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Good Enough To Eat: How College Students Are (Re)forming Their Relationships To Food

by
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Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Introduction

“I feel like I can *almost* always find something.” Jade (she/they) is a self-described picky eater, which is why we were eating at Malott. As they examined their precariously constructed, multi-layer sandwich, they described their action plan had the deli bar not been available that day. “I would have eaten a cheeseburger, but I don’t like the cheeseburgers when they put the stuff on them,” they told me, exasperatedly running through the list of toppings they didn’t like. “And then,” in the event that they had been forced to eat the cheeseburger, “I would have felt like...probably...” they trailed off, picking their next words carefully. “It’s not even in like a ‘cheeseburgers are a bad food’ way because,” they raised the pitch of their voice, putting on an affectation, “‘there’s no good or bad foods,’ but it’s like I don’t normally feel that good after I eat it.”

In a sentence, Jade had captured a piece of the complexity that many college students are struggling with each time they get a meal. First, there was an authoritative voice telling them that cheeseburgers are a “bad food” because they are “junk food,” followed by an out of hand rejection of this conceptualization. I recognized the affectation that they had put on when they told me that there were no good or bad foods because other students had put it on when they told me things like “you should eat when you’re hungry and stop when you’re full.” it was a voice that implied rote repetition of something we both already knew but that they were perhaps still trying to fully convince themselves of. They had brought it up to show me that they knew there was nothing *morally* wrong with eating a cheeseburger, but they still didn’t want it because of the impact it would have on their body. These were the tensions and inner dialogues that animated meals for Jade, myself, and many of the other students I interviewed.

My research seeks to critically examine how college students at American liberal arts institutions relate to food in their everyday lives and how those relationships to food are formed. College students represent a unique research population that provides distinctive insights into certain factors influencing relationships to food. College is a fascinating temporal and physical space of “betwixt and betweenness” (Cook-Sather 2006). According to Victor Turner’s theory of liminality, being betwixt and between describes both a symbolic and physical domain for individuals undergoing a rite of passage in which they are between “what is” and “what can or will be” and which “has few or none of the attributes of [the initiand’s] past or coming state” (Cook-Sather 2006; Turner 1981, 159; Turner 1974, 232). College students are no longer children but are not yet fully independent adults, more often than not oscillating between living completely separately from their families on campus and living in their childhood homes for at least part of the year. While college does not strictly fit the traditional definition of liminality, in part because students transition between campus and home, this conception of liminality can help us to understand how college represents a world set apart from both childhood and adulthood, an important stage in the process of reaching maturity in which students evaluate different aspects of their lives up until this point and how they will be in the world as adults after this experience. Their frequent transitioning between campus and the home gives students the ability to perceive both the stark contrasts and similarities between the eating environments that they grew up in and the new, more independent eating environments they find themselves in, and offer commentary on how the ways that they were raised to relate to food have impacted the relationships to food that they are forming now. As people in their early 20s and late teens, generally speaking, they also have the capacity to illuminate which discourses surrounding food have been the most relevant within the past two decades, as these constitute their frame of

reference for viewing and relating to food. In this space of independence and relative maturity, college students are actively reflecting on these discourses and their childhood experiences as they reformulate their relationships to food, and can richly recount for us the difficulties and complexities involved in negotiating all of these influences.

In this thesis, I argue that college students are, in general, attempting to improve or maintain positive relationships to food, which requires negotiating a variety of interconnected social influences that have shaped these relationships, the most prominent being the ways that their parents taught them to relate to food in childhood and adolescence, cultural conceptions of health, and their own embodied reactions to food. While students are attempting to disengage with the discourses and social influences that they identify as harmful because of the feelings of shame and moral judgment they cultivate, the ideas and strategies that they employ to improve their relationships to food are themselves informed by the same moral and cultural logics as these harmful influences, rendering the process of reforming their relationships fraught with complexity.

Eating and the process of discerning what foods one should be in relationship to and how is relevant to anthropology because it is necessarily a social process. Cultural logics, the “socially-shared system[s] of knowing and doing that [do] not necessarily speak to individual cognition, but [are], rather, unspoken [and] intuitive,” are embodied through daily practices like eating (Eli & Warin 2018). Whether one is eating communally or on their own, the food they choose to eat and how they eat it is determined by their cultural context and the social influences to which they have been exposed. To speak of something being “embodied” is to gesture to how something is contained, felt, or experienced within the body. This encompasses sensation and emotion, but it can refer to social knowledge as well. Within the framework of phenomenology,

the body “is a permanent part of one’s perceptual field,” the context through which one senses and experiences the world (Toadvine 2023). According to Bourdieu, the body is “socially informed” and “the structuring action of social determinism” provides it with “its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its senses” (1977, 124). Therefore, one’s cultural context is embodied and becomes a permanent lens through which one experiences the world, and this especially includes one’s experience of food. It is telling that this “incorporated principle of classification” is often referred to as “taste,” “which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing, and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests” (Bourdieu 1979, 190). While taste is colloquially understood as something highly unique to each individual, it is constituted by a variety of dominant social discourses shared amongst vast webs of people (Lupton 1996). Our bodies connect us to our social worlds through embodied cultural logics that influence what and how we eat.

Present in much of the recent anthropological literature on food choice is an interest in food and food habits as they relate to notions of health (Yates-Doerr & Carney 2016; Bisogni et al. 2002; Greenhalgh 2016; Paugh & Izquierdo 2009; Garth 2023). This preoccupation with health is in part due to the circulating social discourses in the United States that focus primarily on food as it impacts the body and links morality to “healthy” eating choices. The so-called “War on Fat,” initiated in the early 2000s by the US Surgeon General amidst growing concerns about the rising obesity rate in the country, pathologized heaviness to the point of framing it as an enemy of the state. This “war” made one’s weight, and therefore the way one ate or was presumed to eat, a criteria for being a worthy citizen and a central aspect of personal identity and social value (Greenhalgh 2016). From their first conscious meal time interactions as children, today’s college students have been taught by parents and other authority figures that there is a

moral valence to supposedly “healthy” eating habits because healthy eating is framed as being dependent on discipline (Paugh & Izquierdo 2009). In this mode of thinking, to extend beyond the boundary of healthy eating by eating too much or the wrong thing is to reveal a character flaw. These conceptions of health which place so much emphasis on the morality of the individual have been critiqued and contested within the anthropological field, a conversation which I will elaborate on later in this thesis (Yates-Doerr & Carney 2016). Understanding how the moral and political valences of “health” came to influence my interlocutors' relationships to food was key to my analysis.

