

Reflexivity and the Whole Foods Market consumer: the lived experience of shopping for change

Josée Johnston · Michelle Szabo

Accepted: 10 June 2010 / Published online: 8 July 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

Abstract There has been widespread academic and popular debate about the transformative potential of consumption choices, particularly food shopping. While popular food media is optimistic about “shopping for change,” food scholars are more critical, drawing attention to fetishist approaches to “local” or “organic,” and suggesting the need for reflexive engagement with food politics. We argue that reflexivity is central to understanding the potential and limitations of consumer-focused food politics, but argue that this concept is often relatively unspecified. The first objective of this paper is to operationalize reflexivity and advance understanding of reflexivity as an important tool for understanding the lived experience of food shopping. Our second objective is to explore the range of reflexivity observed in a mainstream “shopping for change” market sector. To do this, we draw from in-depth interviews with shoppers at Whole Foods Market (WFM)—a retail venue with the stated goal of making consumers “feel good about where [they] shop.” This group is chosen because of our interest in investigating the reflexivity of consumer engagement with the corporatized arm of ethical consumption—a realm of concern to food scholars as alternative agricultural initiatives are absorbed (both materially and symbolically) into corporate institutions. Our analysis suggests that shopping at venues like WFM is primarily motivated by traditional consumer pleasures, even for politicized consumers, a

finding that poses serious limitations for a consumer-regulated food system.

Keywords Reflexivity · Whole Foods Market · Consumers · Ethical consumption

Introduction

Can consumers really save the world at the supermarket? While there is now a broad consensus that consumers are key actors in political systems (Micheletti 2003; Miller 1995; Slater 1997; Soper 2004; Szasz 2007; Zukin and McGuire 2004), it is not clear whether consumers meaningfully exercise citizenship in the marketplace, or whether this is a neo-liberal strategy of downloading responsibility to individuals, leaving states less accountable for the public good. The popular press is optimistic about the potential of shopping for change (e.g., Clark and Unterberger 2007; Vasil 2007), yet food scholars are more critical, identifying fetishized approaches to “local” and “organic” food projects, casting doubt on the coherence of “citizen-consumers” (Johnston 2008), and suggesting the need for reflexive engagement with food politics (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2003; Hinrichs 2003; Moore 2006).

In this paper we hope to move these debates forward through a theoretical and empirical focus on reflexivity. While reflexivity is central to understanding food politics, the concept is often left relatively unspecified. Most often, it has referred to a consciousness on the part of consumers about their role in perpetuating or addressing problematic aspects of the food system. However, definitions have not always been consistent, as we explain in more detail below. In addition, there is a paucity of food scholarship which explores what reflexivity looks like in the lives and words

J. Johnston (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina
Avenue, Toronto, ON M5S 2J4, Canada
e-mail: josee.johnston@utoronto.ca

M. Szabo
Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, HNES 109,
4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

of consumers. The first objective of this paper, then, is to operationalize reflexivity and demonstrate its utility for understanding the lived experience of food consumers.

Our second objective is to investigate the range of consumer reflexivity observed in a corporate “shopping for change” market sector. While extreme instances of consumer politicization (e.g., organizing consumer boycotts, demanding legislative change to protect consumers) have obvious political import, we believe it is equally important to investigate the meanings and motivations of ethical consumption¹ in corporate spaces. The corporatized arm of ethical food consumption is of special concern to food scholars, as alternative agricultural initiatives have been materially and semiotically incorporated into corporate institutions (Fromartz 2006; Guptil 2009; Howard 2008; Johnston et al. 2009). Despite significant theoretical work on the topic of ethical consumption (Barnett et al. 2005b; Johnston 2008; Jubas 2007; Slocum 2004; Soper 2004, 2007) there is a paucity of empirical work examining the reflexivity and contradictions of ethical consumption in “real-life” market settings, particularly corporate spaces, where the majority of food shopping takes place.

As such, this paper investigates the reflexivity of consumers who shop at Whole Foods Market (WFM). WFM (which has the motto, “Whole Foods, Whole People, Whole Planet”) is one of the largest corporate shopping venues articulating a discourse of ethical consumption (Johnston 2008). WFM is an ideal site for studying reflexivity in practice because it re-frames food shopping at a grocery chain as ethical, sustainable, and pleasurable. The store draws a larger number of buyers than small-scale “ethical” venues (like food co-ops), and offers many products (e.g., candy, cookies, chips, bottled water) that appeal to a wide swath of the shopping public, and not only to deeply committed food activists.² At the same time, WFM is a grocery chain with an enticing catchphrase (“Feel good about where you shop”) and a place where consumers are offered information about many themes central to alternative food movements, like local provenance, organic certification, and sustainable fisheries. Using WFM as a case study, our aim here is to explore the nature, range, and lived experience of consumer reflexivity in a corporate retail setting. We develop criteria for assessing consumers’ reflexivity about shopping at WFM and use these criteria to shed light on the kinds of

reflexivity at play, drawing from in-depth interviews with shoppers. We begin by describing the theoretical context for a study of consumer reflexivity, and then outline our three-part conceptualization of this term.

The context of consumer activism and reflexive shopping

As noted above, popular food writing has taken a decidedly optimistic approach to questions of consumer agency and the food system. Best-selling authors (e.g., Pollan 2006; Singer and Mason 2006) argue that dinner decisions have profound ecological and social consequences and seek to guide consumers in their food choices. A bevy of Internet resources advise consumers on how to make local, sustainable, ethical, and cruelty-free food choices (e.g., www.ethicurean.com). American gourmet culture, more generally, has adopted food politics as a central part of its discourse, frequently framing “eco” food choices as simultaneously ethical and delicious (Johnston and Baumann 2009, pp. 128–129).

While the wave of ethical eating experts, guides, and cookbooks seems inexorable, food and consumption scholars cast a nuanced and critical light on this trend. Guthman (2007) criticizes Pollan’s (2006) individualized focus on what to eat and how to connect with growers, arguing that it fetishizes market solutions while obscuring the structural causes and collective solutions to industrial food system problems. Some scholars suggest that the focus on individual consumption and choice represents a neoliberal downloading of responsibility to self-auditing subjects that leaves the state less accountable for the public good (Power 1997; Rose 1999). For Connolly and Prothero (2008), the problem is not so much political as practical; they argue that current movements for “green consumption” are limited by the significant confusion consumers experience as they sort through conflicting information about “ethical” shopping and negotiate consumption-related identities and relationships. Industrialized societies have developed a significant awareness of environmental issues and over-consumption (Cotgrove and Duff 1980) yet consumers make shopping choices for myriad reasons (e.g., comfort, habits, affection for loved ones) that are not always based on reflexive thought processes (Miller 1998; Reynolds and Olson 2001; Twitchell 1999).

Clearly, there is a significant grey area between the two polarities of this debate, which can be roughly characterized as “food shopping as a new form of activism” and “food shopping as a market-focused neoliberal ideology.” In the middle lies a hybrid political subject—the citizen-consumer—who reflexively considers both the responsibilities of citizenship and the personal pleasures of

¹ We use the terms “ethical” or “ethically” throughout this paper to describe practices or products which our research participants believed promoted social justice and/or environmental sustainability.

² WFM executives are well aware of the potential contradictions of their broad consumer offerings. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, CEO John Mackey announced a new initiative to promote health, and candidly admitted, “We sell all kinds of candy. We sell a bunch of junk” (McLaughlin 2009).

consumerism³ (Barnett et al. 2005b; Johnston 2008; Jubas 2007; Slocum 2004; Soper 2004, 2007). The founder of Slow Food, Carlos Petrini, for example, insists on the interpenetration of pleasure and environmental consciousness in food consumption: “A gastronome who is not an environmentalist is stupid. And an environmentalist who is not a gastronome is sad” (Chapman 2009, p. L3). In an academic context, philosopher Kate Soper, suggests possibilities for a middle ground of “alternative hedonism,” where citizen-consumers are reflexive about their consumption pleasures and take steps to redefine and revise consumer pleasures to account for their collective responsibilities to other citizens, species, and the environment (Soper 2004, 2007, 2008). While theories of transformative consumption are inspiring, it is important to avoid assuming that citizen-consumers are seamless constructions that automatically transform the food system. In other words, it is necessary to investigate contradictions between self-oriented consumerism and the collective responsibilities of citizenship (Johnston 2008). In this paper, we investigate such contradictions by putting theories of reflexivity in dialogue with the views of WFM consumers, shedding light on the possibilities and limitations of consumption-focused strategies for transforming the food system.

The term reflexivity has been used in somewhat different ways in different scholarly traditions. In food scholarship, reflexivity has been used to think through consumers’ engagement with alternatives like organics, local food, and fair trade. Dupuis and Goodman (2005) argue that a transformed food system requires an element of reflexivity and critique the unreflexive fetishization of locavorism, noting that a single-minded focus on local eating can inadvertently legitimize hierarchies of race, class, and geographic inequality (see also Guthman 2003; Hinrichs 2003; Moore 2006). While reflexivity is frequently invoked in relation to food system transformation, the vision of reflexive eating is left relatively unspecified. Questions arise like, “How do we recognize reflexivity in the lives of consumers”?

