Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

these relationships and connections" (Pollan, TOD 10). The fact that Pollan can write that alienation of the consumer from "nature" is the saddest product of the industrial food system speaks to his own "distance from necessity."[10] The relative naturalness and unnaturalness that Pollan discusses are aesthetic judgments that are "characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies" (Bourdieu 54). In other words, it would be absurd to characterize the problem as such for those living in areas contaminated by toxic runoff, for agricultural workers handling agrichemicals, for farmers going bankrupt or selling their farms, or for people who cannot afford decent food at all.

For Pollan, an assumed universal preference for a particular idea of the natural over the artificial undergirds his structural critique. Yet in *Food Rules*, Pollan explicitly instructs readers on how to cultivate this preference[11]. These lessons in classed preferences give lie to their imagined *a priori* universality. For example, as Pollan

[10] "…the correlation between educational capital and the propensity or at least the aspiration to appreciate a work 'independently of its content'" affirms "the dependence of the aesthetic disposition on the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application and also of the accumulation of a cultural capital (whether or not educationally sanctioned) which can (53) only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity" (Bourdieu 54). Insofar as "natural" is the basis for the classification of good taste, of legitimacy, is, like Bourdieu's analysis of aesthetics and taste, "characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies, which is the basis of objective and subjective distance from groups subjected to those determinisms" (Bourdieu 54).

[11] Toby Miller has pointed out that instructional food media has a long history of offering the promise of class mobility by teaching hightly classed notions of "good taste" to a broad audience. In his chapter, "Television Food: From Brahmin Julia to Working-Class Emeril." He considers the ways in which the pleasures offered through instructional food media have a particular class character, as they evoke fantasies of class mobility and delineate classed notions of taste. Taste, especially, has come to be seen as natural, rather than historical and constructed. Further, taste—that is, the superior flavor of ethically correct food choices—is central to Pollan's arguments. Miller points to the ways in which food media—especially in their pedagogical capacities—have a history of offering this fantasy of mobility. Thus, taking pleasure in food in particular ways links up with a performance of class status. Both taste and performance became something individuals could cultivate. Food media appeared—and continues to appear—to "democratize" particular notions of "good taste."

coaches his readers on how to eat ethically, he works to produce a desire for the natural and to produce anxiety over choosing the artificial. In *Food Rules*, rule 13 implores us to "Eat only foods that will eventually rot" (Pollan, FR 23). Rule 14 recommends, "Eat foods made from ingredients that you can picture in their raw state or growing in nature" (Pollan, FR 31). Similarly, rules 19 and 35—"If it came from a plant, eat it; if it was made in a plant, don't" (Pollan, FR 41) and "Eat sweet foods as you find them in nature" (77)—both teach and promote this same set of values.

In Pollan's food books, closeness to nature indicates moral and aesthetic correctness especially insofar as it requires more work on the part of the consumer/producer. Similarly, artificiality indicates a departure from moral and aesthetic correctness by enabling ease and thoughtlessness of consumption. For example, Pollan advocates atoning for the sins of overconsumption, affluence, and easy pleasure through "natural," "pure," and laborious consumption. For him, when we eat industrially, when we enjoy its easy pleasures (read: low personal monetary and labor costs), we accrue "karmic debts" (Pollan, TOD 405). Americans have accrued such debts not merely in the act of such eating, but in their indifference to the artificiality of the pleasures it offers and in their ignorance of its hidden costs. The fast-food hamburger is a prime example. The pleasures it offers are easy ones. They require no knowledge (for Pollan, on the contrary, they demand ignorance) and no labor:

> [The fast-food burger] has been brilliantly engineered to offer a succulent and tasty first bite, a bite that would be impossible to enjoy if the eater could accurately picture the feedlot and the slaughterhouse and the workers behind it or

> knew anything about the 'artificial grill flavor' that made that first bite so convincing. This is a hamburger to hurry through, no question. (Pollan, IDOF 196)

Not only is the authenticity of these pleasures questionable, but enjoying them requires an almost willful ignorance of production process. Further, the low cost of the burger to the fast-food eater is not reflective of how truly expensive it is:

> "The ninety-nine-cent price of a fast-food hamburger simply doesn't take account of that meal's true cost—to soil, oil, public health, the public purse, etc., costs which are never charged directly to the consumer but, indirectly and invisibly, to the taxpayer (in the form of subsidies), the health care system (in the form of food-borne illnesses and obesity), and the environment (in the form of pollution), not to mention the welfare of the workers in the feedlot and the slaughterhouse and the welfare of the animals themselves" (Pollan, TOD 201)

I am not interested in dismissing these costs. However, Pollan calls upon readers to take responsibility for these costs, not simply in the interest of justice and the environment, but because readers are assumed to be particularly susceptible to feelings of guilt regarding the ease with which they can enjoy such a burger. As such, his persuasive strategy is to define a problem that links up with extant anxieties among the professional middle class in particular. Further, the solution to this problem, which is defined as distinguishing between correct and incorrect foods, is dependent on taste knowledge, on ways of reflecting, and on ways of worrying peculiar to this habitus. Implicitly, the

program suggests, members of the professional middle class are uniquely positioned to realize a morally and aesthetically correct food life.

This suggestion runs not only through Pollan's discussion of taste. Worries about easy pleasure and going soft are also mobilized in Pollan's arguments about labor (which I analyze in more depth in chapter three). Just as these worries are uniquely salient to a particular class formation, members of this formation are uniquely equipped to take up the tools Pollan offers for the alleviation of these worries. Just as the products of industrial agriculture not reflective of "actual" costs, accessing their pleasures entails artificially little labor on the part of the eater:

> …these foods are cheap in a second sense too: They require very little, if any, time or effort to prepare, which is the other reason we eat more of them. How often would you eat french fries if you had to peel, wash, cut and fry them yourself—and then clean up the mess? Or ever eat Twinkies if you had to bake the little cakes and then squirt the filling into them and clean up? (Pollan, IDOF 186)

Pollan understands easy pleasure as false pleasure. Through unthinking enjoyment of such pleasures, eaters accrue karmic debt. It is difficult to imagine that a reader unconcerned with the oppressiveness of affluence or "going soft" would find this argument persuasive. Yet the morality of the argument is inextricably linked to these very worries.

Just as Pollan's critique of the industrial food system links up with professional middle class anxieties, his recommendations for ethical eating are aimed at their

alleviation. For Pollan, the pleasures enjoyed from eating a meal "fully paid for" (by the eater, that is) are realer than the pleasures enjoyed from a meal with externalized costs. For example, Pollan serves his family and guests a feast prepared not merely from scratch, but almost entirely from ingredients that Pollan and his friends had grown, foraged, or hunted themselves. This meal was "perfect" precisely because it was "fully paid for," leaving "no debt outstanding" (Pollan, TOD 409).

Although this degree of labor input is, as Pollan admits, not sustainable, eaters can access real pleasure through ways of knowing, thinking and practicing within the constraints of their daily lives. For example, we can begin to make good on our karmic debts, and therefore take more pleasure, through particular ways of knowing and caring (as well as spending more money). Pollan argues "[t]o eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice, few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say in ignorance, are fleeting" (Pollan, TOD 11). The pleasure in eating, for example, a "grass-fed burger," is "a pleasure of another order, not a simple one, to be sure, but one based on knowledge rather than ignorance and gratitude rather than indifference" (Pollan, IDOF 196).

Yet the pleasures offered by eating ethically depend not only on knowledge, but also on constantly reflecting upon and worrying about one's practices. For example, Pollan devotes a full 30-pages to the ethics of eating animals before he can tell us about his hunting adventure in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. He also discloses that he suffered anxiety dreams before the hunt. The chapter is a kind of apologia—a crucially anxious

and ambivalent one—signaling the central importance of worrying about and reflecting upon one's food choices. This is part of what makes them ethical. Specifically, Pollan extends the possibility of pleasure to his readers as a means to make his critiques and recommendations persuasive. He argues that this is a pleasure in knowing and pleasure in tasting equally accessible to all. On the one hand, however, the content of this pleasure is intimately linked, to making good on "our karmic debts" (Pollan, TOD 405), which, as a persuasive strategy, is inextricable from middle class anxieties. On the other hand, this pleasure is bound up in ways of tasting that, far from being natural or neutral, are bound up in classed knowledges, class performance, and class judgments.