To address the question of how college students related to food in their everyday lives, I conducted interviews with 16 interlocutors¹ from across the Claremont Colleges over a meal in a location of the interlocutor's choice. I asked interlocutors a variety of questions about their eating habits, histories with eating, and perceptions of food. In the week prior to the interview, I also asked them to note meals that they considered to be the “best” they had eaten all week so that we could discuss what had made them the best during our interview. The vast majority of our meals were shared at an on-campus dining hall. The purpose of having a meal together during the interview was to get my interlocutors to engage with and describe the sensory aspects of eating as much as possible, and to share in that sensory experience with them. Hanna Garth has written about the importance of the physical feelings that food produces in our bodies as a criteria for choice, and how co-producing sensation with interlocutors by sharing meals with them helps one to better understand their experience (2023). In this way, sharing meals also became a form of participant observation in that I could share in the social experience of a meal with them and

¹ I did my best to ensure that there was relatively even gender diversity among my interlocutors. Many of the people that I interviewed were non-binary, and some exclusively used they/them pronouns, while others used they/them in combination with other pronouns (ex. she/they). For the sake of readability, if a person used they/them pronouns at all, I have simply used they/them to refer to them rather than alternating between they/them and their other pronouns. However, when I first introduce an interlocutor, I will include their pronouns for clarity.

observe how they interacted with food in practice. I was also aware that the topic of food could be sensitive and uncomfortable for some, and I felt that sharing a meal would be conducive to a more casual and social experience than a traditional structured interview. When I ate with my interlocutors, it was no longer a dynamic in which their eating and relationship to food was solely under scrutiny: my eating habits were also on display, and I openly offered up my own experiences with food when relevant to cultivate a more conversational atmosphere that made talking about the topic less awkward.

My interest in conducting this research stems directly from my experiences growing up with a restricted diet and my own fluctuating relationship to food. I was raised largely vegetarian, but was always allowed to choose to eat meat. On the occasions that I did make that choice, my vegetarian mother would remind me that an animal had died for me to have food if I tried to leave a piece of meat uneaten on my plate. Her admonitions imbued me with a fundamental understanding that my food had come from somewhere, been something else before it reached me, and that every bite I took, every bit of food I ate or did not eat, had moral implications. As an adolescent, I developed my own reasons for being vegetarian and eventually vegan, and not all of them were healthy in retrospect. I can recognize now that at times the restrictions I placed on what I ate were just that: restrictions, meant to achieve a thinner body and not rooted in logical or ethical reasoning.

Although I consider my relationship to food mostly healed, part of the motivation for this research was to discover if and to what degree other people my age felt a similar sense of guilt or distrust towards what they ate. I wanted to identify and deconstruct some of the discourses and social forces that created these antagonistic dynamics in some small part for the benefit of my own healing, and in the hope that my research would also help others to better understand their

own relationships to food. Although no one followed my exact trajectory, I've found that my experiences were not uncommon. My interlocutors and I were roughly the same age, and thus we shared a basic vocabulary and framework for understanding and relating to food. Therefore, the greatest challenge lay for me in deconstructing my own value-laden language for talking about food and eating so as to influence my interlocutors' responses as little as possible. In formulating my interview questions, I took extra care to ask mostly open ended, factual questions about what and how people ate. When I asked them questions that involved offering opinions (ex. How would you define a good relationship to food?), I used adjectives like "good" because they were as non-descript and open to interpretation as possible, and allowed me to observe the associations that my interlocutors freely made with the word.

I knew from my own prior experiences and interactions with my peers that it was common to have a fraught relationship with food, and my research confirmed it. The vast majority of my interlocutors had had a disordered relationship with food in the past. Very few of them had ever been diagnosed with an eating disorder at any point in their lives; it was far more common to exhibit patterns of restriction, like skipping meals, that were never clinically diagnosed but I acknowledge as "disordered eating." The way my interlocutors expressed these experiences to me, these were serious, detrimental behaviors whether or not they fit into medical definitions of disorder and represented a departure from a more joyful and stable relationship to food. The term "disordered eating" is part of the vocabulary that my interlocutors and I shared for understanding our relationships to food, and it describes all restrictive practices around food and those that my interlocutors described as harmful and out of the ordinary for them. Importantly, disordered eating results from disordered thinking about food, which is influenced by cultural logics around food as it relates to things like health, moral concepts like

self-discipline and indulgence, and beauty standards. Disordered thinking was, generally, an overly punitive and rigidly quantified way of conceptualizing one's relationship to food that left my interlocutors thinking about food more frequently than they would have liked. It was with this context in mind that many of my interlocutors were attempting to improve their relationships to food.

This thesis will detail some of the most prominent influences on college students' relationships to food: how they were socialized to relate to food by their parents, their embodied reactions to food, and their conceptions of health, and how students grapple with their impact as they attempt to improve or maintain positive relationships to food. The following section will investigate how parent's often taught their children to place high moral value on relationships to food characterized by restriction, but through exposure to other social environments in which they learned different ways of relating to food and exercised autonomy over their eating, students were able to renegotiate their relationships to food. The next section will describe how students turned to their embodied reactions to food as a means to improve their relationships to it, but these reactions were influenced by the very social discourses around food that they wished to escape. To conclude, I will detail how students focused on the emotional health of their relationships to food as alternatives to authoritative definitions of health, but their ways of thinking about and relating to food remained entrenched in dominant discourses of health. I hope to paint a nuanced picture of the negotiations which college students engage in as they eat.

Section One: Parental Influence and Autonomy

“Yeah I mean my mom hates my body.” Cherry (she/her) was telling me how she'd shocked her friends with that same statement the other day, and it knocked the breath out of me

as well. She seemed surprised that we were surprised. “I thought that was part of...” she trailed off, laughing incredulously. Instead of finishing her thought, she launched into an analysis:

“We both look alike. I get those kinds of comments all the time. It’s very much in a bone-structure facial way, how we carry ourselves and not as much like, *body* body...when I was growing in puberty and started to not look like her I think it was weird for her. She simultaneously is, like, jealous and repulsed and also still trying to control my food. There’s this really odd, uncomfortable at times dynamic that she has with not me but my body.”

I hadn’t known that women like Cherry, whose mothers had waged proxy wars on their own bodies through attacking their daughters, existed until I had come to college and started trading food histories with my friends. Unfortunately, my research reflected what I’d learned in casual interactions: this was much more common than I ever could have imagined. This section seeks to understand how and why parents often, though not always, shape their children’s relationships to food in harmful ways and explore the complexity of this phenomenon.