To clarify how the term reflexivity operates in praxis, we can draw from broader debates emerging from theories of reflexive modernization (e.g., Beck 1994; Giddens 1991; Lash 1994). Beck’s concept of reflexive modernization identifies a “self-confrontation with the effects of risk society” directed towards one’s own lifestyle as well as

towards modernization and its attendant social and ecological risks (1994, pp. 5–6). Giddens describes this process as follows: “Social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices” (1991, pp. 38–39). As part of this, reflexivity involves skepticism towards expert knowledge and knowledge-producing institutions, especially since these institutions are seen as inadequate for managing the risks created by modern life, such as global warming and mad cow disease (Beck 1992, p. 153, 1999, p. 80).

The reflexive process is frequently theorized at a national and global scale, but can also be extended to individuals. Giddens refers to “reflexive project[s] of the self” where the self is “explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (1991, p. 33). While Giddens sees reflexive projects as hopeful, he notes that they occur alongside the “demise of public life” and that individual reflexivity can readily devolve into narcissism (1991, pp. 169–170). Food scholars have similar concerns (Guthman 2003) and conceptualize individual reflexivity as a willingness to think critically about the social and ecological problems of the industrialized food system as well as proposed solutions, and engage with food through more self-aware, democratic processes (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2003; Moore 2006).

To this list, we would add a critical engagement with the knowledge produced by key actors in the food system. While for Beck (1992, 1999) and Giddens (1991), an important aspect of reflexivity is skepticism of expert knowledge claims, for an examination of reflexivity in relation to food shopping, it is not scientific knowledge that is key, but knowledge produced by food system actors (which may include, but is not limited to scientific knowledge). Alternative food movement discourses have been appropriated by corporations and other marketing campaigns (Johnston et al. 2009); as such, we argue that reflexivity involves an awareness that food system actors may use movement discourses without making substantial changes to their practices (e.g., “greenwashing”) (Greer and Bruno 1997).

While the concept of reflexivity presents possibilities for linking individual motivations with ecological and social transformations, it is important to recognize its limitations. For example, theories of reflexivity have been criticized for an inattention to inequality (Adams 2007, pp. 49–51; Lash 1994). Reflexivity is not shaped in a social vacuum but reflects the gender, race, and class stratification of the larger social context (Barnett et al. 2005b; Guthman 2003; Lash 1994, p. 156). Privileged (wealthy and highly educated) consumers may have more exposure to information about the food system (through formal education, academic publications, etc.) than less privileged consumers, and may

³ As opposed to the value-neutral term “consumption,” consumerism is understood here as an ideology and refers to the belief that “consumption far beyond the satisfaction of physical needs is, literally, at the center of meaningful existence” (Sklair 2001, p. 5). Consumer societies valorize an ideal of consumer sovereignty where individual choice is prioritized over collective action to combat social problems and the ideals of citizenship are minimized.

thus have more information with which to be reflexive. However, as Guthman (2003) rightly notes, we cannot assume that affluent shoppers necessarily display heightened reflexivity about social and environmental issues in the food system. Such assumptions can serve to elevate the moral and intellectual superiority of economically privileged consumers, while positioning other consumers as slovenly and uncritical (see also Barnett et al. 2005b; Dolan 2005; Dupuis and Goodman 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to be aware that economic and cultural capital facilitates access to “ethical” (e.g., organic, fair trade, local) products and ethical consumer discourse, particularly because of the often higher prices and exclusive location of retailers (Barnett et al. 2005a; Johnston 2008). Put simply, theories of reflexivity must take into account the ways in which inequality shapes consumer access to market spaces, and how privileged food consumers may be framed as more reflexive than low-income shoppers, particularly through their participation in the discourse of ethical consumerism.

To establish our own reflexivity criteria, we integrate the contributions of these scholarly traditions and refine them in relation to the abovementioned critiques. In short, we understand consumer reflexivity as a multilayered concept that includes awareness of the tension between consumer desire and citizenship ideals, critical consideration of the knowledge claims and motivations of actors in the food system, and attentiveness to how food practices rely on and reproduce socioeconomic privilege. We are aware that reflexive thought processes alone do not guarantee specific transformative shopping practices (let alone a wholesale transformation of the food system), but we argue that reflexivity is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for food system transformation. We operationalize these three reflexivity criteria in relation to WFM shopping as follows:

1. *Relative prioritization of consumer desires vs. citizenship ideals:* To what extent are consumer pleasures and conveniences prioritized over citizenship goals like sustainability and social justice at WFM? In other words, to what extent do personal concerns take precedence over issues of environmental and social justice?
2. *Consideration of corporate knowledge claims:* Do consumers think critically about knowledge claims in the food system and the information produced by WFM specifically?
3. *Awareness of social inequality:* Are WFM consumers aware of how access to “ethical” food consumption options (and specifically access to WFM and its products) is shaped by structural inequalities? Does shopping at WFM raise awareness of food system inequities, or does it serve to legitimate inequality and reproduce class boundaries?

We now work through each criterion using our interview data to indicate moments of tension and contradiction, with the larger goal of shedding light on the range and nature of reflexivity evident in the lived experiences of WFM consumers.

Data and analysis: Whole Foods Market, consumers, and reflexivity

Our research revolves around shoppers at WFM, the world’s largest natural foods retailer. WFM has over 270 stores across North America and the UK and employs approximately 52,600 people (Wall Street Journal 2006; Whole Foods 2007), suggesting that the relevance of this case study is at least partially attributable to WFM’s massive scale. As a firm that articulates a discourse of ethical consumption and promotes itself as a place where consumers can enjoy the pleasures of consumerism with a clear conscience (Johnston 2008), WFM is a particularly useful case to investigate how food consumers seek to satisfy the quotidian pleasures of food shopping, while also attending to civic ideals of justice, community, and sustainability. By focusing on consumers who frequent WFM, we do not intend to suggest that these views are representative of *all* consumers engaged with ethical consumption—a broad category that includes engagement with products ranging from fair-trade coffee to sweatshop-free t-shirts to cruelty-free eggs. Our intention is to instead present a range of consumer perspectives associated with a corporate manifestation of ethical consumption.

To interrogate the meanings attributed to WFM consumption, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 WFM shoppers.⁴ We focused on adults who shopped at least twice a month at WFM in downtown Toronto, and while we sought to attain a diverse sample of WFM shoppers, the majority of our respondents were affluent, educated, and White.⁵ In our sample, household income varied, but was generally much higher than the urban average.⁶ Just over half of the participants (11/20) had graduate or professional degrees and all but three had Bachelor’s Degrees. Our study’s demographic breakdown

⁴ All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We coded the transcripts according to recurring themes using the qualitative data management software AtlasTi and examined the coded data according to practices of the extended case method (Burawoy 1991, 1998).

⁵ Eighteen of the participants were Caucasian (two among these identified as Jewish) while the remaining two were Chinese–Canadian and Lebanese–Canadian, respectively.

⁶ Median family income in Toronto is \$62,800 (Statistics Canada 2006, p.10). In our sample, 17/20 participants had a household income above this median. Eleven of 20 had a household income of at least twice this average.

generally mirrors the population of shoppers we observed at this WFM location, which is situated in an affluent downtown neighborhood.⁷ In the following three sections, we use the conceptual lens of reflexivity to examine the meanings and motivations for WFM consumers.

Prioritizing consumer desires versus citizenship ideals

The first way we evaluate reflexivity in relation to WFM shopping is by examining how participants prioritized traditional consumer desires (e.g., affordability, taste, convenience) versus collective citizenship goals (e.g., food system sustainability, social justice). We are interested in the importance of consumer pleasures and benefits, the extent to which larger social and environmental impacts of shopping decisions were considered, and the tensions and contradictions between individual consumer pleasures and collective citizenship ideals.

Overall, conventional consumer values, such as convenience, pleasure, and product selection, were the predominant priorities articulated by our participants. Of these values, the most frequently mentioned theme was the pleasures (e.g., tastes, visuals, smells, feeling of luxury) associated with the products and shopping environment at WFM.⁸ In describing their primary motivations for shopping at WFM, 18 of 20 participants mentioned the aesthetic appeal of WFM (i.e., it was an attractive and enjoyable shopping setting), and all participants mentioned the impressive selection of high quality, healthful products. When describing his first visit to the store, Evan, a 29-year-old IT professional, recalled being love-struck: “I was amazed. I loved it at first sight. They say, can you fall in love at first sight, and yeah, you can! That’s what happened to me with Whole Foods!” Other interviewees echoed the sentiment of “loving” WFM and described the store as “aesthetically pleasing” and as a “food playground.” While Evan’s account of “falling in love” with WFM was a more extreme case, his appreciation for the store’s aesthetics, revealed in the following quote, was typical: “It’s beautiful for one thing. It’s very well laid-out, it’s very clean...It’s just filled with colors and you feel like it’s a nice place to be at.”