Conclusion

Although the anxieties in Pollan's work have historical precedent among the professional middle class, when placed alongside ethical eating literature from times previous, one can detect something distinctly different in Pollan's program. In *Diet for a Small Planet*, for example, Francis Moore Lappé argues for voluntary sacrifice, opting for scarcity, taking pleasure in the moral benefits associated with foregoing luxuries. For example, Lappé begins *Diet for a Small Planet* by locating the problem of her readers' eating:

> When your mother told you to eat everything on your plate because people were starving in India, you thought it was pretty silly. You knew that the family dog would be the only one affected by what you did or didn't waste. Since then, you've probably continued to think that making any sort of *ethical* issue about

> eating is absurd. You eat what your family always ate, altered only perhaps by proddings from the food industry. It's probably a pretty unconscious affair, and you like it that way. But eating habits can have a meaning, a meaning that not only feels closer to you than an abstract ethic, but brings you pleasure too. (Lappé 3)

Here, very much like Pollan, Lappé locates our problem with food as one of a failure to give it thought. Giving more thought to food is a practice that becomes persuasive because, Lappé argues, it will give meaning to the mundane practice of eating and, significantly, give conscious eaters pleasure. She explicitly connects this to a larger social and environmental project. The program she offers in the book is a "guideline for eating from the earth that both maximizes the earth's potential to meet man's nutritional needs and, at the same time, minimizes the disruption of the earth necessary to sustain him. It's as simple as that" (Lappé 3)

The first half of the book is extremely didactic, mostly charts and information about the ways in which meat-eating places far greater stress on global food resources than a vegetarian diet. Unlike Pollan, Lappé does not argue that more ethical food choices are *per se* more delicious than less ethical ones. While she claims that she is not advocating food-asceticism, she suggests that eaters will *learn* to take pleasure in the flavors and imaginative possibilities offered by a more abstemious food-life. She offers readers a few "tips" that she has found "make cooking with plant foods quicker, easier, and potentially more creative" (Lappé 130). She concludes the intro to the recipe section of the book with a gentle note on changing habits:

> Before encouraging you to pursue the recipes for the dishes that appeal to you, let me offer one friendly caveat as my final word. The notion of suddenly changing lifelong habits of any kind on the basis of new understanding does not strike me as very realistic or even desirable (however great the revelation!). At least this is not the way it worked in my family. The change went something like this: The more we learned about the 'costliness' of meat on so many grounds and foods we had always neglected, the less important meat became, and eventually the less attractive. Never did we swear off meat, vowing to make this a great sacrifice for the sake of mankind! Rather, meat began to play a smaller and smaller role in our diet as it was displaced by new and, frankly, more interesting ways of meeting our daily protein need. (Lappé 130)

Lappé's program is not centrally about pleasure. Though some recipes are called "delightful" (Lappé 148), she acknowledges that eaters will have to get used to a lower-meat diet, that the pleasures associated with vegetarianism must be learned.

This is markedly different from the pleasurable possibilities of Pollan's program. Although his is likewise seen as a way of being ethical, it does not entail the same kind of sacrifice as Lappé's. Pollan's is a kind of have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too ethics where indulging (albeit in moderation and through significant work) in high-quality, artisan-type foods (assumed to be delicious in and of themselves) can be understood as a way of giving back.

This can be seen in a recent *Newsweek* article entitled "The Dinner Divide." The article identifies one Brooklyn eater, Alexandra Ferguson, as a locavore. During

their interview, Ferguson and the author "sipped politically correct Nicaraguan coffee in her comfy kitchen while her two young boys chose from among an assortment of organic cereals. As we sat, the six chickens Ferguson and her husband, Dave, keep for eggs in a backyard coop peered indoors from the stoop" (Miller). Ferguson, explains the author,

> says she spends hours each day thinking about, shopping for, and preparing food. She is a disciple of Michael Pollan, whose 2006 book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* made the locavore movement a national phenomenon, and believes that eating organically and locally contributes not only to the health of her family but to the existential happiness of farm animals and farmers—and, indeed, to the survival of the planet. "Michael Pollan is my new hero, next to Jimmy Carter," she told me. In some neighborhoods, a lawyer who raises chickens in her backyard might be considered eccentric, but we live in Park Slope, Brooklyn, a community that accommodates and celebrates every kind of foodie. Whether you believe in eating for pleasure, for health, for justice, or for some idealized vision of family life, you will find neighbors who reflect your food values. In Park Slope, the contents of a child's lunchbox can be fodder for a 20-minute conversation.

The article aims to get at the class complexities of following Pollan's program:

> Over coffee, I cautiously raise a subject that has concerned me of late: less than five miles away, some children don't have enough to eat; others exist almost exclusively on junk food. Alexandra concedes that her approach is probably out of reach for those people. Though they are not wealthy by Park Slope standards—Alexandra works part time and Dave is employed by the city—the Fergusons

> spend approximately 20 percent of their income, or $1,000 a month, on food. The average American spends 13 percent, including restaurants and takeout.

Based on my own experience with those who identify as locavores, I would speculate that the Fergusons are not atypical Pollan devotees. As the interviewee states explicitly, in the face of visible social—and specifically *food*—inequality, this kind of eating is understood as a way of giving back. When the author points out the presence of poverty and food insecurity in Ferguson's neighborhood, she responds, "'This is our charity. This is my giving to the world' … as she packs lunchboxes—organic peanut butter and jelly on grainy bread, a yogurt, and a clementine—for her two boys. 'We contribute a lot'" (Miller).

Put this way, taking pleasure in food practices that, by global standards, are available to only a very small sector of the population, seems like a ridiculously out-of-touch and self-indulgent way of "giving back." Yet in part, the appeal of Pollan's program lies in the fact that it is broadly understood as a kind of charitable sacrifice. Individuals give up their extra time and extra money to live a beautiful food-life understood to have positive ecological and social effects: it supports small farmers; creates connections between farmers and consumers; preserves pastoral landscapes; decreases the use of pesticides; decreases food transport fuel; and represents a withdrawal from an industrial food system that is polluting, inhumane to animals, unjust to workers, and understood to be unhealthful for consumers.

However, it is also important to note that this *Newsweek* piece itself does ideological work. It is part of a growing cynicism about the possibilities of ethical eating,

an increasing tendency to paint the politics of lifestyle as self-indulgent, and its underlying progressivism as somehow false. I find the classed dimensions of ethical eating literature like Pollan's troubling—especially as classed knowledges, tastes, anxieties and longings are posited as both normative and morally/aesthetically correct. Equally troubling, however, is way the classed dimensions of such a politics of everyday life can be glommed onto, as in the *Newsweek* piece, in ways that undermine its progressive possibilities, by reducing it to an elitist and unproductive pursuit. The Fergusons, the article suggests, are a family not particularly engaged in food justice activism besides family-level consumption and production choices detailed here. This, however, is not the case for all. Many local foods people I know are deeply devoted to activist projects around food justice and the environment. These projects are not separate from their classed dispositions, anxieties and desires, yet products of their work exceed the assertion of classed distinction and the reproduction of a professional middle class habitus.

At a moment at which even the middle class is in an increasingly precarious financial position, food becomes an area in which class distinction can still be asserted. Yet at the same time, food is an area in which anxieties about the visible simultaneity of abundance and scarcity can be played out at the mundane level of daily life. Such anxieties include the proximity of food security and food scarcity (as in the Fergusons' neighborhood), and the endlessly reiterated worry about the "obesity epidemic" that disproportionately affects low-income individuals. Middle class US Americans can indulge in Pollan-esque foodie-ism while remaining thin, supporting small farmers, and

promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Further, as it links up with the production of healthy bodies, it is also a path toward good citizenship. This form of "charity" as Ferguson calls it, presents little challenge to class hierarchies. Rather, it works to assert distinction within them while at the same time alleviating the guilt and anxieties that are stirred up by the visibility of economic inequality. At the same time, however, I do not wish to dismiss the ways in which living a beautiful life through "eating ethically" is meaningful in individuals' the daily lives. Although these ways of eating and thinking are classed, they are not in and of themselves politically regressive or conservative. While an aestheticized ethical food life cannot stand in for other forms of political engagement, I remain hopeful that taking seriously the material, social and ecological effects of food practices can open up space for imagining a more just and sustainable world.

CHAPTER 3

Exclusions, Obligations and Ethical Eating

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which Pollan's work draws upon and reproduces professional middle class ways of knowing and thinking. His books offer pleasures and respond to anxieties that are especially salient to this class formation in the present. In large part, I relied upon a Bourdieuian understanding of class. I looked at it not only in terms of macro economic processes and structures, but in terms of tastes, cultural capital and competencies that link up with these structures, but cannot be explained by them alone. In this chapter, I begin from the claim made in the previous chapter that taste and aesthetics—framed as pleasures—are intimately linked to the ways of being ethical that Pollan puts forth. Following Michel Foucault, I define ethics, as I explain in chapter one, as the practices of everyday life, understood as the careful, thoughtful, deliberate, and (for Pollan) personally costly exercise of freedom. This differs from morality, which I see as the—stated or unstated—system of values that undergirds an ethics.