If sociality is “the dynamic matrix of relations through which persons come into being,” our parents naturally form the foundations of this matrix as the first and most enduring relationships throughout our lives (Long 2015, 854). The parent-child relationship is characterized by parents' efforts to teach their children how to be in the world; for many young adults, the influence of their parents is still strong and immediately felt, particularly as it pertains to their relationships to food. While parents’ overall impact was neither unambiguously negative nor positive, it tended to be negative because of the high moral stakes students perceived their parents to place on having a relationship to food characterized by control, surveillance, and self-discipline. Through exposure to a variety of social discourses and spaces in which they are free to exercise autonomy over their eating, students have had the opportunity to renegotiate their relationships to food, as well as differentiate themselves from and reflect on what they have learned from their parents.

In our interviews, students reflected on eating behaviors that their parents modeled for them and which they had reproduced as children, but that they now identified as indicators of troubled relationships to food. Claudia (she/they), a senior from southern California, explained to me that they were “never taught it was a bad thing to starve yourself.” Growing up, they observed that their mother would often skip meals or eat meals that Claudia deemed inadequately small. If Claudia or their sister behaved in the same way, their mother would not intervene because it was normalized in the household. Hedwig’s (they/them) father also engaged in restrictive eating habits by hiding food from himself around the house so that he would not eat it. They recalled opening teapots in their pantry and discovering foods like cookies and connected it to a habit that they developed of hiding food under their bed as a child so they could eat it at night. As parents tried to manage their own bodies through techniques of deprivation, they unintentionally demonstrated restrictive behaviors that their children then absorbed and replicated in their formative years. Their foundation became an understanding of food as something so vexingly powerful that one needed to develop extreme strategies to resist it and control its role in their lives.

In other cases, restrictive behaviors were more intentionally imparted on children. As children, my interlocutors had almost no say in what they ate, and their parents' efforts to control food were read by my interlocutors as disciplinary attempts to prevent weight gain, ingraining an association between eating and punishments which were usually reserved for moral wrongs. Not only did parents most often control what food was consumed at meals because they were the ones cooking it, quite a few also banned snacking as a method of controlling their child's weight, which produced the unintended effect of depriving the child of their ability to respond to their own hunger cues. Hedwig and Cherry both spoke about their mothers being particularly punitive

in regards to foods that they considered unhealthy out of concern for the impact they believed it would have on their child's body. For Hedwig, their mother's concern resulted in her feeding Hedwig and their twin completely different foods. "We had different shelves in the fridge...I would have the low-fat stuff and [my brother] would have the regular- he could eat whatever he wanted...whenever I ate something that was deemed unhealthy my mother would be upset or be like 'have you been outside today?'" This demonization of certain foods was consistent between Hedwig and Cherry. Cherry's mother would constantly try to convince her that certain foods, especially those high in sugar, were "bad" foods and would give her a stomach ache, or that she would otherwise regret them if she ate them. "Donuts, to this day, I still can't really eat," Cherry told me.

Parents also exerted control over their children's food and bodies and reinforced shame around eating by frequently commenting on their children's eating habits and appearance. This commentary could manifest as disparaging comments about how much or how little they were eating and what their bodies looked like, or it could take more indirect forms as my interlocutors observed how their parents talked to and about others. In Kay's (they/she) case, a friend of theirs would often leave much of her meal on her plate when invited over for dinner. After their friend had left, their parents would use the friend as a negative example by discussing how wasteful her behavior was and how Kay should not replicate it. This left Kay feeling confused and guilty about their relationship to food: "I was always like 'I don't wanna be that person'...everyone always says I'm too skinny, I don't need to add to that." While the example that Kay's parents provided may have been meant as an instructive and more indirect way of correcting how little Kay ate, it instead enforced the idea that there was something morally wrong with eating "improperly." Combined with negative commentary they were already receiving on their

appearance, it created even more shame for Kay about their eating habits. Running commentary was a method by which parents, intentionally or not, attached positive or negative moral values to certain foods and ways of eating, and reinforced for their children the notion that someone was always watching and judging their choices.

To understand why parents had such a disproportionately negative impact on their children's relationships to food and behaved in ways that seem in hindsight to be so clearly harmful, we have to understand the unique challenges and moral discourses around food that they faced in their roles as the primary caregivers. Susan Greenhalgh employs the term "biocitizenship" to describe how the notion of a citizen has evolved into "a social being whose existence is articulated in the language of social responsibilities and collective solidarity" (2015, 19). In the context of the War on Fat, a responsibility of the biocitizen was to be thin and fit so as to not "collude" with the enemy. Because children are particularly important targets of the War on Fat, she argues, parents and especially mothers, tasked with managing all aspects of their children's lives, are pressured to ensure that their children are fit and healthy biocitizens. A failure to cultivate such a biocitizen constitutes a failure of the parent in "protecting" the health and moral standing of their child. While parents may think that they are helping by commenting on their children's diets and bodies or modeling dieting behaviors, other studies beyond this thesis have demonstrated that this commentary and behavior is strongly associated with disordered eating habits in adolescents and never with positive outcomes, mentally or physically (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2010). Furthermore, a particular strain is put on mother-daughter relationships because women are already taught to harshly surveil and critique their bodies, and their daughter's bodies can serve as another reflection of their own (Greenhalgh 2015). Having a daughter who physically resembles them then puts a strange double stress on a mother, as we

saw in Cherry's case, because her daughter's body serves not only as a reflection of her parenting but a reflection of her own body which she must keep in line. When it comes to their children's bodies, mothers can be figured as villains at the center of a moral panic either way, whether they are failing to raise healthy biocitizens or harshly policing their bodies (LeBesco 2010). Resisting this dichotomy, I hope to introduce some nuance through which we can at least understand our mothers and our parents more generally, if not forgive them, while not excusing the harm they may have caused.

When I spoke with students about their parents and their harmful impacts, many seemed to understand the major discrepancies between how their parents raised them to relate to food and how they currently related to it as a product of generational differences. "Of course she [mom] is not gonna have a good relationship [to food] because that's just the age, like how she grew up," Claudia told me matter of factly. There was a sense among some students that their parents had grown up in a world of vastly different social influences as they pertained to food and health, leading them to teach their children harmful and punitive ways of relating to food. If a historical generation is a cohort defined by major historical events at key points in their collective development, I would argue that a key feature that defines mine and my interlocutors' historical generation and separates us from our parents was the advent of smartphone technology and social media in our childhoods (Carlson 2008). These technologies differentiated us from our parents in relation to food in a few particular ways throughout our childhoods. Unlike earlier generations, we had constant access to an overwhelming amount of information on the "correct" way to eat. From a young age, my interlocutors were consuming "what I eat in a day" videos, using dieting apps, and observing idealized body standards on social media. These technologies "[facilitated] unprecedented levels of biometric surveillance" in part because they could be taken

everywhere with us, and taught that food consumption was meant to be quantitatively measured, placing a moral premium on relationships to food characterized by rigorous control (Sanders 2017). These moral lessons are notably similar to what students were learning from their parents, and yet technology and social media still figured as an alternative source of discourse because students could seek it out independently and impose these standards on themselves, rather than having them imposed by their parents, which gave the impression of autonomy.