Several participants mentioned not only the aesthetic appeal of WFM, but also the pleasures and the special role in their daily routines of the WFM shopping *experience*. For almost half the interviewees (9/20), simply exploring

the products in WFM was a form of entertainment. They described it as an “experience,” an “outing,” a “vacation” or an “escape”—a retreat from the mundane world of work and family responsibilities. In the words of Mary, a 62-year-old ESL teacher:

For me it’s a destination. ...It feels like I’m going on a trip ...So, to go there, it’s like you’re out of your life. . . You can go in and you can have a treat and you feel like you’ve been somewhere and you’ve done something.

For Mia, a 36-year-old lawyer who used to live near WFM, the outing to WFM was also considered a weekly treat: “It was part of my Sunday to walk around the block, stop in Whole Foods, have a taste of something, buy a few little things, get one of the luxury items as a gift for myself.” Iris, a 56-year-old journalist, described how she introduced an 80-year-old friend to the pleasures of WFM shopping and how a trip to WFM had been the woman’s last outing before she passed away: “It was gratifying to me that she was able to, you know, take some joy in food shopping because food ... should be a pleasure.” Olivia, a 35-year-old real estate agent with two young children, saw a trip to WFM as an accessible form of entertainment given the busyness of working motherhood:

If I go on my own, it’s like a little mini vacation... I like to troll the aisles and look at the 20 different kinds of teas because that is my outlet right now. Because I’m not going out to a movie, I am not meeting friends for a glass of wine and having a great conversation. So, my outlet right now is shopping...Which is a sad commentary but that is the truth.

Interestingly, Olivia rarely bought any tea. She, like other respondents, enjoyed looking at products whether she intended on buying them or not, suggesting the leisure-like quality of the shopping experience. Yet WFM did not only provide a source of indulgences (“treats” and entertainment). It also provided a feeling of heightened status for some interviewees—an opportunity to feel pampered. As Steve, a 31-year-old professional, put it, “you kind of feel like they’re preparing these foods just for you.” In many ways, WFM offers a quintessential consumer encounter as defined by seminal work on consumer culture. It is a place where one may be enchanted by the cornucopia of delightful products (Benjamin 1999; Ritzer 2001) as well as by a luxurious environment (Williams 1982). It offers a feeling of being indulged, of affirming or improving one’s status (Schor 1991; Veblen 2007[1934]). It is a place where the promise of products and imagined lifestyles gives as much or more pleasure than the reality (Campbell 1987).

⁷ These facts in themselves do not suggest that low income consumers are not interested in “ethical” consumption (Lockie 2009) and indeed, three of our participants had incomes below the city average.

⁸ Our interviewees typically talked about the WFM they frequented in Toronto, but several had experience shopping at WFM in other North American cities.

Besides the pleasure of the experience inside the store, other consumer conveniences like parking, one-stop shopping, prepared foods, and selection were also identified as key elements of the WFM experience. Fred, a 36-year-old music producer and father of two young children, noted: “if you need a couple of stupid things like sugar or toilet paper, it is actually there. Whereas if you go to a specialty store, it’s not going to be there. You don’t go to the [organic butcher] and buy a little bit of Ajax, you know? ... [WFM] is very convenient.” Mia, a 36-year-old lawyer with a young child, also emphasized the convenience of one-stop shopping at WFM, and how this intersected with the aesthetic qualities of the products:

When you’ve got a lot to do and you’re looking for everything to be beautiful, it’s a really good place to go because you can get everything you need. You can also get candles for the table made out of ... beeswax. And, you know that everything’s gonna be gorgeous... And you can get the organic or the “not organic” but everything you get is gonna be the perfect ripeness. ... When I’m looking for it to look good and be perfect, I definitely go there.

As indicated by Fred’s and Mia’s quotes, interviewees placed significant value on the abundant array of consumer choices at WFM. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by WFM’s extensive product selection, almost all respondents described it as a positive attribute.

Although consumer values like convenience and pleasure were the dominant reasons given for shopping at WFM, citizenship values were also invoked in our interviews. Three categories of citizenship ideals were brought up by participants in response to questions such as what motivated their shopping at WFM and what was “good” about their shopping practices more generally: (1) environmental sustainability (e.g., local or organic food, biodegradable packaging); (2) labor justice (e.g., organic production as safer for workers, fair trade); and (3) community building (e.g., shopping at a local market to strengthen community relationships). Half of participants (10/20) described the ways in which social or environmental concerns affected their own shopping practice. Of these participants, several (6/10) linked shopping at WFM with achieving social and/or environmental objectives, while others mentioned other kinds of consumption strategies, such as buying from farmers’ markets or food co-ops.

Significantly, the other half of our sample either did not speak about environmental or social values at all, or mentioned them only in *abstract* terms, without relating them to their own practices.⁹ For example, Janet, a

⁹ To be clear, our focus was on how participants understood their shopping practices and described their shopping practices to us. We

32-year-old mother of a young child working in corporate promotions, listed her shopping priorities as “taste, nutrition, and price,” and did not veer much beyond health and budget concerns. In our interview with Mary, she mentioned that the clean, environmentally friendly store presentation made WFM *feel* like an attractive “destination”; in her words, WFM does “the little things that make it feel environmental,” like not selling harmful bleach cleaners. However, when describing the primary motivation for her purchases at WFM, Mary focused on health concerns and the enjoyment she got from shopping in a luxurious, exclusive setting, and did not relate any specific purchases or practices to sustainability concerns. This is not to say that Mary never considered the environmental implications of her purchases, but that environmental considerations seemed more important for shaping her positive feelings about WFM, and less for motivating specific kinds of environmentally reflexive consumption.

While terms like “organic” and “local” peppered our interview transcripts, in many instances we observed a tension between consumer pleasures and citizenship ideals, along with a clear prioritization of the former.¹⁰ Some participants perceived citizenship ideals as too time-consuming or costly to incorporate into their shopping routines. Nancy, a 34-year-old lawyer, spoke to the importance of organic food, but when asked why she bought organic food for her son and not for herself, she replied, “I think because it’s kind of a pain in the a__. If I was to commit to having only organic, it’s a lot of work to do that. And, I mean, I don’t care enough about it to spend that time.” Melissa, a 37-year-old consultant, acknowledged the tension between eating locally made or grown foods and the convenience of one-stop shopping, and said that since her partner and she were busy professionals and parents of an infant son, convenience usually prevailed: “In terms of the local thing, it’s mostly a matter of convenience. So, [convenience is] obviously gonna be really important for us right now at this stage in our lives. I don’t know what it would take to make me drive any further ... We’re really rarely going out of our way.”

In other instances, respondents made clear that they would not shop at WFM if it had a more ethically sourced, but less bountiful selection, demonstrating how at least some shoppers reflect openly about the contradictions

Footnote 9 continued

asked participants what they typically purchased at WFM, but we did not attempt to reconcile participants’ reflexive values with an audit of their grocery store purchases.

¹⁰ Our documentation of consumer priorities, such as convenience, is intended as an empirical contribution, rather than a normative judgement. The conclusion to our paper explores our position on consumer practices and responsibilities for regulating the larger food system.

between consumer desires and citizenship ideals. Olivia mentioned the importance of making thoughtful food choices, but admitted that she enjoyed the wide range of non-seasonal, non-local goods at WFM: “I’m a little spoiled. I guess I’m not content with staying within that absolute local zone within the winter months.” Alan, a 46-year-old television producer, similarly emphasized the importance of consumer choice in his shopping choices:

I ... appreciate that they [WFM] aren’t so dogmatic that there aren’t other options. They do have conventional fruits and vegetables. I’ve got the choice. ... If they were so hard line about it, and it was only hand-fed, and you know [laughs], absolutely by the book. I mean, you know the book by Michael Pollan? If they answered every one of his criticisms, and appeased him, I don’t know if I would be a happy shopper there.

In a small number of cases, participants’ understanding of potential tensions between citizenship ideals and consumer pleasures created feelings of conflict and anxiety, particularly about shopping at WFM. Leah, a 26-year-old graduate student, reported that she had “felt really guilty about shopping at Whole Foods for a really long time.” Her concerns revolved around WFM’s high prices, which to her made their products unavailable to lower income consumers, and the paucity of local products in the store, which she saw as their lack of commitment to local farmers. Tina, a 55-year-old ESL instructor, noted that “there are times when I don’t go there [to WFM] ‘cause it just feels—why not just shop in the market and support local people in that way. But not 100 percent. I still go there.” Gail, a lawyer with a young baby, acknowledged a more general tension between her desire to support social justice initiatives, and her desire for delicious-tasting food: “I do try to get fair trade products. But sometimes, like for example, chocolate, I’m just not sure if it tastes as good.”