In Pollan's books, the discourse of pleasure—and what Pollan sees as pleasure's discursive other, pathology—becomes an ethical litmus test. If pleasure, however, indicates ethics, there is little space to discuss structural constraints, normative assumptions, and hidden obligations within the recommendations Pollan offers his

readers. In fact, it is through the notions of pleasure and pathology that Pollan claims a democratic mode of address. Furthermore, Pollan's emphasis on the aesthetics of food practices and the pleasures of knowing tends also to aestheticize the *labor* of carrying out such practices (as well as the labor of acquiring the knowledge and skills these practices require).[12]

Through these notions, Pollan presents ways of being ethical as *aesthetic* choices. In this way, Pollan tends to aestheticize the extra expenditures (time, money, labor) required for the lifestyle he recommends. Labor in particular must be understood and performed as a "labor of love." It becomes ethical when understood not only as pleasurable but also as *freely chosen*. The relationship of labor to ethics, thus, obscures the structural and contextual obstacles to labor-as-pleasure that many people bump up against. Furthermore, it excludes the labors of those who are imagined to do such work by necessity (as opposed to by "choice") from the definition of ethical Pollan seems to espouse.

In this chapter, I make three arguments. First, I argue that Pollan's program involves considerable added expense. This expense can be paid with financial resources or time spent in thoughtful reflection, but the preferred mode of payment is labor. Second, I argue that Pollan adopts a democratic tone that disavows the ways in which the

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[12] In other words, the labor of shopping, cooking, growing, feeding others, preserving vegetables, spending time learning about "where your food comes from," the added time spent going to and from the farmers market (which are variously time-consuming and laborious, depending on one's proximity to the market, the availability and quality of public transportation, whether one has access to a car or a bicycle, etc.) on top of trips to the grocery store, chatting with farmers ("get to know your farmer"), learning about unfamiliar vegetables, figuring out how to cook said vegetables, making said vegetables palatable to partners and children—not to mention oneself. These tasks, the work of ethical eating, are here understood as labors of love, pleasures, even. They are not stressors, not drudgery, and not unappreciated or unpleasant work. Indeed, taking pleasure in this work is bound up in the practice of ethical eating itself.

access to and meanings of such added expense, time and labor have race, class and gendered dimensions. Labor especially is the mode of expense that is understood as democratic. Particularly, Pollan suggests that, while perhaps only some readers can afford the extra monetary expense (that is, paying otherwise externalized costs with cash), the program is not truly exclusive because extra labor can make up the difference if one cannot pay these costs monetarily (for example, Pollan points out that one can make organic oatmeal instead of buying Cheerios, thereby being ethical *and* saving money[13]). If individuals are *willing* (that is, if they choose) to devote more time and work, then the vast majority of US Americans can take up Pollan's program. Third and finally, I argue that the ways in which this added expense is understood as *ethical* is also raced and gendered in particular (and exclusive) ways. Only some labor is understood—or visible—as ethical.

Before launching into my analysis, it is useful to briefly map out the ways in which Pollan's books call upon readers to devote more time, resources and labor to their food practices in ways that have shifted over time. To show that, despite the shifts, Pollan's central emphasis on increased labor has remained constant, I cite two examples, his first ethical eating book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), and his most recent book in the same genre, *Food Rules* (2009). Specifically, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* calls upon readers to *spend more time reflecting* on their food practices. It implies a hierarchy of

[13] As cited in chapter 1, "I can buy a pound of rolled oats for 89 cents organic in my market. So the way to make money is to sell say something like Cheerios. Take those rolled oats, give them a little shape, give them a brand. Suddenly, you're charging 4 bucks for even less than a pound of rolled oats…" Michael Pollan, "You Are What You Eat: Rules to Eat By" with John Donovan and Anchor Cynthia McFadden, NIGHTLINE, ABC, Berkeley, 8 May 2008..

producer-consumer choices in terms of authenticity. The less a person relies upon the "hidden costs" that exist in the industrial food system—that is, the more he or she "fully pays" for the food he or she eats—the more "authentic" the food pleasures he or she experiences. The book is largely descriptive. Pollan sidesteps making overt moral claims about the rightness or wrongness of eating a McDonald's hamburger or that of eating a meal made from scratch from ingredients hunted and gathered oneself. Though never explicitly stated in any of the books, Pollan implies that the word "pleasure" might easily be replaced with "ethical." The eater of the McDonald's meal relies the most on externalized costs. The eater of the "industrial organic" meal relies on fewer externalized costs. Consumers can absorb *some* of the costs by spending more money in places like Whole Foods Market. Yet, significantly, many costs remain unpaid (by consumers in the market), like the environmental costs of industrial organic production techniques and long-distance shipping. (Pollan is not interested in externalized costs borne by agricultural laborers. Nor does he understand the externalized "health costs" of the industrial food system as something absorbed by the bodies that suffer from them. Rather these are "costs to the health care system.") The "intensely local" meal Pollan ate on the farm of Joe Salatin, involved, according to Pollan, still fewer "hidden costs," while the final "hunted and gathered" meal made through Pollan's own incredible expenditure of time and labor was, for him, "fully paid for." In this book, "hidden costs" *can* be paid in cash, but it is preferable to pay them in time and labor.[14]

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[14] The extent to which one can pay these costs is contingent upon access to particular resources. In addition, to time and cash, Pollan had access to social and knowledge resources. He relied, for example, upon the expertise of a few European foodie friends who took him hunting for wild boars and foraging for wild mushrooms. They taught him how to butcher and make fancy sausage. Pollan highlights their cultural

Food Rules (2009) more explicitly urges readers toward additional labor, listing practices that readers ought to take up. It is in this book that Pollan is perhaps most explicit about the relationship between increased labor and living ethically. He warns readers away from packaged, processed and prepared foods: Rule 17: "Eat only foods that have been cooked by humans" this does not include "restaurant chefs" (Pollan, FR 37), or rule 18: "Don't ingest foods made in places where everyone is required to wear a surgical cap" (39). The ease of drive-through is a dead give-away that eating this way is unethical: Rule 20: "It's not food if it arrive through the window of your car" (43). Yet it is not "junk food" *per se* that Pollan warns readers against. Rather, according to Rule 39, you can "Eat all the junk food you want as long as you cook it yourself" (85). In other words, Pollan suggests that readers consider the amount of time and labor they must devote as a means to assess the ethicality of their food practices. Because of the specificity of the recommendations in the book, living ethically becomes possible only if one (1) has *access* to resources (time, money, land, etc.) and has *geographical access* (to

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capital—another barrier to access—when he describes the sumptuous snacks these friends bring on the hunt:

> a terrine of lobster and halibut *en gelée*, an artisanal salami and prosciutto and mortadella, Angelo's homemade paté of boar and home-cured olives, cornichons, chicken salad, a generous selection of cheeses and breads, fresh strawberries and pasteries, silverware and napkins, and, naturally, a bottle each of red and white wine. Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

Furthermore, in order to pay these hidden costs, individuals must also have geographic access and mobility. Pollan, for example, lives in California where he can gather wild edibles from forest and sea. His ability to do these things is contingent on the fact that he is ablebodied. He has a fully functioning kitchen and a yard with a vegetable garden. Paying hidden costs is also more readily done if one has a car. Joe Salatin's customers, for example, drive up to 150 miles to buy his chickens (which, one might argue, introduces a significant ethical paradox). Pollan does not consider the ways in which privilege in global hierarchies, that is, the ways in which some individuals have access to resources and skills necessary for the ethical living (while others don't) depends on other hidden costs—both externalized environmental costs and the invisible labor of others.

the farmers' market and other sites at which "ethical" consumption is possible) and (2) is willing and/or able to perform the *labor* of being an ethical consumer-producer-knower of food.

The Pleasure-Pathology Dichotomy as an Ethical Litmus Test

A pleasure-pathology dichotomy forms the terrain on which Pollan makes *additional expense* (of time, labor, and money) intelligible as *an ethical and enjoyable choice*. Although present to some degree in all of his books, Pollan articulates the dichotomy between pleasurable and pathological eating most explicitly in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*. The introduction to *The Omnivores Dilemma*, for example, is entitled: "Our National Eating Disorder." He concludes this chapter by positing "pleasure" as the healthy other—indeed, the solution—to this pathology. As an intervention into this disorder, Pollan argues, "this is a book about the pleasure of eating, pleasures that are only deepened by knowing" (Pollan, Dilemma 11).

The eating disorder with which Pollan diagnoses "the nation" is condition called orthorexia nervosa. Orthorexia is variously defined as an unhealthy preoccupation with *healthful* eating, or as an unhealthy preoccupation with *virtuous* eating. In 2008 and 2009, concern over orthorexia was aired in the *New York Times* (Ellin), *The Washington Post* (Goff), multiple publications in the UK, and has been discussed on ABC news (Stossel). Although one can easily imagine the usefulness of a notion like orthorexia to efforts to undermine alternative food practices, Pollan picked up on this term in the former sense to undergird his arguments about the problems of the industrial food system

(specifically in relation to advertising and packaging) and the shortcomings of "nutritionism" (a term coined by sociologist Gyorgy Scrinis to describe a reductive way of thinking about nutrition only in terms of food's individual component parts).