However, technology could also figure as a medium for genuinely alternative ideas to what they were learning from their parents. Emergent ideas about body neutrality were learned online, “what I eat in a day” videos could emphasize the deliciousness and sensual pleasure derived from the food rather than its nutritional content, and social media could function as a platform for collective reflection amongst a generational cohort. For example, a few of my interlocutors used terms which were popularized on social media to describe their families, terms like “almond mom” (a euphemism for a mother who places excessive emphasis on restricting “junk foods”) and “ingredient household” (a household that contains no “snack foods,” most often due to the belief of one or more household members that snacking is unhealthy). Terms like these allowed our generational cohort to collectively articulate, critique, and poke fun at behaviors exhibited by our parents that we could now understand were inspired by a fear of gaining weight. Social media and other new technologies were therefore somewhat ambivalent moral forces in the lives of students that differentiated them from their parents, at once reinforcing some of the ideas they had learned from their parents and providing them frameworks through which to critique these ideas and their impact, an aspect of figuring themselves as autonomous beings separate from their parents.

Parents should not be mistaken as being unambiguously negative influences in their children's lives: a few interlocutors pointed to their parents as positive influences in the development of their relationships to food. A common theme amongst parents who had an explicitly positive influence on their children was an emphasis on the joyful aspects of eating like the pleasure of cooking, relishing the taste of food, and sharing meals as social rituals. It also seemed to make a difference if families all ate in a similar way. Beyond simply sharing meals, having a parent who visibly ate less or restricted their eating in a way that differentiated them from the family seemed to spell restrictive habits for students as children, whereas those who cited their parents as positive influences never mentioned any noticeable differences in the way their parents ate from the rest of the family. Even in cases like Zelda's (she/they), where their diet was restricted due to allergies, having their family's diet be similarly restricted had a positive effect on them, as they did not feel excluded within their family. In these environments, food consumption was positioned as a socially and emotionally rewarding activity through which relationships were fostered, rather than as an activity that needed to be constantly restricted because of the impact it might have on the body.

Whether their parent's impacts were negative or positive, spaces of autonomy and exposure to other social eating environments allowed students to reformulate their relationships to food. James (he/him), a sophomore from South America, was one of the rare students who cited the relationship to food that his family had cultivated as extremely neutral. Growing up, he and his family always ate dinner together and shared the exact same food, and, according to him, this "bought [him] time from thinking about [his] relationship with food." "I didn't really have to make a relationship with food at the time," he told me, "I was just eating what was put on my plate." However, the unconsciousness of what he was eating was disrupted when he began to eat

with his peers at school when he was about 14. Observing how his peers ate exposed him to whole new ways of eating that he says he began to try out in an almost experimental fashion, telling me that “after your parents lose that grip on your way of eating food, you kind of can do anything with it.” This sentiment seemed to hold true for many of my other interlocutors as well, as they grew more self-selective about food in adolescence and after spending time eating with friends and peers in environments outside the home, in addition to learning about different ways of eating online.

Often less restrictive than the home environment, college in particular became a significant space for interlocutors to create new habits and determine what works for their bodies. For many students, including Camilo (he/him), the control he was able to exercise over his eating schedule helped him to reconnect with and respect his own hunger cues. At home, his parents had essentially controlled all of his meals and had forbidden him from snacking, but in college, he realized that he was a “grazer” and preferred to eat smaller snacks throughout the day, a behavior which had always felt “natural” to him but that he had not been able to explore at home because of his parents desire to control his weight. For Roxanne (she/her), her eating schedule became much more consistent and aligned with when she was hungry because at home her eating schedule was “very much dependent on [her] family, whereas [at school] [she’s] dependent solely on [herself].” College was ultimately an environment in which many students could establish full control over their eating for the first time.

Sometimes, this autonomy could feel overwhelming. As Katy (she/her) astutely put it, “a lot of this experience for college students...is like...how are you supposed to deal with this [feeding yourself] if you don’t have a mom to make you minestrone soup?” She cited her own difficulties motivating herself to go eat at the dining halls, which could be overwhelming social

environments, and talked about how she missed the familial aspect of eating when she was at school. Having experienced disordered eating in high school, college was a site of struggle for her because she was solely responsible for feeding herself, which was something she was not always willing to do. Nonetheless, there seems to be an implicit acknowledgement in her statement that feeding oneself is a life skill that for many young adults must be learned at a distance from their parents so as to gain full autonomy over what and how they eat and how they conceive of the moral dimensions of their choices.

As we've seen, reconnection with bodily hunger cues has been an important factor for students in establishing their own relationships to food. The next section details the complexities of embodied reactions and the ways that parental influence and other forms of knowledge around food that they have absorbed remain relevant, even as students seek to distance themselves from them.

Section Two: Embodied Knowledge as a Reparative Strategy

As I have mentioned, the majority of my interlocutors unfortunately had a negative, restrictive, or otherwise antagonistic relationship to food at some point in their lives. For a few, their relationships had been fraught since childhood due in large part to their family environments, but for many this antagonism was set off at puberty as their bodies began to change and become the subject of scrutiny from family, peers, and just about everyone else in their lives. While no one's trajectory was exactly the same, adolescence unsurprisingly seemed to be a particularly difficult time for my interlocutors as they variously struggled to conform to their parents wishes for their bodies, health and nutritional guidance, and the bodies and eating habits of people they observed online, while at the same time trying to break out of negative thought patterns and formulate a new and positive perception of their ever changing bodies. In college, a

physical and temporal space of unprecedented autonomy at the cusp of adolescence and adulthood, many were taking the opportunity to reform their relationship into something more positive. I thought of this as a reparative approach to food that sought to suture old wounds. Students advocated becoming attuned to their embodied and emotional reactions to food as a method of forming positive relationships to it that were separate from harmful discourses they had absorbed in the home and elsewhere. However, because bodies are always socially informed, students' embodied and emotional reactions could be influenced by these discourses and other past experiences.