While consumer choice and pleasure were central motivators for most participants, and were often seen as existing in tension with citizenship ideals, it is important to address the possibility that consumer pleasures are *re-thought* or re-imagined to incorporate citizenship responsibilities. If this transformation occurs, satisfying citizenship ideals is not viewed as a consumer compromise (like Gail’s fair trade chocolate) but can be understood as a new or newly realized pleasure, a phenomena which Kate Soper (2007) terms “alternative hedonism.” Soper (2007) suggests that individuals in late modern capitalism can become disenchanted with consumer society (because of its threats to non-consumer pleasures such as community life and health) to the point that they reconceptualize consumer pleasures and the “good life.” Such individuals may veer away from consumer pleasures and conveniences (such as

enjoying beautifully packaged gourmet products and luxurious retail environments) and seek out *less commodified* pleasures (such as making food for themselves with products bought in bulk or picked from their own garden) (Soper 2008, 2009).

For many of our participants, the pleasures and conveniences of WFM were indeed related to their feeling that pleasure and well-being were being threatened elsewhere in risk society. These participants contrasted WFM’s products and services with what they saw as the poor quality or inadequate nutrition of conventional supermarket food, and the uninformed or apathetic service at mainstream food retailers. However, it is not clear that these participants were necessarily reconceptualizing pleasure in the way that Soper envisioned. In fact, a central appeal of Whole Foods seemed to be that it allows a more palatable and pleasurable manifestation of contemporary consumer lifestyles in the face of the social and environmental problems associated with the industrial food system. Rather than encouraging a rethinking of consumerism or resource-intensive lifestyles,¹¹ the store enables the replacement of conventional commodities (e.g., non-organic) with different commodities, albeit those which draw on ethical consumption discourse (e.g., certified organic). Moreover, interviewees frequently mentioned that an advantage of WFM over other natural food stores or specialty stores is that it fits conveniently with *existing* consumer habits and lifestyles. For example, participants liked that WFM accommodates car-centered lifestyles with free parking, that it has long hours and prepared foods for busy professionals, that it provides one-stop shopping by offering an enormous variety of products (eliminating the need to visit multiple specialty stores), and that it stocks a wide range of food necessities and luxuries, regardless of season.

Although most participants prioritized consumer pleasures, even when they were open about the contradictions between these pleasures and citizenship goals at WFM, there were some significant exceptions. A small sub-set of our sample with relatively politicized views about the food system forcefully questioned and even rejected conventional consumer pleasures that served their individual interests. Hugh, a 32-year-old physician who works with economically disadvantaged patients, spoke passionately about how he *did not* enjoy the abundance and exclusivity at WFM: “I walk in there and I definitely get a bit of a sick feeling in my stomach and sometimes *a lot* of a sick feeling in my stomach, you know, especially when I walk through and just look at the kind of prices they’re charging.” In a

¹¹ The resource-intensive nature of North American lifestyles has been well documented. For example, ecological footprint analysis estimates the US per capita footprint at 9.7 hectares, and the Canadian per capita footprint at 7.5, even though the global biocapacity is just 1.8 hectares per person (Global Footprint Network n.d.).

few cases, the tension between citizenship ideals and consumer choice resulted in participants deliberately changing their shopping practices to restrict consumer choice. Chris, a 31-year-old working in education, talked about his love of eating fish, but also displayed a willingness to forgo many types of fish consumption to satisfy his concerns about sustainability: “My perspective on the seafood industry is that fish are fished to extinction, and that farmed carnivorous fish are unsustainable. So the only options are farmed shellfish or farmed vegetarian fish and even then there are questions depending on where they’re fished.”

In other exceptional instances, participants described a willingness to redefine consumer pleasures in circumstances that would seem to promote the collective good, but that would be deemed inconvenient or unpleasant by traditional consumer standards. While Mary appreciated the bloodless aprons of the butchers at WFM, Fred critiqued the conventional food system (including WFM) for disassociating meat from living animals and valued the experience of re-connecting with the live animals that become food:

None of our animals are alive [in North American supermarkets, including WFM]. We will not slaughter them in front of you. And a part of me enjoys that process in Chinatown. The place is very vibrant, and I feel that the people are very connected to the food there...When they are whacking the head off a tilapia, live, spurting blood, out of the tank, you know there is no disconnect there.

For his part, Chris found pleasure in the environment of a local food coop with a less bountiful, less polished shopping environment compared to WFM. In addition to appreciating the community aspect of the food co-op, Chris also expressed affection for the aging coop shopping space, despite its aesthetic limitations when compared to the glossy, highly commercialized space of WFM: “The [coop] environment is very stark—exposed concrete ground and a fridge that I’m not quite convinced is cool enough for my yogurt ... And so it’s an aging environment, the equipment is aged, but I liked it when I was there.”

Though exceptional, these examples demonstrate important instances where participants expressed a dis-ease with consumer pleasures and redefined understandings of the good life and good food to incorporate critiques of the industrial food system. Significantly, most of these examples were situated *outside* of WFM (e.g., in a food coop, in Chinatown). Our interviews suggest that the experience of shopping at WFM—a “food playground”—may in fact, *encourage* consumers to prioritize consumer desires over citizenship responsibilities, particularly since the consumer desires on offer are presented as more palatable than those

available at a conventional supermarket. Even participants who expressed considerable concern about social and environmental issues in the food system felt captivated by the pleasures on offer at WFM. Husband and wife, Julie and Hugh, described it like this:

Julie: I just enjoy the whole shopping experience a lot when I go to Whole Foods...It’s not something I want to do all the time because politically I have some issues with it. But, if I feel like not thinking politically, it’s kind of fun...There’s still certain things we like to get at Whole Foods... And then once you’re there—

Hugh:—you kind of get sucked in.

Chris, one of the most politicized eaters in our sample, also described a feeling of being “sucked in”:

You walk into Whole Foods and you’re in the bakery section and you smell the cookies, you smell the cakes and you see all the breads and all the cheese laid out. You walk in a little further and you see the sushi bar and the hot food and you’re basically sucked into that experience.

This feeling of being “sucked in” describes an experience that seemed common for many interviewees; almost half of our participants (9/20) said they were enticed into buying more than they needed or intended to purchase at WFM.

To summarize, our data demonstrate some evidence of the incorporation of collective-oriented citizenship ideals (environmental, social, and community-building objectives) into consumer consciousness and into shopping practices. Several participants demonstrated reflexivity about potential contradictions between consumer pleasures and citizenship obligations, and a small number of participants described how they changed or restricted their consumer pleasures to satisfy their citizenship ideals (e.g., Chris restricting his choice of fish). In terms of participants’ understandings of WFM, the majority saw the store primarily as a convenient and pleasurable source of food, and these consumer interests tended to eclipse larger, citizen-based concerns about social justice or sustainability in the food system. Some references to values like sustainability and community were made in relation to WFM, but these concerns were often overshadowed by the interviewee’s descriptions of the enchanting smells, sights and tastes on offer. To be clear, we are not arguing that food pleasures are necessarily antithetical to citizenship concerns (cf. Soper’s 2007 conception of alternative hedonism described above) and indeed, a small number of our participants found pleasure in activities that prioritize collective well-being over individual self-interest. However, the prioritization of citizenship goals over consumer pleasures, when a tension between these ideals was found to exist, was only rarely observed in our sample.

Skeptical consumers and contingent trust

A second window into the reflexivity of our participants is the degree to which they were skeptical of the knowledge or information produced by WFM. Scientific skepticism, combined with doubts about the ability of state regulators to protect public health and the food system (e.g., from mad cow disease in the UK), have fuelled faith in consumer markets, specifically alternative markets that promise decreased exposure to risk (Szasz 2007). This raises questions about whether consumers are skeptical of the knowledge claims of market institutions, particularly corporate actors adopting themes of alternative agro-food initiatives like WFM. Claims of corporate social responsibility may be no more than whitewashing or greenwashing, particularly since contradictions often arise when profit-maximizing corporations claim to prioritize goals not obviously related to profit, such as public health, environmental protection and social justice (Bakan 2004, pp. 60–84).

WFM in particular has been vocal in proclaiming the company's "values," which include "Caring about our communities and environment" and "Supporting team member (employee) happiness and excellence" (WFM n.d.). Although WFM has been ranked among Fortune Magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work for," WFM's corporate vision has been critiqued from multiple perspectives (e.g., Harris 2006). CEO and founder John Mackey is well known for his libertarian philosophy that includes anti-union views (Lubove 2005) and his strong objections to state intervention in the economy, even concerning health care (Mackey 2009).¹² In addition, WFM's environmental self-presentation contains significant contradictions¹³ (e.g., Maloney 2006) and reinforces a problematic cornucopian ideal obscuring the need for affluent consumers to reduce their ecological footprint (Johnston 2008, pp. 258–261). In light of these issues, we are interested in the degree to which our participants approached the food system, and WFM more specifically, with a critical eye. While we did not ask our interviewees about skepticism per se, we asked them to share their

positive and negative perceptions of WFM and the food system more generally.