Thus, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan draws on scientific discourse—which connotes expertise, objectivity, and universality—to define the problem into which his work is an intervention. I do not mean to oversimplify Pollan's arguments. Pollan's message is contradictory, as I discuss in chapter 1, and the extent to which he privileges the notion of individual pathology over a structural critique varies depending on the site from which he speaks/writes. The generalizations I make here refer to the food books in particular as well as other media sites in which he appears in an advice-giving capacity. The seemingly universally salient problem-solution set of pathology and pleasure remains the predominant mode of appeal in Pollan's 2008 *In Defense of Food*. Here, US America's food-problem is at base ideological and psychological: we are in a state of "confusion and anxiety" around food (Pollan, IDOF 6). It is a problem of collective amnesia: as a culture, "we've" forgotten why we eat and due to the ideology of nutritionism. In particular, Pollan observes, "…nutritionist thinking has become so pervasive as to be invisible. We forget that, historically, people have eaten for a great many reasons other than biological necessity. Food is also about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity" (Pollan, IDOF 7). His intervention, and our job as eaters, is to challenge "nutritionism…the official ideology of the Western diet" by developing "a different way of thinking about food" (Pollan, IDOF 12). His suggestion is reminiscent

of therapeutic discourse: Pollan coaches individuals to unlearn problematic ways of thinking through a kind of cognitive restructuring. Thus, it is "our" way of thinking about food that emerges as the problem to be worked on, instead of the broader structural conditions that in which "nutritionism" and the industrial food system thrive. Specifically it is a preoccupation with health, at the expense of pleasure, that is cause for intervention:

> That eating should be first and foremost about bodily health is a relatively new and, I think, destructive idea—destructive not just of the pleasure of eating, which would be bad enough, but paradoxically of our health as well. Indeed, so people on earth worry more about the health consequences of their food choices than we Americans do—and no people suffer as many diet-related health problems. We are becoming a nation of orthorexica: people with an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating. (Pollan, IDOF 8-9)

Here, Pollan explicitly places pleasure in opposition to pathology. This somewhat flattened vision leaves out a long and fraught history of food-related pathology, in which particular bodies, practices and knowledges have been constituted as objects of intervention, while other bodies, practices and knowledges are assumed to be normal and healthy. The construction of such pathology links up with repressive discourses of gender, class and national belonging.[15] However, "orthorexia" in its novelty and its purported even distribution over Americans in general (for "we" suffer in common) is an

[15] For example, assimilationist projects have attempted to "normalize" the eating habits of immigrant populations through nutrition science; Progressive Era reformers intervened in the eating habits of the working class; anorexia and bulimia are gendered in particular ways, both materially and discursively (Levenstein; Shapiro; Bender).

egalitarian. By invoking a term that, to date, lacks a problematic history, Pollan avoids casting aspersions at any particular population or group that suffers disproportionately from food-phenomena designated "pathological" or people who have been systematically disempowered by racist, sexist, or classist diagnoses of such pathology. Rhetorically, Pollan's use of the term "orthorexia" has a democratizing and inclusionary function. It identifies "Americans"—who, in reality, are positioned profoundly unequally in relation to the food system—as suffering from the same problem. Further, it locates responsibility for the problem on individuals and invites us all to be a part of the solution.

In offering this solution, Pollan calls upon readers to "return" to a kind of "pre-pathological" way of eating. To help readers achieve this, Pollan puts forth food practices that emphasize unhurriedness, contemplation and social togetherness, through devoting more time, money and labor, as the means to have an ethical relationship with food. These emphases equate the *choice* to expend resources—and more specifically, *taking pleasure* in this expenditure—with being ethical *per se*.

Imagined Universality: Ethical Eating, Access, And Whiteness

For Pollan, the practices that constitute ethical eating are aligned with those recommended by other authors within what has been called "the alternative food movement." The "alternative food movement" is a phrase that has been used to describe the increased interest in farmers' markets, CSA membership,[16] gardening, cooking, and

[16] CSA stands for "community supported agriculture." It is a system by which individuals and families can purchase a subscription to a local farm at the beginning of the growing season. Typically, each week, CSA members receive a box of a variety of vegetables and a newsletter listing the contents of the week's box, explanations of any vegetables assumed to be unfamiliar to the overwhelmingly white, middleclass

the kinds of foodie-ism[17] that have sprung up around “local and organic” foods. The “movement”—if it can indeed be called a movement—is in fact incredibly diverse, both in terms of the people involved and the practices that constitute it. Yet in much media representation, it tends to be identified with white, upper-middle class individuals like Michael Pollan. Other scholars have pointed out that “alternative food discourse” (including Pollan’s writing) tends to assume a universal perspective that obscures the ways in which whiteness inheres in the culture of alternative food. Buying local and organic directly from farmers, for example, is posited as a universal good for which individuals ought to take responsibility to pay the “full cost” of food (as opposed to the myriad externalized costs of buying food grown and distributed through the industrial food chain). Julie Guthman, however points out that

> [the rhetoric of paying the full cost] seems to be asking people who might have historical connections to those who have more than paid the cost with their bodies and livelihoods in U.S. agricultural development—who in certain respects have themselves subsidized the production of cheap food—to pay even more. At the very least, full cost presumes that all else is equal, even though U.S. agricultural land and labor relations are fundamentally predicated on white privilege. (Guthman, Color Blindness 394)

As noted above, Pollan relies heavily on the concept of “paying the full cost” of food.

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shareholders, recipes, photos of the farm, news of weather, weeds and pests, and a few other anecdotes from the week. The idea is that members absorb some of the risk involved in being a small farmer by paying for the share upfront and thereby get the benefit of local, fresh, and usually organic/sustainable veggies all through the summer.

[17] Foodies tend to have a deep but centrally aesthetic interest in sustainable, local foods—Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape (New York: Routledge, 2010).

For him, industrial foods are artificially cheap. The "hidden" costs are those of health care, animal welfare, and the environment. Pollan also points to more abstract "costs" like the "loss" of food-related skills, practices and knowledges. Pollan offers his discussion of "costs" as a rational explanation for choosing more work- and resource-intensive food practices. Yet the seemingly "objective" reasoning of hidden costs, as Guthman points out, is in fact predicated on occupying a privileged position from which these costs are indeed neither seen nor felt. The fact that a cost is hidden to an individual is intimately connected to his or her potential to eat ethically. The process of acquiring knowledge of the "costs" and changing food behaviors is the exercise of this ethics—a becoming ethical through, for example, reading Pollan's books. The assumption, here, is once the costs are known, behaviors cannot but change. Guthman calls this the rhetoric of "if they only knew," one of several phrases (including "getting your hands dirty," and "look your farmer in the eye") that baldly fail to consider "the ways in which they reflect whitened cultural histories and practices" and "point to an agrarian past that is far more easily romanticized by whites than others (Guthman 2004)" (Guthman, Color Blindness 394).

Guthman goes on to point out that all too often the invisibility of the whiteness of this rhetoric allows alternative food discourse—regardless of the intent—to become a device for scolding others:

> the subject positions of the proselytizers [white proponents of alternative foods], as well as the goodness of the food, continues to go without saying. This is the hallmark of whiteness and its presumption of normativity; it goes to the deeper

> way in which color blindness and acts of doing good can work to separate and scold others. (Guthman, Color Blindness 394)

Indeed, the "alternative food spaces" that Pollan encourages his readers to visit, like farmers markets, tend to be disproportionately occupied by white people, even if the space is located in a diverse or predominantly non-white neighborhood (Slocum). Further, the absence of non-whites from these spaces has been a rationale constituting the food practices of various non-white populations as problematic (for example, from the perspective of public health), and attempting to "enroll" them in the project of alternative food (Guthman, Bringing Good Food). According to Guthman, although a diversity of US Americans do not participate in alternative foods, non-whites have been the special targets of associated food-scrutiny:

> Thus far, existing research suggests that people of color, and African Americans especially, do not participate in these markets proportionate to the population. It may also be the case that working-class or, more likely, less formally educated whites do not participate equal to their numbers either, but neither have they been subject to the same sort of scrutiny regarding their food provisioning practices, including attempts to enroll them in alternative food practice. (Guthman, Color Blindness 388)

However, it is also important to point out that some critiques pointing to the whiteness of alternative food spaces and practices may inadvertently erase the non-white and non-middle-class bodies that occupy the spaces and carry out the practices associated with alternative foods—or at least erase the ways in which occupying these spaces and

carrying out these practices can also be understood as ethical.

What's the Problem? Who Is to Blame?

Before analyzing the ways in which Pollan offers pleasure as an ethical solution, it is helpful to look more closely at the food problem into which Pollan's books aim to intervene. This, I hope, will illuminate the ways in which Pollan allocates blame and, in turn, illuminate what is at stake for individuals in accepting or refusing, enjoying or disliking the added expenditure required if we accept the (universal) ethicality of Pollan's program. Further, the extent to which Pollan's writing becomes disciplinary (for certain populations) has implications for the ways in which laboring, spending and eating ethically (in Pollan's sense) can indeed be understood as pleasurable, or even possible.