Many of the students I spoke to expressed a desire to stop *thinking* so hard about food. "I'm still scared to interrogate what I'm eating because I don't want to get back to the point of disordered thinking" about food, Eliot (they/he), a senior from LA County, shared with me. For them, their past disordered eating habits had been characterized by an obsessive analysis of their food in terms of its calories and nutritional content. Therefore, their reparative strategy was to create distance by not being "critical" of what they were eating. However, they understood that criticism could emerge and spiral in a way that was out of their control if at any point they thought too much about what they ate. Jade told me that they weren't sure they could ever get back to a place where they completely disregarded what food would do to their body and their weight, but that having a good relationship to food required getting as far away from that line of thinking as they could. Thoughts, it seemed, were not entirely in a student's control when it came to what they ate, and they tended to be critical in a way that could endanger the sensual enjoyment or even neutrality that one experienced regarding food. The consequence of thinking too much was guilt. Many people also advised me that to have a good relationship with food, one could not "worry" or feel "anxious" about it, nor "dread" it, nor walk away from the table feeling

“regret.” These ways of defining the parameters of a good relationship to food imply painful histories of experience or observation of relationships to food that had been characterized by anxiety and self-criticism. The sheer amount of negative affect around eating that needed to be carefully managed was overwhelming.

One method of managing this negative affect that students frequently repeated was grounding into their bodily sensations while eating. They articulated this in a few different ways while describing how to have a good relationship with food. One oft repeated piece of advice was to eat when one was hungry and stop when one was full. While this might seem fairly intuitive, as we have seen in situations where students did not have autonomy over what and when they ate in their family environment or struggled with restrictive eating, it was easy for students to form the impression that hunger cues were to be distrusted or ignored. In order to remedy this, their relationship to their body’s hunger signals had to be rebuilt. Students also advocated for eating what made them feel good physically and emotionally. Eating what they enjoyed and taking pleasure in eating and rituals around it like communal meals and cooking were seen by the majority of my interlocutors as necessary aspects of a good relationship to food. Others further differentiated this form of pleasure which tended to be understood as more emotionally fulfilling from eating foods that made their *bodies* feel good, suggesting that their bodies would tell them what foods they needed through physical sensations. These broad pieces of advice align with the tenets of the intuitive eating movement, which a few students cited by name as a mindset that had helped them to reform their relationship to food. Created as a response to the negative impacts of “diet culture,” broadly conceived, intuitive eating teaches relating to food in a way that is body centered, encouraging adherents to “honor” and be “gentle” with themselves and their sensory and emotional reactions to food while rejecting “militant”

methods of relating to the body that required one to “police” what one ate and how one moved (IntuitiveEating.org 2019). Fascinating political valences of this language aside, the frequent references across my interviews to intuitive eating and its principles gives an impression of the cultural shift that was taking place in reaction to diet culture and more punitive body and food narratives as my interlocutors were growing up that also helped to form the basis of their perceptions.

I read in this body centered philosophy of eating a desire amongst students to escape outside directives on how and what they should eat by looking inward for a sort of a priori knowledge on what food was good to eat. While received discourses from parents and various public health sources had cultivated shame and an obsessively quantitative relationship to food, there seemed to be a sense that the body held its own knowledge which was distinct from discourse that could be accessed through attention to sensation and affect. When I asked Roxanne how she had formed her impression of what constituted a good relationship to food, she told me “from experience of how I mostly feel, because sometimes I’ll be very mindless with my food and it makes me feel really bad. Mindlessness leads to regret and thinking ‘why did I shove that thing down my throat when I actually really didn’t want it?’ ...I wouldn’t say that formal learning has taught me that. My parents definitely didn’t really teach me that.” Roxanne gives an impression that the other key sources of information in her life regarding how to eat have failed. Instead, she has recourse to learning about herself and what she needs from the ways that she reacts emotionally and physically to particular ways of eating, in some ways giving her ultimate autonomy over her relationship to food. Others similarly called on their bodies as sources of knowledge. Jade struggled with intense stomach aches and was trying to cut out the foods that hurt them and eat for the purpose of making their body feel good. Frustrated by how restrictive

prescribed diets for sensitive stomachs that they had found online were though, they instead opted to observe their own bodily reactions to different foods and create a list of things that hurt their stomach. Using their body almost as a site of experimentation, they crafted their diet around this data derived from themselves. Although these are just two examples, other students voiced similar sentiments and strategies of deriving knowledge from within as an alternative to outside discourses.

However understandable this desire to escape the often restrictive and shame-inducing discourses around food by looking within oneself for directives on what and how to eat is, it is unfortunately not so simple. The idea that the body is a pure font of knowledge distinct from and uncorrupted by the outside discourses processed by the mind is based on the Cartesian mind/body dualism that is a central assumption in the Western world. Anthropologists have troubled this simplistic dualism by interrogating the ways that embodied reactions like sensation and emotion are influenced by cultural context. Drawing on Geertz's theorization of the interrelatedness of emotions and the body, Scheper-Hughes & Lock suggest that "without culture, we simply would not know how to feel," because emotion is never divorced from being shaped by culture (1987). Thus, while emotion is sensual and rooted by the body, our emotional reactions are influenced and largely determined by our cultural context. While it may be easy to accept that emotion, which itself occupies a troubled space between the body and the mind, might be influenced by outside discourse, there is also ample evidence that the physical sensations of the body are influenced by culture, especially when it comes to food. The sensation of hunger, for example, is more often viewed as something instinctive and therefore uninfluenced by social context. However, as Deborah Lupton asserts, "it would be difficult to argue that hunger is purely a biological phenomenon, given the web of cultural significations that surround

and govern the ways and amounts and times that we eat” (1996, 33). In other words, our cultural context is capable of influencing how our hunger is experienced and what triggers it.

For example, Hanna Garth studied how residents of Santiago de Cuba used their embodied knowledge and reactions to food to assess what food was acceptable to eat. She notes that over the course of her research, during which she shared meals with her interlocutors, her sensory perceptions of certain foods began to change: she began to perceive rolls that her hosts often complained about as small, hard, and unappetizing, and she developed a taste for meat croquettes, the smell of which, at the beginning of her research, could drive her from a room (Garth 2023). Through immersion in the host culture and prolonged exposure to the ways in which they talked about and interacted with certain foods, she began to sense that food in a way that was similar to her interlocutors. There is ample evidence that our bodily reactions, particularly when they pertain to food, are influenced by the cultural context and discourses to which we are exposed. Therefore, the impression that we can “escape” outside discourses by looking within at our bodily reactions is, unfortunately, somewhat misguided.