Skepticism was a strong theme in our data. The most salient type of skepticism among the WFM shoppers we interviewed was a questioning of the human health implications of the mainstream food system. The large majority of our participants (18/20) worried about the healthfulness of conventional foods and took steps to avoid some of these foods. In contrast to this general distrust of the mainstream food system, our interviews suggest variable degrees of skepticism toward WFM's corporate knowledge claims. Half (10/20) of our participants expressed some concern about either the corporatization of food production and retailing or WFM itself as a large corporation. The most common concern was that, as a corporation, WFM would prioritize profit making above all else, and that this would compromise any ecological and social objectives. Iris, Hugh, Julie, and Steve were all skeptical of WFM's claims about charitable donations, expressing a critique that WFM's goals of profits and corporate benevolence were not easily reconciled. In Hugh's words:

This example of [WFM] giving their sandwiches to an organization like Second Harvest [a food gleaning organization]. I mean, two things: first of all, they advertise it which just bumps up their whole profile and earns them more profits and second, I'm sure they write it off on their taxes...It's like when any corporation goes out there and sponsors these charity events. It's never for charity that they're doing it.

Other participants critiqued WFM's claims of corporate benevolence on the grounds of consistency, questioning their claim to hold the moral high ground when they also stocked products thought to be ethically questionable, as evident in the following exchange between Fred and Alan:

Fred: I went to buy a live lobster [at WFM], and they said that they didn't carry them because it was unethical. [Both Fred and Alan laugh]. [And] I was actually annoyed because I felt, "It's a f__ing bug. A bug of the sea." Why would you choose that one? That seems contradictory. You have completely unethical coffee here, as well as fair trade coffee, but you have coffee that really, really screws people up. And you don't have a couple of sea bugs in a tank?

Alan: I mean, what is separating shellfish from lobster? I don't get it.

Fred: Or shrimp? Which is ruining the coasts of Thailand with the shrimp farms! What is the difference?

Many participants did not articulate exactly what it was about the corporate form that was objectionable, but instead expressed a general sense that corporations, especially large-scale corporations, were worthy of some

¹² These views inspired a Facebook-organized WFM boycott in 2009 (Hickman 2009).

¹³ While the chain now heavily promotes local produce and farmers in shopping spaces, it is estimated that no more than 30% of its produce is grown locally (Gandel 2007). The store also stocks a wide variety of products that are out of season, shipped transnationally, produced using industrial monoculture, and deemed problematic on specific environmental grounds (e.g., bottled water). While local eating is clearly not a food-system panacea (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2003), critiques of locavorism do not negate all of the environmental and social consequences of globalized agricultural trade (e.g., Clay 2004; Shrybman 2000).

scrutiny. For example, Steve was critical of WFM's claims of environmental sustainability, stating, "I don't believe for a second that they actually do things good for the environment. They're corporate—they're a grocery store chain! It's a corporation!" What these latter participants expressed was not a detailed knowledge of corporate practices or the potential contradictions of green business, but rather a *feeling* that corporations were food system actors that could not be completely trusted to produce accurate information, or promote social change.

While these instances of consumer skepticism about WFM's knowledge claims are significant, albeit impartial, indicators of reflexivity, it is important to note that half of our participants did *not* voice any concerns about WFM's corporate form, potential contradictions between profit-maximization and eco-social objectives, or the reliability of product information at WFM. For these participants, the structure of the company seemed immaterial, and they indicated a fairly straightforward faith in market alternatives and corporate information. They saw WFM primarily as a source of high quality, novel, healthy and sometimes ethical products. If they reflected on WFM's core values of environmental stewardship and community support, they were more likely than those participants concerned about a corporate food system to take promotional information at face value. For example, when speaking about WFM's in-store "healthy cooking" workshops, Janet described WFM as "almost like a ... healthy community center." And when asked if she had any critiques about WFM, Janet could not think of any. Megan, a 36-year-old nutrition consultant, praised WFM as a responsible corporate citizen that promoted sustainability, stating that she admired "their [recycling] philosophy ... [and the signs saying] please don't take too many serviettes because you really don't need them and don't just throw them in the garbage."

It is also notable that even the participants who had deep misgivings about WFM's corporate form continued to shop there. For these participants, WFM clearly had redeeming characteristics that outweighed its perceived drawbacks. In fact, some participants made a deliberate decision to place a kind of contingent, or contradictory, trust in WFM. These participants foregrounded their faith in WFM in some instances, but in other instances, highlighted their doubts and misgivings. For example, Chris expressed doubts that the meat at WFM was really "naturally raised," and even wrote a letter of inquiry to the meat department to get more information about their standards. He ultimately decided to "take their word" on the issue and continued to buy meat at WFM, even though he stated he was more comfortable buying meat from smaller butchers in whom he had greater trust. Olivia's interview also demonstrates the contingent nature of trust in WFM, which in this instance appeared to exist for pragmatic reasons. She described how she found it

convenient to use WFM to help her shop ethically, especially given her busy life as a working mom: "[Shopping at WFM] is easy because the decisions have been made for you there, politically speaking." While Olivia's comments seem to convey a straightforward faith in corporate knowledge claims, later on in the interview she suggested that her faith in WFM is more complex. She critiqued WFM for promoting an "illusion of bohemia" that made her feel "sort of tricked into this kind of hippy-feeling environment", and insisted, "I shop there and my eyes are opened. I know it's a corporation."

Mary was another example of a consumer who in many instances indicated a trust in WFM as a provider of healthier, more ethical products, but in other instances indicated a skeptical attitude towards its knowledge claims. Mary described WFM as the only place she felt comfortable purchasing meat (even though she acknowledged that other local stores carried the same brands she liked to buy), but suggested that she was conscious of buying into an "image." In response to a question about how she balanced ethical principles with consumer priorities, she replied:

Well, it's easy when you do it at Whole Foods because you believe you don't go through that "Was it bought locally, is it fair trade, is it blah blah" because, somehow, *even though it's not true*, you've told yourself that it's better than anything else, right? ... And, it's bulls__t and I know that (emphasis ours).

One reason for this sense of contingent or contradictory trust among some participants was that they felt there was little choice in food retail options. Hugh's words demonstrate how skeptical and contradictory feelings about WFM are part of his larger skeptical assessment of the industrial food system and corporate capitalism:

Do I like the store? No. Do I like it better than ...the other supermarkets around? (pause) Yes...In some ways I do think they take a certain ethical approach to the way that they select their products. But, I mean the flip side of that is I think they're absolutely and completely profit-oriented and I think they absolutely and completely have the same bottom line as any big multinational corporation.

For these skeptical respondents, while WFM was not ideal, it was considered either equivalent to, or better than, other chain supermarkets in terms of its ethical commitments. The sentiment they expressed was that although WFM's corporate social responsibility may be primarily a marketing ploy, this was better than *no* corporate social responsibility. Some participants at times bypassed supermarkets altogether (patronizing farmers' markets or small shops, for example), but these options were generally seen as too inconvenient for day-to-day shopping. As a spacious,

climate-controlled store with convenient hours, parking, and a bevy of products, WFM was seen as difficult to beat.

Another reason participants continued to shop at WFM despite their reservations about corporatism was that they felt they could not make informed choices *no matter where* they shopped. Leah expressed this feeling of confusion:

There's so many layers of exploitation in anything that *I have a really hard time feeling like I'm ever making an informed decision* unless I know the farmer...In the city...I really don't feel like I know where the products on the shelf are from. So, I don't feel strongly compelled to shop at only certain places (emphasis added).

Participants like Leah indicated a skeptical reflexivity towards the food industry more generally, which was part of how skeptical shoppers justified shopping at WFM. Since one cannot know whom to trust, one might as well base shopping decisions on what *can* be known (e.g., which stores are convenient, attractive, enjoyable) and what information *is* available (e.g., which stores at least acknowledge environmental and social issues). The sense of not being informed enough to make good choices also came from consumer uncertainty about information. Julie's story reveals this uncertainty in assessing contradictory claims about corporate practices:

I think we were initially like, "oh this place [WFM] probably has terrible politics. It's a big corporation, big chain" ... And then [spouse] read that book called *The way we eat* by Peter Singer, a philosopher who raves about Whole Foods and talks about how it's so ethical ... and we were like "Oh, Whole Foods is great!" ... And then recently I've heard again through someone that [a local chef] was totally dissing Whole Foods saying it's a big corporation...So now I'm again being swayed by that. And not having any time or much interest in doing a huge investigation personally, we're backing away a little bit from feeling so good about shopping there.

Julie's experience of encountering conflicting information about the food system was not uncommon in our interviews, nor was her sense that the effort required to untangle the facts was excessive.

In sum, while all participants expressed ambivalence towards the conventional food system, critical attitudes about WFM's knowledge claims and WFM's status as a benevolent, or socially responsible, corporation varied considerably and contained multiple contradictions, even within individual interviews. While half of our interviewees embraced the store and its ethical claims without reservations, the remaining half was more cautious about accepting WFM and its claims. However, even skeptical

participants felt WFM was one of the better grocery store options within a larger food system about which they held reservations. A paucity of clear and consistent information about food issues, busy lifestyles, and a desire for good quality, healthy, and sometimes ethically produced food kept respondents returning to WFM.