It is important to note that from the exploratory 2006 *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, to the 2009 pocket-sized shopping guide, *Food Rules*, Pollan's mode of address has shifted significantly. While in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*, 'pleasure' is paramount, the *Food Rules* program aims to enable not only 'pleasure,' but 'personal health' as well. As such, the problematization of food likewise broadens, from a psychological and ideological affliction in the first books,[18] to one of physical health (and most notably obesity) in the last. Yet in all three books, the central *causes* of the food problem remain the same.

These causes are historical and cultural and are inseparable from the solutions that Pollan proposes. For example, Pollan argues that "American" food practices are characterized by a "lack of tradition," Americans have nothing with which to resist the

[18] Pollan articulates these as 'problems of freedom,' in the Foucauldian sense.

onslaught of food mass marketing and nutrition advice (Pollan, IDOF 150). It is unclear whether Pollan would wish for a unified food culture, nevertheless, his concern over this "lack" excludes US Americans who identify with a particular food culture from his definition of American.

Yet he also bemoans a *loss* of US food culture, which, for him, is intimately bound to changes in gender roles during the 20th century. To write a case history of America's eating disorder, in *In Defense of Food,* Pollan posits nostalgic notions of a "pre-pathological" way of relating to food. Although Pollan urges all readers, regardless of gender, toward a more ethical relationship with food, he also idealizes a time when mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers cooked from scratch with the (superior, apparently fixed, and almost embodied) knowledge of culture and tradition. "[F]or most of human history, humans have navigated the question [of 'what to eat'] without expert advice. To guide us, we had, instead, Culture, which at least when it came to food, is really just a fancy word for your mother" (Pollan, IDOF 3). Although we all have the embodied resource of taste to help us make food choices, food culture and tradition seem to inhere in women's bodies themselves: "Most of what we need to know about how to eat we already know, or once did until we allowed the nutrition experts and the advertisers shake our confidence in common sense, tradition, the testimony of our senses, and the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers" (Pollan, IDOF 13). Pollan continues this line of reasoning in *Food Rules*, in which he asks, "So whom did we rely on before the scientists (and, in turn, governments, public health organizations, and food marketers) began telling us how to eat? We relied of course on our mothers and grandmothers and

more distant ancestors, which is another way of saying, on tradition and culture" (Pollan, FR xvi-xvii).

As such, when nutrition science and food industry marketing emerge, it is women who lose their agency, cowed by science and industry:

> But over the last several decades, mom has lost much of her authority over the dinner menu, ceding it to scientists and food marketers (often an unhealthy alliance of the two) and to a lesser extent, to the government, with its ever-shifting dietary guidelines, food-labeling rules, and perplexing pyramids. Think about it: Most of us no longer eat what our mothers ate as children. This is, historically speaking, an unusual state of affairs. (Pollan, IDOF 3)

As Pollan constructs this history, not only does the emergence of food science and marketing rob women of their agency, women are also deprived of their (natural) knowledge, duped into the prevailing ideology that continues to cause such trouble. In particular, Pollan traces the changing contents of the "American table" from the 1960s to point out the ways in which women in particular fell victim to specious food knowledges: nutrition science turned against animal fat;

> [a]nd then there were the food manufacturers, which stood to make very little money from my grandmother's cooking, because she was doing much of it from scratch…Amplifying the 'latest science,' they managed to sell her daughter on the virtues of hydrogenated vegetable oils, the ones that we're learning may be, well, deadly substances. (Pollan, IDOF 5)

Mom's dupedom is not only misled, it's dangerous. Additionally, this historical narrative positions those women who had the resources and desire to participate in the burgeoning consumer culture of the first half of the 20th century as both normative and (unwittingly) blameworthy. It fails to consider to whom this version of domesticity was an option (Coontz 11).

Stephanie Coontz argues that "our recurring search for a traditional family model denies the diversity of family life, both past and present, and leads to false generalizations about the past as well as wildly exaggerated claims about the present and the future" (Coontz 14). Pollan is not nostalgic for a traditional family *per se*, nor does he explicitly argue for a return to prior ways of being. However, he posits a reductive and normative—and, one might add, rosy—vision of the past, which delimits the kinds of action that his program can suggest. Here, "your mother" is reduced to a normative, middle-class, woman who was an active participant in consumer culture, while "your grandmother" had the time and positioning to be the bearer and arbiter of particular kinds of domestic skills and knowledge. The tragedy that befell America was the loss of this grandmotherly knowledge through particular ideological processes. To solve this problem, then, we must to recuperate this knowledge and cast off our false consciousness.

It may be tempting to dismiss Michael Pollan himself as sexist. However, his nostalgia links up with broader trends and anxieties that appear across media. It is, for example, in line with "…much of the mainstream debate on eating" which Elspeth Probyn argues "signals a nostalgic return to authenticity." This nostalgia links up with anxieties about a global context that seems to change at a dizzying speed. Probyn goes

on to note “at the present time, appeals to ‘the real’ operate as a way of covering over many of the massive changes in terms of families, gender and sexual orders, local and global economies” (Probyn 8). Additionally, the historical narrative Pollan offers had significant purchase prior to the publication of his texts. To make sense of the conditions that gave rise to the present state of eating, Pollan draws on a literature that posits domestic science as having “ruined” food by persuading impressionable housewives to adopt new “efficient” food practices. In *Perfection Salad*, for example, Laura Shapiro looks at the ways in which women’s normative responsibilities linked up with the increasing industrialization of the American food system during the turn of the 19th century. Although her project aims to take seriously the domestic scientists’ contributions, she ultimately posits that it was the error of these women that resulted in the impoverishment of American food culture. In particular, she bemoans the elevation of “daintiness” over taste or preference, the privileging of the “science of food” over its “sensuality,” the increased value placed on notions about the digestive process and efficiency, and the decreased value placed on flavor and appetite (Shapiro 43, 47, 79, 92).

In this literature, housewives appear as generically “American.” The young, white, heteronormative, middleclass women are depicted as particularly vulnerable to the onslaught of marketing and domestic science because they are unencumbered by “tradition.”[19] Tradition becomes the purview of their “ethnic” American and immigrant counterparts. For these women, on the other hand, “culture” is a resource with which they can resist destructive and ill-informed food regimes (Levenstein; Shapiro).

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[19] This imagined tradition- and cultureless-ness links up with Ruth Frankenberg’s discussion of the way in which the invisibility of Whiteness is central to the functioning of racism. Ruth Frankenberg, white women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

In addition to nostalgia for women's lost food knowledge and agency, Pollan bemoans the corruption of global food cultures by the "Western diet." He cites a study, carried out by Kerin O'Dea, in which a group of otherwise urban-dwelling Aboriginal Australians fished, hunted and foraged in the brush for seven weeks. O'Dea's project was to track the health effects of this "traditional" diet. O'Dea's unremarkable findings—that subsisting as a hunter-gatherer results in weight loss and general improvements in weight-related health problems—would likely be true irrespective of her subjects' ethnicity. Nonetheless, Pollan notes that O'Dea repeated the experiment with Native Americans and Native Hawaiians, as proof that a "return" to "prior," "traditional," "more natural," and "closer to the earth" way of living results in improved health. While this may be empirically true, the notion that "a complex of so-called Western Diseases…begin almost invariably to appear soon after a people abandons its traditional diet and way of life" (Pollan, IDOF 87) constructs a static idea of the "pre-Western" culture and reproduces racist and colonial discourses that identify Native peoples as closer to nature than, and as temporally prior to, "Western civilization." They are constructed as corruptible and their food cultures imagined as unchanging until the advent of the indomitable Western diet.

To his credit, Pollan makes a point of stressing that he does not advocate "returning to the bush or taking up hunting and gathering" (Pollan, IDOF 106). Rather, he is merely underscoring the possibilities of "traditional food knowledges" as an alternative way of thinking to the "Western diet." Pollan marshals nostalgia as a means of critique, not as a way to get at an absolute Truth. Certainly, a critique of the industrial

food system is more than justified. Even without a call for a "return," however, it remains problematic that "tradition" appears as an ahistorical ideal that inheres in particular (female, racially and ethnically Other) bodies until they are exposed to the corrupting and irresistible influence of science and marketing. Further, the placement of these images as "pre-pathological" not only erases inequalities that were present in "traditional" food cultures themselves, but also exposes Pollan's failure to acknowledge the kinds of food insecurity experienced before the industrialization of food.

Thus, in large part, our food problem is one of loss. It was caused by the inability of certain populations—especially normative middle class women, but, to an extent, those marked as racially other—to resist dominant food ideologies and practices. Pollan's use of nostalgia functions to allocate blame on a gendered and racialized basis.