The negative discourses attached to food that students sought to escape through body-grounded approaches already had effects on their bodily reactions, and this manifested in various subtle ways. Camilo was particularly self-aware about the ways that his hunger had been affected by outside discourses and had not always been a reliable indicator of his need for food:

When I was a child and I would fall into these things of restricting eating, like I genuinely did feel hungry. Like I felt like I needed to consume whatever it is that I was consuming. And it was only until after when my stomach would hurt and I would be like physically sick and also just feeling grossed out at the fact that I had eaten, that’s when I would realize like ‘ok, you actually went too far and like you didn’t really need to be doing that, you weren’t that hungry.’

Camilo began restricting as a result of social pressures to regulate his appearance, which disconnected him from his bodily hunger cues. In this cycle of ignoring his appetite, hunger was

constituted as something unreliable to be resisted and repressed. When it did become overpowering, Camilo engaged in bingeing, consuming far more food than his body actually needed after a period of deprivation. The disgust that he felt after having eaten was also culturally embedded, not just a physical feeling but a moral judgment for eating when he wasn't "that hungry" that arose from the social discourses he was exposed to. Coupled with the painful sensations that resulted from the binge, these embodied reactions then reinforced the notion that his appetite was not to be trusted. Recalling this anecdote caused Camilo to revise his earlier answer that a good relationship to food should be guided by people's hunger to say that a "healthy" relationship to food was one in which someone could *trust* their own hunger. However, it was still unclear how one could cultivate that trust in their own hunger, especially knowing how variable and tied to emotion and social influence it could be.

We can see similar embodied reactions as a result of social influence in other students as well. It is extremely difficult to notice and distinguish the ways in which our physical reactions and emotions are influenced by our cultural contexts, and even more so to articulate these impacts. Therefore, many of my interlocutors did not specifically identify this phenomenon. However, there were clues in their responses as to the ways their environments and cultures might have impacted them. To give one example, Cherry reported that she still felt fear and anxiety towards certain foods that her mother had told her were unhealthy or would give her a stomach ache if she ate them when she was growing up, imbuing them with the power to inflict pain as well as change her body. This fearful reaction was cultivated not only by her mother's warnings that the foods would physically harm her, but also by a culturally specific fear of gaining weight and becoming unhealthy which was taught to her primarily by her mother.

When I argue that our cultural context and the discourses that we are steeped in can affect our embodied reactions to food, I am not suggesting that it shapes every single sensation. There would be little evidence to claim that Jade's stomach pains when they eat certain foods are a result of their mother's criticisms of the way they eat, for example. This does not, however, discredit the fact that sensations like hunger and certain emotional reactions can be influenced by culture. Likewise, I am not trying to discredit intuitive eating practices or grounding into bodily sensations as a strategy for repairing one's relationship to food. Many of my interlocutors seemed to be in a far better place with food than they had been because of it, and I know that it has helped me in my own relationship to food. Getting to know our bodies better in a food culture that relentlessly encourages us to suppress our appetite is certainly important for breaking out of restrictive cycles and can encourage a more joyful relationship to food. What I am suggesting is that we need to be more cognizant of the discourses that we have absorbed and how they affect us, because they also have an impact on our body's reactions to food.

A disturbing trend that I noticed amongst a few of my interlocutors that I had not expected was a feeling of guilt and shame when they did not eat *enough* and felt that they were not fulfilling their own expectations of what a positive, reparative relationship to food was, feelings which were not easily resolved simply by attending to bodily sensation. Katy described eating as fulfilling a basic human need and if she is not eating, she feels that "it's like either I am not motivated enough to fulfill that need or I'm actively feeling bad about myself and am avoiding fulfilling that need, and that is shameful and I know it" and added that she was "glad to be ashamed of not eating [rather] than ashamed of eating." In this conception, Katy manages to make the notion of food as something necessary to care for the body punitive. Rather than escaping the paradigm of viewing eating as shameful, she reproduces it by identifying a different

set of eating habits as shameful. She was not alone in this though. As Cherry told me, “the other day, I ate dessert and felt proud that I didn’t feel guilty, and I was like I don’t know if I want to be...it still feels weird to have an emotional reaction to eating that way? And then realizing that I felt proud made me feel guilty.” It seemed that no matter what the eating practice was, even if it was a step towards cultivating a positive relationship to food, it would still produce a sense of guilt because it was not “perfect” in the sense that it was not completely in line with how Cherry defined a positive relationship to food. These feelings of guilt and shame arise from the health discourses to which students have been exposed. These discourses place moral value on achieving a “healthy” relationship to food, an idea which I will explore at length in my next section.

Section Three: Reorienting Conceptions of Health

Health and variations on the word can carry multiple and conflicting meanings from person to person and even from context to context. This is, in part, why I chose to leave such language out of my interview questions (ie. asking what a “good” relationship to food looks like instead of a “healthy” one). Aside from wanting to avoid adding connotations to my questions that would influence people’s answers, I also wanted to see if words like “health” emerged organically in relation to goodness. In all but a few of my interviews, the terms had a way of becoming synonymous. It seemed to be the only language my interlocutors had at their disposal to define a good relationship, and it’s not difficult to understand why. “Health” itself carries significant moral implications, which many anthropologists have attempted to reveal and interrogate. In *Against Health*, Jonathan Metzl describes how “health is a concept, a norm, and a set of bodily practices whose ideological work is often rendered invisible by the assumption that

it is a monolithic, universal good” (2010, 9). In other words, the moral goodness of health has become common sense to the point that the moral inadequacy of the *unhealthy* behavior or person is all but assumed. As Robert Crawford points out in his article “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life,” health has become “a metaphor for all that is good in life,” a state embodied and achieved by an individual. This conception of health has put the onus of achievement squarely on individuals while failing to acknowledge the ways that health can be socially and politically determined (Crawford 1980). Today, a “moral imperative to engage in healthy lifestyles” touches every aspect of our lives, particularly the ways we eat, as each choice can be loaded with the implication of moral failings, like over-indulgence or ignorance, or moral achievements, like self-discipline (LeBesco 2010, 77). Within the context of these moral implications, students struggled to articulate a consistent definition of what the word “healthy” means.

People implicitly and explicitly defined healthiness in many different ways, sometimes contradicting themselves in their own usage of the word. However, two distinct ways of conceptualizing healthiness emerged. The first was related to the character of the food itself. Healthy foods were variously defined as whole foods that weren’t processed, were not “fast foods,” and were low in sugar. Healthy meals were those that included variety and “balance” among its nutritional elements, with a key component of a healthy meal being vegetables. These conceptualizations of health reflect standard public health guidance and consensus on what makes a food nutritionally valuable, as I will discuss in more depth later in the section.