High prices, class, and symbolic boundaries

Our third indicator of reflexivity is consumer awareness of class privilege as it relates to food consumption and specifically, WFM consumption. As noted above, the cultural and economic resources required to participate in ethical consumption are unevenly distributed across class lines. WFM offers an interesting example of class stratification related to ethical consumption.¹⁴ WFM stores are generally located in neighborhoods with higher than average incomes and education levels (Cox 2006; Lockie 2009), and the chain devotes considerable shelf space to certified organic foods, which are typically 10–40% more expensive than their conventional counterparts (Winter and Davis 2006; FAO 2010). Despite the economic forces stratifying access to food markets, consumers of healthy and ethical foods are frequently socially constructed as consumers with superior moral standing (Guthman 2003, 2008). In light of this, we used our interview data to assess the extent to which participants were conscious about how inequality might relate to their patronage of WFM. As relatively affluent consumers, were they reflexive about their own privileged access to high quality, healthy, and "ethical" foods? What symbolic boundaries did they draw to situate themselves and to what extent did they attend to the ways their shopping practices might inadvertently legitimate or reproduce social inequality?

The most salient concern about WFM in our sample—mentioned by more than two thirds (14/20) of our participants—was about high prices. For some, the concern revolved around their own household finances and not the affordability of WFM to the wider population. Interestingly, this concern did not consistently correspond to the income level of the respondents. For example, Melissa, whose household income was over \$200,000 (CAD),

¹⁴ There is some debate on whether WFM's popular nickname, "Whole Pay check" is warranted. While this study is far from comprehensive, Alternet journalist, Stan Cox, compared a basket of monthly food goods (based on the a minimal, USDA-recommended "low-cost food plan") required to feed a small family, and found that the basket would cost \$232 (USD) at Wal-Mart and \$564 (USD) at WFM (2006). CNNMoney.com published a story entitled, "Whole Foods: The whole truth—how to get the biggest bang for your green buck when shopping at the pricey chain" (Gandel 2007), which noted that some house brand items are competitively priced, but that the specialty or unusual items that draw people to the store are typically quite expensive.

described shopping carefully at WFM to avoid impulse purchases, and her major critique of WFM was the “price premium.” However, almost half (9/20) of our interviewees acknowledged WFM’s exclusivity, or expressed concern over its lack of affordability for lower income consumers—an important indicator of reflexivity concerning social segregation in the food system. An idea commonly expressed among this group was that it was “a shame” or “unjust” that WFM’s high quality, healthy food was inaccessible to those with lower incomes. Theo, a 38-year-old hotel manager, noted that “it [WFM] is not for the—let’s say, the common man—because it’s too steep in price for that.” In other cases, class-based critiques were subtler than price and related to the privileged atmosphere or cultural capital required to feel comfortable at WFM. Chris noted that WFM “draws a certain clientele that makes it very elitist,” and Steve made a clear link between the physical environment of WFM and its elite clientele: “[Y]ou need to have resources to feel comfortable in that store...The mood of the place is not accessible.”

While WFM was sometimes critiqued for being elitist, at other times its upscale environment was presented as part of its appeal. Steve enjoyed the service and opportunities he associated with wealth, saying, “They call me sir—it’s much more pleasing,” and jokingly remarked, “You can pick up cuter guys that have money.” Similarly Mary stated that although she felt less privileged than other shoppers, WFM’s elite atmosphere made it an attractive destination—a kind of “public space” that allowed lower-income people such as herself to intermingle with the rich and experience some of their luxuries:

I like watching people [at WFM] because I think, I wonder if these people have money. ... I think that’s part of the attraction for me... When I went to Paris, I went to Cartier ...they said “What would you like to see ma’am?” you know, with the gloves and the tray with the Cartier champagne and chocolates... I like the fun of that. You know, and there’s an aspect of that with me at Whole Foods. This is a *public space*. I like the idea that it’s public and anybody can go there (our emphasis).

Mary’s words speak to the complexity of social class and reflexivity at elite consumption spaces like WFM. These quasi-public settings can play a dual role: on the one hand facilitating critique of social inequality (e.g., identifying where elites shop) but at the same time minimizing critique by allowing non-elites to enjoy elite consumption spaces. This is particularly the case for food environments like WFM, where luxury items (e.g., artisanal tea) are relatively affordable compared to conventional status goods (e.g., luxury cars).

The idea of reflexivity along class lines can be problematized on another dimension. While a significant portion of respondents were conscious of WFM’s relative inaccessibility to those with less economic and cultural capital, very few of our upper-middle class shoppers identified themselves as privileged food shoppers within a stratified food system. Instead, these respondents were more likely to position themselves in opposition to shoppers they saw as *more* privileged than themselves. These respondents drew a symbolic boundary¹⁵ between their own consumer behavior (e.g., selective, price-conscious) and those of “true” elites, particularly those who could afford to buy *all* of their groceries at WFM, or those who shopped without any consciousness of cost. Megan, for example, contrasted her experience with that of “lovely ladies walking around in their Prada, Gucci, you know, whatever, looking very, very well made up, well groomed, all of those kinds of things.” Fred described the WFM neighborhood as “richy-rich land,” and added: “I feel like I’m unlike [other WFM shoppers]. I feel like there are a lot of plastic surgery, 60-year-old women shopping for supplements, and buying Jerusalem artichokes for their housekeeper to do something with.” While Melissa acknowledged that her household income made her “not that far from the demographic of what’s probably the typical shopper at Whole Foods,” she insisted that she didn’t see herself as “typical,” and compared her careful and restricted shopping to people “who probably go and do all of their grocery shopping there.” When asked how she could be in a similar demographic, but not feel typical, Melissa responded: “We work hard for the money we have and so that’s one thing...we’re still very conscious of the money we spend.” By drawing a symbolic boundary between themselves and those shoppers they see as truly elite, some WFM shoppers may avoid reflecting on their own relatively privileged position in class and food hierarchies.

There were a few significant exceptions to this trend of not seeing oneself as part of a privileged class of shoppers. For example, partners Julie and Hugh were highly reflexive about their own privilege, and mentioned that they shopped at WFM less than in the past because of their concerns about its exclusiveness. Hugh was uncomfortable about contributing to and reinforcing an inequitable food system by patronizing WFM:

[WFM] to me has just served to reinforce this incredible class divide when it comes to talking about

¹⁵ Symbolic boundaries are used to monopolize status and resources based on “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices”; the concept of boundaries has been widely employed by sociologists to better understand how symbolic resources define lines of exclusion and inclusion, and legitimate social difference (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168).

these sorts of ethical food choices: organic food, local food. [It] really reinforces this idea that this stuff is just accessible to rich people. And by engaging in it you're actually participating in like an upper class or upper-middle class activity as opposed to just a normal every day activity which is what I think [food shopping] should be.

Hugh and Julie's reflexivity on this point was relatively exceptional, however, and as noted above, most participants concerned about the exclusiveness of WFM did not seem to consider their own social privilege in relation to broader patterns of class and food system inequities. Our findings suggest that WFM shoppers are not always conscious of how their own shopping behavior fits within an economically and culturally stratified food system. More generally, these findings speak to the relatively low awareness of class privilege amongst North America's upper-middle class (Brantlinger 1993; Stuber 2006) and the tendency of the upper-middle class to downplay their power and status (Lamont 1992, p. 79), even though these class members "tend to control the allocation of many of the resources most valued in advanced industrial societies" (Lamont 1992, pp. 79, 1).

This limited awareness of class privilege raises the issue of how these WFM shoppers understood the food choices made by consumers with *fewer* economic resources. While most participants readily characterized WFM groceries as expensive, a minority expressed a relatively voluntaristic notion of food's affordability that focused on consumer choice and a willingness to pay for good food. Fred stated, "At Whole Foods, I feel like I have the choice to engage with upper-end products. I have the choice. So I look at something, and determine whether I think it has value, or whether it is an inflated price for some kind of specialty product. And then I just make the choice." Tina and Mary, who described themselves as having limited incomes (and indeed had household incomes lower than our study's average) stated that although WFM prices restricted the amount and variety of food they could buy, they shopped there because they saw themselves as *willing* to make sacrifices to pay for high quality, healthy food. In Tina's words, "I know people who don't shop there for that reason [high cost]. But I know other people like myself who don't have a lot of money but feel it's worth it to shop there because they want to eat good food."

While some participants criticized those who did not adequately "value" good food, Iris questioned an acquaintance with "a working-class income" who "insists on buying her produce [at WFM]." Iris asked: "Why doesn't she just go to Loblaws [a traditional supermarket] and buy their organic stuff? Does it have to be organic or does it have to be Whole Foods organic?" What Iris's

question seems to express is that healthy or ethical shopping in a place like WFM that offers "extras" (e.g., aesthetic pleasures, conveniences, status) is reasonable for affluent consumers, but not for those with lower incomes, who are seen to be wasting their money on such "superfluities." Tina, who described herself as "working poor," echoed this sentiment, even as she justified her own purchases:

On one level I shouldn't be shopping there at all. But I'm sort of middle class mentality even though I'm not middle class in my actual financial statement. And I appreciate good food. And I choose to spend a certain amount of money on food. But if I were really diligent ... I probably wouldn't be shopping there (our emphasis).