Nostalgia and the Loss of Women's (Pleasurable) Cooking Labor

Pollan thus constructs a narrative that articulates the loss of women's cooking and caring knowledge to the decline of US Americans' health and happiness. He also argues that women stopped cooking, not for convenience's sake, not because of the demands of work, not because of structural constraints that made it difficult, and definitely not because of the pleasures of *not cooking*. On the contrary, for Pollan, women left the kitchen *despite* the pleasures the gained from it. Indeed, on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* in 2006 (just after the publication of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Pollan suggests that women merely forgot that they did indeed love to cook when they were confronted with new convenience foods in the 1950s:

> When they first started coming up with convenience foods in mixes, the industry—this is in the 1950s—the industry really had to fight the American housewife who said, "wait a minute, this isn't drudgery, I love to cook. I get great satisfaction out of feeding my—this is one of the great satisfactions of my life!" and it took years of propaganda, years of marketing to persuade them that cooking is drudgery. It's not. It's one of the great pleasures of life" (Pollan, Talk of the Nation)

For Pollan, then, the labor of cooking can only be understood as a labor of love. He goes on, "we're told we're too busy. We're told that we don't have enough money—um, and perhaps that's true for some people. But by and large it's a matter of priorities. We've been convinced that we don't have time to cook. It really doesn't take that long to cook a meal" (Pollan, Talk of the Nation). Pollan encourages listeners not to believe what "we're told"—that individuals might have come to any of these conclusions independently (or collectively) is not an option Pollan entertains. Rather, Pollan urges listeners to re-organize their priorities so that they match his own.

To make sense of what is at stake in Pollan's particular call to take pleasure in the labor of food preparation, it is helpful to place the books alongside other instructional food media, such as cooking shows, that make this same call. Of course Pollan's books differ from food television: the books lack the seductive and spectacular visual dimension; they purport to address a genderless audience; and they are less concerned with cooking, the kitchen and domesticity than with a whole way of living in relation to food. However, both Pollan's work and food television circulate in a broader context in

which the division of food labor and that of food pleasure reflect gendered inequalities. Thus, because Pollan's work and food television both extend the promise of pleasure *through* domestic labor, the shows and the books produce similar contradictions. For example, in his chapter, "Television Food: From Brahmin Julia to Working-Class Emeril" Toby Miller points to the contradictory nature of the pleasures that food television offers women. For him, these pleasures are bound up in the labor of food practices, rather than the eating or tasting of it:

> The culture of preparing food as a pleasure has two antecedents. The first is a sexual division of labor that has required women to undertake unpaid domestic tasks on behalf of others. The second is the unattainability of perfectly prepared fine food—the sense that one can never get it right, but that the search is an asymptomatic, autotelic pleasure of its own. (T. Miller 129)

Because food television collapses domestic labor with pleasure—labor figures as a pleasure in two senses. First, it is pleasurable in and of itself, and second, it offers the pleasure of caring for others. Food television offers women limited pleasures that are in line with a regressive sexual division of labor that itself is imagined as source of satisfaction. Furthermore, as Cheri Ketchum points out, in offering female viewers pleasure through cooking as a "lifestyle choice" food television both erases and reinforces the ways in which women have historically been socialized to adopt a care-taking role. It additionally burdens her with the work of attaining the knowledges, skills, and consumer commodities that are required to achieve this lifestyle. Pollan's work can similarly be read as offering readers these pleasures as a lifestyle choice. Equipping

oneself to make ethical choices requires significant work, involving acquisition of knowledge and skills: one must know where ones food comes from, one must know how to shop for (or grow) and prepare local, organic and whole foods, and one must understand (and care about in particular ways) the relationship of one's own food choices to the food system at large. In the books, however, this learning and skill-building is not framed not as work. It is rather folded into the pleasures Pollan describes. This move functions to give the Pollan's program the appearance of equal accessibility to all, regardless of structural circumstances.

(Gendered) Labor in Context: Constraints and Assumptions

Labor thus emerges as a central contradiction in Pollan's work. Although the concept of labor is of the utmost importance, its practice abstracted from the contextual realities of individuals' lives. The kind of labor Pollan recommends to readers is discrete, personal, and aimed at pleasure. To imagine labor this way has a gendered bias that can be seen is other food media. In her analysis of gender on food television, Rebecca Swensen notes that, though there are both male and female hosts on food programs, gender is produced and maintained in very specific ways. Particularly, she notes a striking absence within the male-hosted shows of any discussion of "cooking as everyday, family-centered labor" (Swensen 50). Rather, for such shows, "cooking is constructed as leisurely entertainment" and "a way to flex professional muscles" (Swensen 47, 41). In other words, the fun and aesthetics of cooking are paramount. In such shows, cooking "is only partially and temporarily tied to the rewards and

responsibilities of family life" (Swensen 47). On the other hand, she notes, "female hosts tend to portray cooking as domestic work done for family and friends" (Swensen 41). These shows offer time- and labor-saving tips aimed at helping working adults who are responsible for the daily food needs of partners and children. Like the male-hosted shows, Pollan instructs readers to labor more, and encourages them to enjoy this labor. Thus, despite his call for everyone to participate in food related work, Pollan's representation of labor links up with normative constructions of masculinity and femininity. He does not offer readers tips for making this work fit into busy schedules filled with multiple responsibilities.[20]

That Pollan fails to offer such tips not only points to a representational bias in his program, it also ignores the ways in which the division of household labor continues to be inequitable. As Brooke Judkins and Lois Presser observe, in the context of pre-existing unequal division of labor, the added labor of the "ethical" lifestyle choices—they are studying "eco-friendly lifestyle"—tends to exacerbate this inequality. Just like the lifestyle choices that Pollan advocates, "eco-friendly lifestyle necessitates a greater commitment of time and energy in domestic affairs than does the conventional US

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[20] Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann point out that Pollan is "widely read by foodies," "foodies," the authors define, as those who approach food as "a topic for serious aesthetic deliberation, consideration and appreciation" Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape (New York: Routledge, 2010).. According to the "Foodie Handbook" they tend to be class-aspirational and are "not characterized by fatness." For foodies, "Michael Pollan has become a kind of journalistic folk hero" Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape (New York: Routledge, 2010).. The authors note that foodies tend to reject TV personalities like Rachel Ray and Paula Dean in favor of more adventurous and aestheticized food media Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape (New York: Routledge, 2010).. Though not addressed by the authors, it would be interesting to analyze the extent to which "foodies"—in order to prove their mettle or authenticity as a such—are called upon to reject feminized forms of cooking instruction and practice. There seems to be something distinctly non-foodie-ish about navigating (and perhaps feeling frustrated by) domestic constraints and responsibilities as a home cook, a role still disproportionately played by women.

lifestyle" (Judkins and Presser 924). Such added work includes

> using fewer packaged or processed foods, reducing dependence on cars, using fewer disposable products and reusing items like plastic bags, limiting children's use of energy-consumptive entertainment, shopping for products produced in more environmentally-sensitive ways, and drying clothes outside or on an indoor rack rather than in an electric clothes dryer (Judkins and Presser 924).

> Within households, practicing greater sustainability means doing things such as growing one's own food and/or buying local, organic and bulk foods; using whole foods and cooking more 'from scratch'; installing compact fluorescent light bulbs, water flow reduction devices, and energy-efficient appliances; purchasing recycled products and items with minimal packaging; using biodegradable cleaners; hanging laundry outside; and walking, biking, carpooling, and trip-combining (Gershon & Stern, 1997; Newman, 2003). In addition, television and video game use is limited in more sustainable households due to the energy these devices require and the messages to consume and degrade that they propagate. Hence childcare and entertainment call for more interaction" (Judkins and Presser 926).

Judkins and Presser anticipated that the progressive environmental politics of their (admittedly small) sample—12 heterosexual, married couples with children that "adopted eco-friendly behaviors in the home"—would correlate with an equitable division of this added household labor. However, their study indicated that the women in the couples

"generally did more eco-friendly domestic labor than did their husbands" (Judkins and Presser 930). Further, the study also tended to support the assumption that "that men serve in an auxiliary, and not a primary, role where housework is concerned" (Judkins and Presser 934). The men tended to "help out" with the housework, whereas the women both did more of the work and "tended to bear primary responsibility for the work that got done" (Judkins and Presser 933). Because these particular findings were gleaned from such a small sample, they cannot in and of themselves be used to generalize about progressive, middleclass households in general. Nevertheless, it would be worth investigating whether the findings are indicative of broader trends among this particular formation, which is so often assumed to share household labor equitably. It seems likely that the adoption of Pollan's program would similarly exacerbate an unequal division of household work along gendered lines. Further, with its emphasis on the pleasures rather than responsibilities of cooking, Pollan's program does little to challenge the construction that cooking is a responsibility borne primarily by women.