However, the second conceptualization of health pertained to my interlocutors’ relationships to food, and a far less straightforward definition emerged. To have a healthy relationship to food, as it turned out, did not necessarily mean eating the foods that were

described as healthy. One of my interlocutors, Zelda, described a healthy relationship to food as completely subjective, saying that they were “a little cautious of maybe...saying what that [a healthy relationship with food] looks like for everyone because I think it looks different for everyone...the things that maybe don’t seem healthy to me are just things that don’t work for me.” While others didn’t go quite so far as this, many of them hinged their definitions of a healthy relationship to food on it not having the characteristics of disordered eating habits. For them, healthy relationships to food were defined simply by eating enough rather than restricting and tracking the calories they were consuming, eating when they wanted to and being able to trust their own hunger cues, and not having a sense of guilt around eating food. Students were trying to move away from more traditional definitions of health received from authorities that placed moral judgments on what and how they ate by attending to the emotional health of their relationships to food instead, but remained compelled by the moral imperative to health in general and remained limited by the health-centered language used to describe positive relationships to food.

Ava (she/her), a dual-national senior, created an equivalency between her relationship to food and her relationship to a romantic partner in terms of the emotional stability or instability they could cultivate. “I don’t think I could have an eating disorder and have a healthy relationship with a partner,” she told me, “because I would have to choose one or the other...in that way it’s like a toxic boyfriend. It takes up my whole life, like I have to focus so much energy on that.” Even though this conceptualization of healthiness refers to an interpersonal relationship, it still implicitly reveals how she conceptualizes a healthy relationship to food. Food is something so central, and with such latent power, that it could theoretically foreclose entirely on a close human relationship. Through the metaphor of the toxic boyfriend, she illustrates how an unhealthy

relationship to food mirrors an unhealthy human relationship in that it can drain and isolate an individual if unchecked. The healthy relationship, by contrast, can be both loving and allow space for an individual to love and devote attention to other things. Most importantly though, this example illustrates her understanding that the relationship to food is primarily an emotional one with different standards of “health” than simply nutritional content.

Significantly, many people did not produce definitions of healthy relationships on their own terms, but rather as negations of what they saw as unhealthy. Uncoincidentally, many of the people who defined a healthy relationship to food as being unrestricted and open to all types of food had themselves experienced disordered eating habits. Because unhealthiness had looked this way for them in the past, they formed this definition in part in reaction to their experiences. Others who defined their relationship to food in this way had had no experience with disordered eating but had witnessed it in family members and loved ones, and had made conscious decisions to not replicate that behavior. “There's a lot of people in my life I feel like who don't have that great of relationships with food, and I kind of look at that and I just don't don't want that for myself,” Kay told me. “[My mom is] very much like someone who will beat herself up over her appearance and how she thinks she's not good enough,” they explained, “and just not wanting to be that insecure,” was what helped them to form their understanding of what a positive and healthy relationship to food should look like. This definition of health by negation involves moral reasoning as well though: “the definition of our own health depends in part on our value judgments about others. We see them [“unhealthy people”] and realize our own health in the process” (Metzl 2010, 2). The concept of disordered eating implies negative moral traits, like insecurity, and suggests the existence of “ordered” eating, a normative and moral mode of relating to food. However, understanding what “ordered” eating looked like was severely

problematic for students when the definitions of healthy eating provided by health authorities had moral valences that encouraged restrictive and punitive thought patterns.

When interlocutors explicitly used the word “unhealthy,” it seemed to have a fairly consistent set of meanings with little variation. To say that someone’s eating habits were unhealthy was almost invariably a euphemistic way of saying that they were not eating enough or were otherwise dramatically restricting their food intake. In reference to food, unhealthiness was exclusively associated with processed foods, a nebulous category of their own including fast food or otherwise “oily” foods. This conception relied on traditional nutritional understandings of health. The word “unhealthy” in this context was often only used to describe the food itself; only one individual stated that a *person* themselves was unhealthy if they consumed fast food. These two things that unhealthiness seems to describe, not eating enough and processed foods, were the only two things that interlocutors would fairly unanimously and definitively say were negative things. Even then, in many cases unhealthy foods were not so much identified as a key issue or thing to be avoided at all costs in the same way that restrictive eating was. In fact, to strictly limit oneself from supposedly unhealthy foods was seen in some cases as potentially precipitating restrictive eating, and so compromises were made to prioritize not falling into a restrictive mindset. For example, Zelda, whose diet was already severely restricted due to multiple allergies, explained to me that they were wary of the fact that they were “walking a very fine line between having a healthy relationship with food and completely restricting [themselves].” They explained one of their strategies for not falling into these restrictive eating patterns, which they conceptualized as being the opposite of a healthy relationship with food, like this: “if I see something that I can eat and it's maybe like a cake or, you know, chips or something that is quote UN quote unhealthy, I let myself buy it because it's something that I want, something I want to

try, I feel like I'd be much more of a sad person if I didn't let myself at least have these things that make me happy.” For them, cultivating positive emotional states was a central method of maintaining their health through food, while remaining self-consciously aware of the “unhealthiness” of the foods that might invoke those states.

In spite of the desire to shift the emphasis from traditional notions of nutritional health to emotional health, most everyone expressed a desire to eat what they described as balanced meals and varied diets in language that mimicked public health guidance on what a healthy diet was. There was rote repetition across my interviews that a complete meal included protein, vegetables, and carbs, and an emphasis on creating balance amongst these three food categories, even at the expense of the culinary cohesion of the meal. For example, during our interview one of my interlocutors added tomato salsa and guacamole to her plate of chicken and pasta with white sauce on the insistence that she needed more vegetables to “balance” her plate.

These ideas and language were derived from a variety of sources with varying degrees of authority. One significant site of intersection with public health discourses was the classroom prior to college, where students identified informational campaigns like the MyPlate initiative, spearheaded by Michelle Obama as part of her mission to target childhood obesity, as having been significant sources of information on how to eat “healthfully.” Even students who had grown up abroad recalled similar educational materials supplied by organizations like the WHO, indicating how globalized and ubiquitous these discourses of nutritional health were (Wentworth 2017). Students also had varied experiences with doctors and nutritionists. For example, Charlotte (she/her), a freshman from New York, told me how the nutritionist that had spoken to her family when she was a child had emphasized making the “right” choice when it came to food and not necessarily eating less, and that this advice had had a lasting positive influence for her.