Mary also inferred that stores like WFM were not intended for people like her: "I do prefer to eat locally grown and seasonal food when I can. I like to eat organic food. *A lot of people think, 'why is she doing this if she doesn't have any money and complains about not having any money' and that's true, but I really like to eat organic food*" (our emphasis). These quotations suggest that lower income consumers might be in a kind of double bind when it comes to ethical consumption: they are chastised for avoiding higher-priced "good" food (i.e., making uneducated or unethical food choices), but also for seeking it out (i.e., shopping above their means).

Conclusions: consumers as reflexive regulators of the food system?

Reflexivity has been a suggestive, but relatively underdeveloped concept in agri-food studies. Its significance lies in its connection to transformative food practices. Naïve attempts to "save the planet" through shopping have been rightfully critiqued, but *reflexive* consumer practices offer the prospect of thoughtful, politicized engagement with the food system—a kind of engagement where people think beyond individual self-interest, reflect on the needs of other people and beings, and critically consider how vital needs are clarified or obscured by knowledge producers. In this paper, we aimed to move beyond a simple dichotomy suggesting that reflexivity is either present or absent, and instead provide a more precise, nuanced operationalization of this important concept. Our goal was to unpack the most salient dimensions of reflexivity in relation to the broader context of food consumption and investigate the relative presence/absence of reflexivity among shoppers in the corporate foodscape. As such, this paper documented a range of reflexivity in shopping practices at WFM, a key

player in the corporate-organic foodscape and a shopping space that articulates a discourse of ethical consumption.

Some significant indicators of reflexivity were evident in our sample, as seen through our three criteria of (1) the relative prioritization of consumer desires versus citizenship ideals, (2) critical attitudes towards corporate knowledge claims, and (3) awareness of inequality in relation to food shopping and food system hierarchies. In terms of our first criterion, we found that although the majority of interviewees emphasized traditional consumer pleasures available at WFM, citizenship values—environmental, labor, community—were identified by many respondents, and a significant number of participants were conscious of potential tensions between consumer pleasures and citizenship ideals. The second criterion—critical engagement with knowledge claims in the food system—was more readily apparent, but also highly varied; half of interviewees expressed skepticism about WFM's corporate information and claims of corporate benevolence. Finally, our third criterion of awareness of inequality was also fulfilled to different degrees. Some respondents demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the class inequalities structuring the food system, some felt that shopping at WFM was an activity that not everybody could afford, and a few believed that their shopping habits at WFM helped perpetuate an inequitable, class-segregated food system.

While we do not wish to downplay instances of consumer reflexivity in our sample, relatively *un*-reflexive thought processes were also evident, leading to more pessimistic conclusions about the transformative potential of reflexive grocery shopping. Our intention is not to offer fuel for scholarly cynicism about affluent food consumers and their selfish motivations. Instead, we believe that an analytic focus on “reflexivity” can help food scholars identify bottlenecks within consumer-focused projects for food system transformation—bottlenecks that congregated, in our study, around issues of consumer pleasures, knowledge/skepticism, and class awareness.

In our interviews, the primary motivation for shopping at WFM, even for the most politicized and reflexive shoppers in our sample, was to access a highly pleasurable consumer experience. The potency of citizenship ideals articulated by interviewees in relation to WFM was diluted by the prioritization of consumer desires and the partial acknowledgement of the potential contradictions between consumer pleasures and citizenship objectives (e.g., enjoying maximum choice versus voluntarily limiting choice to products produced sustainably). Instances of partial or fragmented consumer reflexivity should not be attributed to the ethical shortcomings or “laziness” of consumers. Instead, our focus on reflexivity revealed the difficulty of rejecting or redefining consumer pleasures in a corporate-dominated foodscape offering a panoply of

pleasurable, convenient consumer choices. Even highly reflexive participants in our study found these choices attractive and difficult to resist, suggesting that reflexive thought processes alone do not guarantee specific outcomes in terms of food practices. Redefining culinary pleasure to more significantly incorporate citizenship objectives, like food system sustainability (e.g., avoiding convenience food, making seasonal, home-cooked meals, acquiring food through multiple small-scale venues), was understood as highly labor intensive. These kinds of food choices seemed particularly difficult for people with demanding work lives and family commitments, even with relatively high incomes, and reminds food scholars that consumer choices are intimately tied to the structural conditions of wage labor and social reproductive work. This suggests that fostering consumer reflexivity is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for producing significant change in the industrial food system. While heightened consciousness of food system issues (e.g., sustainability, inequality) is important, people also need the time and resources necessary to restructure their work life, home life, and practices of social reproduction. As our participant, Olivia observed, shopping is “a fine balance between wanting to eat quality organic produce, trying to eat locally, make ethical decisions, and then the reality of work and time—which sort of puts a kibosh on the first three things.”

In terms of skepticism towards corporate knowledge, our research, like that of Abrams et al. ([in press](#)), found that a number of people are skeptical of company motivations especially given an awareness of company profit objectives. This finding reveals that corporate projects for ethical consumption are not always convincing to the public. However, like Connolly and Prothero (2008), we also found that many people want to be more reflexive about their food choices, but feel confused by conflicting information about food quality, safety, and sustainability. The question this raises, then, is where do reflexive people look to find answers? A significant number of our respondents described looking to WFM to help mediate conflicting information, and many, despite trepidation, saw the corporation as a convenient, albeit imperfect, arbiter of conflicting knowledge claims about food.

Significantly, only one of our respondents mentioned the state as a way to mediate information or regulate uncertainty in the food system. The willingness to accept corporate knowledge claims on the part of some of our respondents, as well as the relative absence of the state in interview responses, suggests the potency of a neoliberal discourse of privatized knowledge and minimal state involvement in the food system. It is also worth noting that respondents primarily saw themselves as individuals confronting a food system behemoth, and there was little evidence that they understood themselves as part of a larger

collective that could petition the state to make changes to the food system. Our data thus offers further support to the argument made by Szasz (2007) that individualized consumer approaches to environmental protection is part of, and potentially supports, a neoliberal political culture that undermines a collective sense of civic responsibility and state regulation of ecological issues. It also lends empirical support to the theoretical argument put forward by Busch in a forthcoming issue of this journal (in press) that as individuals are faced with an overabundance of product and retailer choices in a context of impoverished trust (from limited face-to-face interaction with producers and processors themselves), they rarely have the time, energy or even the ability to make the best shopping decisions toward social and environmental justice goals. Given these findings, we agree with Connolly and Prothero (2008) that it is vitally important to question the utility of expecting reflexive consumers to regulate a complex food system, particularly given that they often make choices in a corporate context where they possess imperfect information. It is also essential, we would add, to question the political implications of such expectations given that many consumers rely on the corporation for information and decision-making, even when they are skeptical of corporate power.

Finally, in terms of our third criteria of “awareness of social inequality,” a good number of our participants were aware of social injustice in the food system and the relative inaccessibility of WFM to many people. This reveals that discourses about the moral superiority of “ethical” (in many cases affluent) food consumption are being questioned in some circles. At the same time, it is significant that just over half of our respondents were unconcerned or unaware of the inaccessibility of WFM to lower-income consumers. This is a particularly important finding given the relatively affluent nature of our interview sample, and suggests that a further problem with a model of social transformation through reflexive consumption is its class underpinnings. While some participants were reflexive about the class privilege required to participate in the discourse and practices of ethical consumption, others were critical of those who do not make the right choices or value food sufficiently. Without this reflexivity, these consumers inadvertently reproduce a segregated food system where “ethical” eaters are understood as affluent, responsible, and knowledgeable, leaving those with less economic and cultural capital to shop in less prestigious, less desirable, and less “ethical” food system niches.