That the gendered dimensions of household labor remain unaddressed and unanalyzed in Pollan's work has implications for the viability of his program. In a post to the "Moms & Dads" blog of South Florida's *Sun Sentinel*, Vicki McCash Brennan, for example, expresses frustration at the difficulty of following Pollan's advice. "Can feeding my family get any more complicated?" she wonders. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* "opened her [16-year-old daughter Abby's] eyes to food additives, including high fructose corn syrup, MSG, hydrogenated oils, artificial colors, flavors and sweeteners." Although McCash takes Pollan seriously as "a science and food writer who has conducted

tremendous research into where our food comes from," she points out that his seemingly simple suggestion that we "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants," in fact requires tremendous time and energy to put into practice in a real family system. This is especially so in a family in which the primary shopper/cook is responsible for meeting multiple (and at times competing) nutritional needs and demands of family members. Brennen summarizes her experience of Pollan's argument to "eat food," the subsequent demands made by her daughter, and the family context in which this occurred:

> By food, [Pollan] means food that would be recognizable to your great-great grandparents in the 19th century. Food that comes from real plants and animals that are fed what nature intended for them to eat.
>
> Abby vowed on Easter Sunday that she would no longer eat any bad food additives. Her chocolate bunny remains unopened. She printed a list for my reference from the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a group of liberal, activist scientists concerned about our food supply.
>
> Meanwhile, daughter No. 2, who will eat meat and has no compunctions regarding high-fructose, multicolored "food," gets insanely painful migraines of unknown source. The neurologist's recommendation: No food additives. No peanuts. No chocolate. No caffeine. No hard cheeses.
>
> And my husband has slightly elevated blood pressure, so low-sodium for him.
>
> I challenge you to walk in my shoes for just one trip to the grocery store. Try reading the labels on everything you buy. High fructose corn syrup is

everywhere: In crackers. In jelly. In waffles and cereal. In strawberry cream cheese. Artificial sweeteners are in almost anything labeled "low" or "no" sugar. MSG is in packaged soups, taco seasoning, salad dressings and lots of mixed spices. You'll see long lists of things that turn out to be benign vitamins in bread, but then there's BHA or BHT. There are sulfites in bacon, sausage and frozen turkey and chicken products. Sodium is loaded into soups, canned vegetables and almost every prepared food. Cold cuts have all kinds of complicated-sounding preservatives. Tuna has traces of toxic metals such as mercury which might trigger migraines.

> Do you know how hard it is in the 21st century to sustain yourself on a 19th-century diet? We're managing so far. But even with the no-additives diet, our younger daughter has been sidelined with a migraine for the past two days. I guess I really am going to have to take that no-peanuts edict seriously. But what do you put in a lunchbox for a kid who cannot eat cheese, peanut butter, cold cuts or tuna? (Brennan)

Although not hostile to Pollan's advice *per se*, Brennan's experience helpfully illustrates the ways in which following Pollan's advice, given the present-day demands faced by many home cooks, takes time, effort and emotional energy and can be far from pleasurable. Reading labels and meeting the dietary needs of children and spouses are labors that—for those bearing the primary responsibility for feeding family members—are inseparable from (and at times may preclude) the possibility of experiencing the "pleasures" of cooking that Pollan describes.

Laboring Ethically as a Problem of Freedom

Yet for labor to be ethical within Pollan's program (and within many other ethical lifestyle regimes) it must be imagined to have been *freely chosen*. This way of imagining ethics produces exclusions, which have been helpfully articulated by a commenter, blackandalive, on the blog *Racialicious*: "…when people in a poor neighborhood grow food in their yards … it's just being poor– but when white people do it they are saving the earth or something" (Balasubramanian). The cultural assumption to which blackandalive makes reference is that *necessity*, at the exclusion of ethics, knowledge or aesthetics, determines these practices when carried out by poor and/or non-white individuals. If ethics is imagined in this way, the "freer" the actor, then the greater is his or her potential for living an ethical life. For laboring to link up with ethics, it must be understood as the pleasurable exercise of freedom.

If ethics is defined as the pleasurable exercise of freedom, access to ethical eating is limited on the basis of race and class. Further, this definition of ethics implies gendered exclusions. For example, Pollan does not describe "our mothers and grandmothers" as ethical. These imaginary progenitors did not choose particular practices. Rather, governed by tradition and culture—not freedom—they put their embodied skill and knowledge into practice. If Pollan imagined these women as ethical or free, their choice, for example, to leave the kitchen (if that is indeed what they did) would have to be taken seriously *as a choice*. Instead, Pollan argues that this choice was not made by individuals acting freely. Rather, the abandonment of cooking from scratch as a labor of love was

the result of food industry trickery. One might ask what this means for the implied gender of the ideal ethical eater. Do the responsibilities that many women bear—for example, moms like Brennen or the women in Judkins and Presser's study—constitute them as less free and therefore less potentially ethical than those with fewer domestic responsibilities? Indeed, that ethics is the special purview of the "freest" of men is an old idea and has particular purchase in the canon of what Pollan has called American nature writing (Pollan also claims this body of work as his literary legacy, referring to himself as a "child of Thoreau" (Pollan, SN 3)). In *Walden* for example, Henry David Thoreau remarks, "With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor… None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we shall call voluntary poverty" (Thoreau 9). It is only by virtue of having means to begin with that a life without luxuries becomes ethical. Poverty is ethical only if it is chosen, yet those who are not "voluntarily" poor are imagined as unfree and therefore without ethics.[21] This is not to say they are without *morality* or a system of values that gives meaning to the practices of everyday life, but as long as living ethically is by definition a *practice of choosing freely among options unequally accessible*, it is *per se* exclusive on an economic basis.

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[21] A telling passage in *In Defense of Food* helps to make sense of the exclusions produced by Pollan's program: "Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and that is shameful: however, those of us who can, should . . ." Michael Pollan, In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008).. Here, poverty as a principle of exclusion is acknowledged, bemoaned, but ultimately left unquestioned. The viability of Pollan's movement, it seems, has nothing to do with the participation of poor people. Poverty itself emerges as abstract, though problematic, while the exclusions internal to Pollan's program are ignored. The condition of poverty precludes the right to choosiness not only as a means to "vote" with ones dollars and support alternative food systems, but also as condition of access to safe, sustainable food.

The Stakes of Refusal

Yet pleasure is not all that is at stake in Pollan's call to labor. A refusal to expend more time, energy, money and thought to live a more ethical food-life may result in the perpetuation of problematic food ideologies and pathologies. Americans will continue to be fat and the industrial food system will persist in producing deleterious health and environmental externalities. It is a refusal to absorb the "hidden costs" of the industrial food system. In *Food Rules* these stakes are articulated in an increasingly disciplinary tone, especially with regard to obesity. At stake in the labor of cooking in *Food Rules* is personal health and the health of one's family: "As the cost of food in America has declined, in terms of both price and the effort required to put it on the table, we have been eating much more (and spending more on health care)" (Pollan, FR 99-100). Similarly, rule 63, "Cook," is also articulated to health: "Not surprisingly, the decline in home cooking closely parallels the rise in obesity, and research suggests that people who cook are more likely to eat a more healthful diet" (Pollan, FR 137).

Thus, while the first books were aimed at living a satisfying and pleasurable life by careful reflection and knowledge, in *Food Rules* Pollan devotes a great deal of space to encouraging readers to curb, rather than expand their ways of eating. In rule 44, Pollan asks readers to "pay more, eat less" and in rule 45, as though acknowledging that paying more is not necessarily feasible, he asks that they simply "… eat less" (Pollan, FR 99, 101, ellipses in original). "Stop eating before you're full" is rule 46 (Pollan, FR 103), and rule 53 asks readers to "serve a proper portion and don't go back for seconds" (Pollan, FR 117).

Pollan's status as an eating "expert" in *Food Rules*, perhaps allows him to offer rules that would otherwise be visible as disciplinary. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that Pollan's urgings to "eat less" are aimed at the same audience to which he spoke in the first books. Such urgings link up with broader interventions into populations defined as "problematic" because of "unhealthful" eating practices—overwhelmingly poor and non-white Americans.

Conclusion

Michael Pollan goes to great lengths to achieve a seemingly gender-, race-, and class-neutral mode of address. He makes a point of encouraging all readers, regardless of gender, to "cook" and "plant a vegetable garden," as stated in rules 63 and 62 respectively (Pollan, FR 137, 135). The apparent gender-neutrality of his call to take pleasure in the thoughtful labor of food preparation fails to consider the ways in which this kind of labor has historically been, and continues to be, highly gendered. Acknowledgement of the gendering of domestic labor becomes increasingly important in the context of postfeminism—a prevailing notion that feminism has been "taken into account," and is thus "no longer needed" (McRobbie, Aftermath 12). Elspeth Probyn, for example, critiques the discourses that urge a post-feminist return to the kitchen. She argues that these discourses circulate based on the assumption that "freed from the obligations of cooking, the kitchen [can be] now sold to women as the new sphere of sensual liberation" (Probyn 4).

Pollan similarly offers added time and labor (as opposed to added monetary cost) as (almost) universally accessible means of absorbing "hidden costs." He address US Americans as equally positioned in relation to the possibilities of becoming ethical eaters. Yet in so doing, Pollan aestheticizes the labor of food practices—abstracting them from the realities of such work in daily life. He does this first by registering nostalgia for a time when women performed the caring work of food preparation (thanks to embodied, rather than laboriously acquired, skills and knowledge) as a labor of love, and second by registering nostalgia for a time when various non-white peoples were still uncorrupted by the food practices of western colonizers and industrialization. Further, in describing his own experience with cooking, gardening, foraging, etc., readers are led to understand that, for Pollan, these things *are* pleasurable. He fails to consider the ways in which individuals are positioned differently in relation to such labor—physical ability, time, cooking resources, family demands—and he fails to analyze the ways in which the gendered division of household labor remains inequitable.