On the other hand, when Roxanne was sent to a dietician by her father and was diagnosed as “nearing obesity,” one of the solutions he provided was a diet in which one could only eat watermelon all day, which would have undoubtedly jeopardized both her mental and physical health. Whether the impact of these interactions was negative or positive, health authorities were still bought into moral narratives of “right” and “wrong” ways of eating and “obesity” being demonized to the point that dramatic solutions would be prescribed to “cure” it by any means necessary. Even outside of these spaces of authority, social media and self-tracking technologies were intimate reminders of the imperative to nutritional health. Technologies like dieting apps and other “digital self-tracking devices,” according to Rachel Sanders, “extend the regulatory mechanisms of both public health and fashion/beauty authorities, and enable increasingly rigorous body projects” (2017). In conjunction with a continual exposure via social media to people engaged in “body projects,” like fitness influencers, this assertion held true for my interlocutors, as public health discourses were naturalized through students’ own processes of self-regulation.

All of these sources of discourse that students interacted with can be contextualized by the pernicious framing of War on Fat which was the background for these students’ childhoods. Because obesity was conceived of as the number one threat to public health in this campaign, the remedy was assumed to be broad ranging education on proper nutrition and the dangers of things like sugars and trans fats targeted specifically at children in order to prevent them from becoming fat. Guidance related to eating behavior, especially restrictive behavior, which seems to be the most relevant concern around eating for my interlocutors, was not highlighted or even included at all because that did not fit the agenda of the campaign. Rather, the campaign encouraged “obsessive attention to the body” because “optimal health can never be fully achieved [and so]

its pursuit requires constant work and vigilance” (Greenhalgh 2015, 19). We can see evidence of the way the War on Fat has backfired in the proliferation of new (and controversial) pathologies like orthorexia, which describes a condition characterized by an obsession with healthy eating, a paradoxically “unhealthy” fixation on health (Wynne et al. 2022).

At this point, many of my interlocutors recognized the problematic underpinnings of much of the health guidance they were given throughout their youth. Those who had used technologies like dieting apps associated it with past disordered eating habits, and others shrugged off the guidance they had received in school as “bullshit” because although it did not correspond to the ways their family and peers ate, these people were, by all accounts, still healthy. Hence, the desire to place greater emphasis on emotional health than traditional conceptions of nutritional health. This recognition and suspicion of public health guidance did not mean that students were prepared to completely reject it and its attendant logics though.

A practical way of talking about food that relied on supposedly scientific ways of understanding food's value through nutrition was prevalent in many, though not all, of my interviews. Nutritionism is essentially the reductive idea that the healthiness of a food is determined by the nutrients it contains, and we can see it reflected in the way that food was often conceived of by students as a way of “fueling” the body with its “energy” and meeting its nutritional needs so that it could function (Scripps 2015). Vitamins and calories, in many cases, seemed to be thought of as an input which would keep the body “running,” almost as if it was a machine. These ways of conceptualizing and speaking about food and its impact on the body indicate a continued investment in the logics of biomedicine and how it conceives of the body. While these conceptions may seem to be “neutral” because they are scientific, Yates-Doerr points out how nutritionism consolidates “technical and historically contingent ideas about nourishment

and the myriad relationships surrounding dietary practices into seemingly unproblematic terms,” obscuring the complexity of genuine nourishment in service of a biomedical regime of health which views the relationship of food to the body as one of simplistic inputs and outputs (2012). Nevertheless, it seemed that this apparent simplicity was desired by some: a few students seemed to articulate it as a way of creating necessary distance between themselves and food. To view it in terms of its practical function would, hopefully, remove the negative value judgments ascribed to eating more generally and make it easier to conceptualize as a neutral bodily process. In this case, students seemed to be using the language provided within their social context as best they could in their attempts to reform and rearticulate their relationships to food.

Conclusion

College students are betwixt and between their lives as adolescents and fully-fledged adults, a period that invites and demands re-evaluation and re-examination of their habits, beliefs, and values. At this point in their lives, many students are negotiating the interconnected social influences that have shaped their relationships to food thus far as they attempt to improve these relationships. Parents formed the basis of these relationships as the first models in students’ lives of how one should relate to food, and often had a negative impact because of the moral value student’s perceived their parents to place on highly controlled and surveilled eating habits. In spaces where they were exposed to different social discourses around food and had the ability to exercise autonomy over their eating, students were able to reflect on what they had learned from their parents and begin the process of renegotiating their relationships to food. In identifying strategies for reformulating their relationships to food, many students advocated for becoming attuned to their embodied and emotional reactions to food for information on what and

how they should eat that was divorced from outside discourse. However, these embodied reactions were themselves shaped by the student's cultural context, rendering them unreliable as forms of acultural knowledge. Furthermore, students attempted to eschew more traditional and authoritative definitions of health as they pertain to food in favor of prioritizing the emotional health of their relationships to food, but remained committed to moralized notions of the value of health. As students attempted to disengage from the social influences they identified as having negatively impacted their relationships to food, particularly because of their moral dimensions, the ideas and strategies they turned to as alternatives were frequently fundamentally entwined with the same moral and cultural logics that they wished to escape.

While I have attempted to convey a cohesive argument about just a few aspects of the complexity college students are facing within their relationships to food at this moment in time, it is important to avoid generalizing this research beyond its bounds and understand some of the specificities of this context. This particular group of liberal arts college students were especially thoughtful in their reflections on their relationships to food and nuanced in their thinking on dominant conceptualizations of things like health that are otherwise often accepted as unambiguous truths. However, a few students identified this attitude as a feature unique to the Claremont Colleges because of the liberal political sensibilities of the campus community, and shared stories that suggested that students their age at other schools were still firmly entrenched in ways of speaking about and relating to food that they deemed harmful. With that said, my interlocutors do not speak for their entire generational cohort, only a small segment of it, and, even among them, there were widely varying experiences and perspectives.

It would be impossible for me to capture and do justice to all the things my interlocutors talked about across my interviews, and indeed I had to sacrifice a discussion of many interesting

conceptual threads for the sake of brevity, such as an in depth discussion of the impact of social media on this generation's relationship to food, health tracking technologies, the unique social conditions of the dining hall, and much more. It is my hope that this thesis will function as an invitation to future researchers to engage in more research on this complicated topic. Though they do not represent their whole generational cohort, my interlocutors do capture the tension of a burgeoning political shift in how we talk about food, health, and bodies that deserves more scholarly attention. Our generation falls on the cusp of two modes of conceptualizing food: while our childhoods were defined by the War on Fat, our adolescences and nascent adulthoods are witnessing a shift towards body acceptance and intuitive eating. The perspective of this generation is in many ways unique and will have significant implications for how we collectively approach food in the future. While eating is an everyday process which some might dismiss as quotidian and inconsequential, in reality it is rife with moral, social, and political negotiations and implications. My aim in this thesis was simply to provide a portrait in which I draw out some of these complexities in order to incite further interest in the topic. At the very least, I hope that I have given you something to consider at your next meal.

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