References

- Abrams, K.M., C.A. Meyers, and T.A. Irani. In press. Naturally confused: consumers’ perceptions of all-natural and organic pork products. *Agriculture and Human Values*.
- Adams, M. 2007. *Self and social change*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Bakan, J. 2004. *The corporation: The pathological pursuit of profit and power*. Toronto, Canada: Penguin.
- Barnett, C., N. Clarke, and P. Cloke. 2005a. The political ethics of consumerism. *Consumer Policy Review* 15(2): 45–51.
- Barnett, C., P. Cloke, N. Clarke, and A. Malpass. 2005b. Consuming ethics: Articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption. *Antipode* 37(1): 23–45.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk society: Towards a new modernity* (trans: Ritter, M.). London, UK: Sage.
- Beck, U. 1994. The reinvention of politics: Towards a theory of reflexive modernization. In *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, ed. U. Beck, A. Giddens, and S. Lash, 1–55. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Beck, U. 1999. *World risk society*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, W. 1999. *The arcades project* (trans: Eiland, H., and K. McLaughlin). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brantlinger, E. 1993. *The politics of social class in secondary school: Views of affluent and impoverished youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Burawoy, M. 1991. The extended case method. In *Ethnography unbound: Power and resistance in the modern metropolis*, ed. M. Burawoy, et al., 271–287. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burawoy, M. 1998. The extended case method. *Sociological Theory* 16(1): 4–33.
- Busch, L. In press. The private governance of food: Equitable exchange or bizarre bazaar? *Agriculture and Human Values*, forthcoming.
- Campbell, C. 1987. *In the romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Chapman, S. 2009. Q&A Carlo Petrini, Slow Food Founder. *Globe & Mail*. 6 May 2009: L1, L3.
- Clark, D., and R. Unterberger. 2007. *The rough guide to shopping with a conscience*. New York, NY: Rough Guides.
- Clay, J. 2004. *World agriculture and the environment: A commodity-by-commodity guide to impacts and practices*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Connolly, J., and A. Prothero. 2008. Green consumption: Life-politics, risk, and contradictions. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(1): 117–145.
- Cotgrove, S., and A. Duff. 1980. Environmentalism, middle-class radicalism, and politics. *Sociological Review* 28(2): 333–349.
- Cox, S. 2006. Natural food, unnatural prices. *AlterNet* 26 January 2006. <http://www.alternet.org/story/31260/>. Accessed 30 Jan 2006.
- Dolan, C. 2005. Fields of obligation: Rooting ethical sourcing in Kenyan horticulture. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(3): 365–389.
- DuPuis, E.M., and D. Goodman. 2005. Should we go “home” to eat? Toward a reflexive politics of localism. *Journal of Rural Studies* 21(3): 359–371.
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). 2010. *Organic agriculture*. <http://www.fao.org/organicag/oa-faq/oa-faq5/en/>. Accessed 22 Apr 2010.
- Fromartz, S. 2006. *Organic, Inc.: Natural foods and how they grew*. Orlando: Harcourt.
- Gandel, S. 2007. *Whole Foods: The whole truth*. CNNMoney.com. http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2007/moneymag/0706/gallery.whole_foods.moneymag/5.html. Accessed 22 Apr 2010.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Global Footprint Network. n.d. *Footprint for nations*. http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/footprint_for_nations/. Accessed 1 Jun 2010.

- Greer, J., and K. Bruno. 1997. *Greenwash: The reality behind corporate environmentalism*. New York, NY: Apex Press.
- Guptil, A. 2009. Exploring the conventionalization of organic dairy: Trends and counter-trends in upstate New York. *Agriculture and Human Values* 26: 29–42.
- Guthman, J. 2003. Fast food/organic food: Reflexive tastes and the making of “yuppie chow”. *Social and Cultural Geography* 4(1): 45–58.
- Guthman, J. 2007. Commentary on teaching food: Why I am fed up with Michael Pollan et al. *Agriculture and Human Values* 24: 261–264.
- Guthman, J. 2008. “If they only knew”: Color blindness and universalism in California alternative food institutions. *The Professional Geographer* 60(3): 387–397.
- Harris, M. 2006. Welcome to “whole-mart”: Rotten apples in the social responsibility industry. *Dissent Magazine*. Winter 2006. <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=162>. Accessed 1 Sep 2009.
- Hickman, L. 2009. Customers call for boycott after Whole Foods chief executive criticizes US healthcare reform. *The Guardian*. 21 August 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/aug/21/whole-foods-healthcare-mackey>. Accessed 1 Sep 2009.
- Hinrichs, C. 2003. The practice and politics of food system localization. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19(1): 33–45.
- Howard, P. 2008. *Who owns what in the organic food industry?* <http://www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca/rcbtoa/services/corporate-ownership.html>. Accessed 1 Oct 2009.
- Johnston, J. 2008. The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society* 37: 229–270.
- Johnston, J., and S. Baumann. 2009. Tension in the kitchen: Explicit and implicit politics in the gourmet foodscape. *Sociologica* 1. Doi: 10.2383/29565.
- Johnston, J., A. Biro, and N. MacKendrick. 2009. Lost in the supermarket: The corporate-organic foodscape and the struggle for food democracy. *Antipode* 41(3): 509–532.
- Jubas, K. 2007. Conceptual confusion in democratic societies: Understandings and limitations of consumer-citizenship. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2): 231–254.
- Lamont, M. 1992. *Money, morals, and manners: The culture of the French and the American upper-middle class*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, M., and V. Molnár. 2002. The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167–195.
- Lash, S. 1994. Reflexivity and its doubles: Structure, aesthetics, community. In *Reflexive modernization: Politics, traditions, and aesthetics in the modern social order*, ed. U. Beck, A. Giddens, and S. Lash, 110–173. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lockie, S. 2009. Responsibility and agency within alternative food networks: assembling the “citizen consumer”. *Agriculture and Human Values* 26(3): 193–201.
- Lubove, S. 2005. Food porn. *Forbes.com*. 2 February 2005. <http://www.forbes.com/global/2005/0207/050.html>. Accessed 26 May 2005.
- Mackey, J. 2009. The Whole Foods alternative to ObamaCare. *Wall Street Journal*. 11 August 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204251404574342170072865070.html>. Accessed 1 Sep 2009.
- Maloney, F. 2006. Is Whole Foods wholesome? *Slate.com*. <http://www.slate.com/id/2138176/>. Accessed 20 Apr 2010.
- McLaughlin, K. 2009. Frank talk from Whole Foods’ John Mackey. *Wall Street Journal* 4 August 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124942686325006009.html>. Accessed 15 Apr 2010.
- Micheletti, M. 2003. *Political virtue and shopping: Individuals, consumerism, and collective action*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller, D. (ed.). 1995. *Acknowledging consumption: A review of new studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miller, D. 1998. *A theory of shopping*. London, UK: Blackwell.
- Moore, O. 2006. Understanding postorganic fresh fruit and vegetable consumers at participatory farmers’ markets in Ireland: Reflexivity, trust, and social movements. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 30(5): 416–426.
- Pollan, M. 2006. *Omnivore’s dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Power, M. 1997. *The audit society: Rituals of verification*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, T.J., and J.C. Olson (eds.). 2001. *Understanding consumer decision making*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ritzer, G. 2001. *Explorations in the sociology of consumption*. London, UK: Sage.
- Rose, N. 1999. *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schor, J. 1991. *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Shrybman, S. 2000. *Trade, agriculture, and climate change: How agricultural trade policies fuel climate change*. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. <http://www.iatp.org/iatp/publications.cfm?accountID=421&refID=36154>. Accessed 9 Mar 2010.
- Singer, P., and J. Mason. 2006. *The way we eat: Why our food choices matter*. Kutztown, PA: Rodale.
- Sklair, L. 2001. *The transnational capitalist class*. London, UK: Blackwell.
- Slater, D. 1997. *Consumer culture and modernity*. London, UK: Blackwell.
- Slocum, R. 2004. Consumer citizens and the cities for climate protection campaign. *Environment and Planning A* 36(5): 763–782.
- Soper, K. 2004. Rethinking the good life: Consumer as citizen. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 15(3): 111–116.
- Soper, K. 2007. Rethinking the “good life”: The citizenship dimension of consumer disaffection with consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(2): 205–229.
- Soper, K. 2008. Alternative hedonism, cultural theory, and the role of aesthetic revisioning. *Cultural Studies* 22(5): 567–587.
- Soper, K. 2009. Introduction. In *The politics and pleasures of consuming differently*, ed. K. Soper, M. Ryle, and L. Thomas, 1–21. London, UK: Palgrave.
- Statistics Canada. 2006. *Canada’s global cities: Socio-economic conditions in Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver*. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-613-MIE/89-613-MIE2006010.pdf>. Accessed 1 Feb 2008.
- Stuber, J. 2006. Talk of class: The discursive repertoires of white working- and upper-middle class college students. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(3): 285–318.
- Szasz, A. 2007. *Shopping our way to safety: How we changed from protecting the environment to protecting ourselves*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Twitchell, J. 1999. Two cheers for materialism. *Wilson Quarterly* 23(2): 16–26. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Press.
- Vasil, A. 2007. *Ecoholic: Your guide to the most environmentally friendly information, products, and services in Canada*. Toronto, Canada: Vintage.
- Veblen, T. 2007 [1934]. *The theory of the leisure class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wall Street Journal. 2006. *Market watch: Whole Foods Market Inc.: Company information*. <http://www.marketwatch.com/tools/quotes/profile.asp?symb=wfmi>. Accessed 1 Oct 2008.
- WFM. n.d. *Whole Foods Market: Values overview*. <http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/values/>. Accessed 1 Oct 2009.

- Whole Foods Market. 2007. *2007 Annual Stakeholders' Report*. <http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/company/annual-reports.php>. Accessed 1 Aug 2008.
- Williams, R. 1982. *Dream worlds: Mass consumption in late 19th century France*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Winter, C., and S. Davis. 2006. Organic foods. *Journal of Food Science* 71(9): 117–124.
- Zukin, S., and J.S. McGuire. 2004. Consumers and consumption. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30: 173–197.

sociology of food, and she has published numerous articles on this topic. Her book, *Foodies: Democracy and distinction in the Gourmet foodscape* (co-authored with Shyon Baumann) was published in 2010 (Routledge).

Michelle Szabo is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. Her dissertation work is concerned with household gender roles and work-life balance as they relate to sustainability in the food system.

Author Biographies

Josée Johnston is associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her major area of research is the