Although Michael Pollan surely aims to be inclusive, his purported race-, gender-, and class-neutral mode of address and his seemingly universally appealing concepts like "pleasure" tend to obscure the structural constraints that organize individuals' daily lives. This occurs on the mundane level of the home, but also in relation to the broader functioning of food-related labor, food access, and food knowledge. Pollan's work implies that the *freer* one is with respect to structural constraints, the more ethical one can potentially be. Such a notion of ethics tends to limit access to ethical eating on the basis of race and class. It also implies gendered obligations. It equates the labor of ethical

eating with a kind of freedom—a centrally pleasurable one. This equation obscures the ways in which such labor is done in the context of time, economic, spatial/geographical, and cultural constraints that might make such work not only difficult to carry out, but also difficult to understand as the pleasurable exercise of freedom.

I level this critique not to dismiss Pollan out of hand, nor even to reject the possibilities of pleasure (or even labor) in an effective food justice intervention. Rather, I suggest that it is imperative that those who are invested in food justice analyze the productive dimensions of the way we define the "food problem," how we locate the causes of this problem, and the solutions we propose. By "productive," I mean the ways in which the problem-cause-solution constellation produces blame and obligations in ways that are distributed unequally along raced, gendered, and class lines. By "productive," I also mean the ways in which the problem-cause-solution set defines freedom and ethics in ways that require forms of access that are likewise unequally distributed. "Pleasure," especially when attached to forms of labor with long and complex histories, is neither neutral nor apolitical. Same goes for "pathology." Although I believe significant structural change is necessary to achieve a just and sustainable food system, I also take seriously the possibilities of a politics of the everyday. Political/ethical commitments can be meaningfully carried out in the mundane details of everyday life. If, as Pollan argues, an effective or meaningful intervention can indeed entail absorption of "hidden costs" on an individual level, we must seriously consider several things. First, we must address the ways in which this requires resources that are unequally distributed. Second, we must interrogate the degree to which such

"absorption" is understood as ethical has a relationship to the degree of "freedom" one had in choosing to absorb these costs. Third, we must look at whether this way of being ethical is likely to exacerbate a regressive gendered division of labor. And Finally, we must analyze the ways in which understanding ethics in this way has implications for whose expenditure, whose labor, counts as ethical.

Alternatively, we might also ask whether a politics of the everyday need be so individual, whether it must entail "absorbing hidden costs" through personal expenditure. Are there possibilities for pleasurable labor in a more equitable world? What would a collective politics of the everyday look like? Elspeth Probyn argues "food and its relation to bodies is fundamentally about power…This power is obviously exercised at the macro level of economics and class (and indeed the clearest exposition of 'glocal' economics can be seen in agriculture), but it is also palpable at individual levels" (Probyn referencing Jack Goody 7). Thus, a politics of food must be conceived not only in relation to the structural, but also in relation to the mundane. Pollan's work takes seriously the politics of the everyday. Conceived of as a site at which to carry out a politics of the everyday, shifting food practices can help us to imagine other ways of being in the world.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to make sense of the productive dimensions of Michael Pollan's writing by analyzing it as a cultural technology. In chapter one, I argued that his instructional work can be understood as a technology of a particularly ethical form of neoliberal citizenship. Critics of Michael Pollan point out that his work links up with neoliberalism, individual responsibility, and consumer action. They argue that this very fact indicates that his work is apolitical, an "anti-politics" and "depoliticizing" (Guthman, Commentary; Lavin). In contradistinction, I argue that there is a political and productive dimension to these very aspects of Pollan's ethical eating program. For Pollan, a particular way of reflecting upon one's food practices through specific forms of knowledge becomes the means to living a beautiful food life. This way of reflecting is inextricable from Pollan's critique of the industrial food system and his (limited) critique of neoliberal capitalism. Reflecting appropriately on food practices requires knowledge of these critiques. While this form of reflection is exceedingly individual, it becomes meaningful when folded into the mundane details of daily life *because* it is understood to have broader effects. Individuals can self-shape as ethical neoliberal citizens through putting Pollan's ethical eating program into practice.

Pollan's mode of address parallels that of other technologies of neoliberal citizenship not aimed at living a beautiful life. For example, he consistently uses a rational analysis of costs and benefits to make his program persuasive. Pollan's emphasis on economic efficiency is typically neoliberal and appears to disallow claims made on the

basis of competing value systems (like environmentalism, human rights, etc.). However, I conclude chapter one by suggesting that Pollan's program has a morality that exceeds that of neoliberalism and economic efficiency. He registers hopefulness about the possibilities of living a beautiful food life *per se*. This hopefulness is not because such a life is efficient, not because such a life produces rational, risk-averse individuals. This is a system of morality that has its basis memories, longings, and anxieties that cannot be explained by theories of neoliberalism alone.

Thus, in chapter two, I analyzed Pollan's system of morality in relation to a particular class formation: the liberal professional middle class. I began by tracing this morality through Pollan's early nature writing and I argued that the longings, anxieties and memories registered in this writing are especially salient to a professional middle class audience. While in some ways, Pollan's more recent work appears to speak to a broader audience than his prior work, the morality—that is, the measure of right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse—that undergirds Pollan's food ethics is reflective of these very same longings. Thus, I argue that the food books can be understood as a technology of class reproduction, for cultivating particular ways of knowing and tasting that link up with living a beautiful food life.

I begin chapter three with the question of pleasure. Pleasure might seem better suited to chapter one or two, in which I consider the possibilities of living a beautiful food life. However, in this chapter I aim less to think through the content of this pleasure, and more to investigate the material aspects of living an ethical life that the concept of pleasure serves to obscure. I argue that, as an ethical technology, Pollan's

work calls upon individual's to expend time, resources, and carry out significant labor as a way to be ethical. The definition of living ethically implied in the books—with its particular history, its labor requirements, its problem-solution pair for addressing the issue of food in the United States today—tends to extend the possibility of living ethically unequally on a raced, gendered, and classed basis.

In writing this thesis, I set out to investigate the productive dimensions of Pollan's work by, for the most part, analyzing his texts and other media appearances. I have not investigated the ways in which Pollan's books and other messages have been taken up nor have I analyzed the ways in which he or his work has had material, economic or political effects. While I have closed with my most cynical analysis, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which Pollan's work does seem to be upsetting business as usual within the industrial food system.

In a recent article in *Mother Jones*, for example, the author pointed out that "More than 35,000 college students were assigned one of his books last year; the *Omnivore's Dilemma* is one of the most widely read titles on US campuses" (Enzinna). The author interviewed a veterinary medicine grad student, who already had complete an MBA, or "masters of beef advocacy" which is "an industry funded program that trains college students to fight back against critics of big agribusiness, like Michael Pollan" (Enzinna 25). To the interviewer, the grad student describes Pollan as "really our enemy right now" (Enzinna).

Pollan's lectures on college and university campuses are one of the most significant sites of his messaging. The author of the *Mother Jones* piece argues that,

since Pollan's emergence, there has been a "pro beef backlash" on college campuses. This backlash has included cancellations of lectures by Pollan, for example, the one that was slated to take place at Washington State in 2009. This cancellation occurred in tandem with the removal of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* from the freshman reading list. The same year, the owner of Harris Ranch threatened to withhold a $500,000 donation to California Polytechnic if the school allowed Pollan give a scheduled talk. The school compromised by holding a panel discussion with Pollan and a beef industry advocate. The final incident cited in the article was a protest demonstration of a Pollan lecture held by a Wisconsin ag group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison after the school distributed *The Omnivore's Dilemma* to all incoming first-year students (Enzinna). According to this article, then, Pollan—and especially Pollan's campus presence—is experienced as a threat to the beef industry. It would be useful to analyze the extent to which this experienced threat links up with living an ethical food life.

In excluding the material and political effects of Pollan's writing cited in places like *Mother Jones,* while writing this thesis, I became increasingly concerned about the ways in which my critique might enervate progressive politics—albeit a politics that has regressive elements. I found myself equivocating awkwardly when my aunt, a retired teacher, asked if she could read this piece. She has devoted herself—for as long as I can remember—to the kinds of ethical eating recommended by Pollan. She has a vast organic garden, she has started organic school gardens, and she is heavily involved in the sustainable agriculture scene in central Massachusetts. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the possibilities for a progressive politics of lifestyle, I still feel encouraged when my

aunt tells me about her projects. Despite my critique, I also remain wedded to my own ethics of food, which is along much the same lines as my aunt's. It would be valuable to spend time thinking through the ways in which affective and emotional labor are enlisted in the project of living ethically. While certainly these can be called upon in ways that exacerbate existing inequalities, perhaps the collective possibilities of such labor and the affective investment in alternative economies can shift existing hierarchies toward a more just way of living.

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