

Fall 2016

# What We Talk About When We Talk About Food Systems: Discourse in an Emergent Field

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## Recommended Citation

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What We Talk About When We Talk About Food Systems:  
Discourse in an Emergent Field

By Hailey P. Grohman

Under the Supervision of Dr. Amy B. Trubek

In Partial Completion of the Requirements  
of the M.S. in Food Systems

**08/26/2016**

## Introduction

The field of food systems is a relatively new discipline, one whose characteristics, philosophies and methodologies are not universally agreed upon. It's also a transdisciplinary field, crossing borders and bringing together researchers from many areas of study. This makes it an exciting and productive field to study, particularly for its intersections with the field of communications. Relatively little has been written about discourse within food systems, likely because the topics within the field of study itself are still emerging. However, it is an important time to think about *how* information is created and disseminated within the field, as meaning is constantly being made. The research focus for this particular project involves one node in particular in which communication about food systems occurs rapidly and with frequent change: the University of Vermont Food Systems program, in particular at the Food Systems Summit that occurs every year in June.

This project originated with my interest in participating in the planning of the Food Systems Summit as a professional development experience, as well as interest in engaging with the material created at the event itself. This project combines my interests and experience in marketing and communications with a burgeoning curiosity in the more theoretical aspects of discourse in the field. I worked with Dr. Amy Trubek, director of the UVM Food Systems graduate program, and Alison Nihart of the Food Systems Initiative and organizer of the Food Systems Summit (FSS).

The theme of the 2016 FSS was the central question of 'What Makes Food Good.' This question gave rise to my own research questions in my examination of the discourse and rhetoric employed at the Summit, which were:

1. What are the values and belief sets underlying the answers to the question of What Makes Food Good?
2. What can be understood about the discipline of food systems through the discourse and rhetoric employed by speakers at the Summit?

This project contains three distinct but interrelated sections. The first is the most practical: a communications and PR report for the use of the Food Systems Summit Steering Committee, a result of my months of work as a communications assistant for Alison and the Committee. It is a concise summary of social media, press and media pitching related to the Summit, though not a complete history of my duties for the Summit.

The second section is the analytical meat of the report: a discourse analysis of the Summit itself, using material such as keynote and panel transcripts, social media postings, audience questions, post-conference press and concurrent session descriptions. This section uses the research questions as a foundation for examining the discourse created around the Summit, and can be seen as a rhetorical snapshot of the discipline at one moment in time. In other words, this section provides a narrow insight into the field of food systems as those within it create, shape and interact with meaning through discourse at one particular academic conference.

In the third and final section, I synthesize the practical and theoretical material in a short narrative essay on my own answer to the question of ‘What Makes Food Good.’ As this question is what drew me to the Summit in the first place, the essay provides insight into the ways I have grappled with this question in my personal and professional life. In this project, I have both created discourse through marketing (Section One) and examined it from a more distanced, academic perspective (Section Two); the two come

together to form my own opinions about the nature of good food, however amorphous the concept may be.

This project is somewhat innovative (though within a new discipline and a new department this seems inevitable), and I deeply appreciate the support of Amy, Alison and others in the program as I waded through its various iterations. I hope that it contributes in some way to the field of food systems and examinations of the discourse and rhetoric within it, so that we may strive for flexibility and engagement in our communication as well as further our transdisciplinarity.

## Methods

Though this project surrounds the 2016 UVM Food Systems Summit, which took place June 14th-15th, much of the work that contributed to this paper and to the conference took place for months in advance. My role as a communications assistant for the Summit required participation from early November until the end of the event, starting with serving as a notetaker at meetings and an aid to the Summit Steering Committee.

My duties as a communications assistant included writing press releases, crafting blog posts, interviewing keynote speakers, creating social media postings, pitching to media outlets and more. The results of my work can be seen in Part One, the communications report section of this paper. I also aided in the logistics of Amy Trubek's panel presentation during the Summit, in order to gain experience in the minutia of conference planning.

During the Summit itself, I immersed myself in the event by attending sessions, taking field notes, participating in extracurricular events such as luncheons and dinners, and maintaining the Twitter presence of the UVM Food Feed by monitoring the hashtag "#UVMFoodSummit."

The data collected after the Summit and used for analysis includes several panel and all keynote speech transcriptions, submitted concurrent session descriptions, Twitter postings during the Summit, Summit Steering Committee meeting notes, audience questions to the keynote speakers, and media coverage of the event. These data comprised over 100 pages.

Once data was transcribed and compiled, I conducted my analysis for Part Two of this paper using the method of discourse analysis. This method, previously unfamiliar to

me, was suggested by Elizabeth Berman after reading an initial literature review for this project. Discourse analysis is a method typically used in linguistics, philosophy and other disciplines. It is used to break down texts of any sort (written, oral, visual) for their meanings in context, in order to gain knowledge about the speaker, their intentions, their audience, and the world around them. I found this methodology to be particularly appropriate for answering my research questions about communication within the field of food systems. My guide was the textbook *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, a 2010 work by James Paul Gee. This text was recommended to me by Elizabeth Berman and Sarah Heiss. Gee's toolkit consists of 28 analytical "tools" for uncovering meaning in a text. They range from more practical tips (the 'Intertextuality Tool' asks the researcher to look for references or allusions in the text) to theoretical, structural lenses (the 'Systems and Knowledge Building Tool' aids the researcher in linking their data to the sign systems or ways of knowing that are being represented or privileged within those data).

No tool is a clear set of steps; discourse analysis does not provide a 'how-to' guide for understanding language and meaning. However, these tools guided my understanding and deepened my analysis of how discourse shapes the culture, relationships, identities and structures that make up the world. Discourse builds the discipline of food systems, as individuals and institutions use language to convey information, enact certain identities (thus creating 'insiders' and 'outsiders') and maintain the structures (such as academia) that allow the discipline to exist.

I used an emergent coding method to identify themes in the texts and pull out specific pieces of dialogue that fit those themes. Those themes are described in Part

Two. My research questions, listed in the introduction, were also developed during this coding process.

Part Three of this paper is a narrative essay and thus has no clear methodology. The essay, an answer to the question of What Makes Food Good, has been informed by my experiences as a member of a farm family, a white middle-class woman living in an urban area, a researcher of food discourse and a voracious eater. It simply felt right, after analysing the strides that others made towards understanding Good Food, that I grapple with answering the question myself.

## **Literature Review**

Food Systems as a discipline contains elements of nutrition, agriculture, economics and political science, among others. It's also in its infancy as a field of study; the pioneering UVM program is only four years old. Thus, very little literature exists which analyzes the discourse within this broad discipline and how meaning or symbolism is communicated. Food more broadly has been the subject of much analysis in the linguistic or semiotic field, beginning when Brillat-Savarin declared in 1826 "tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are," to modern examinations like Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's 2014 sociological work *Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*. However, analyses of these types for the specific discourse of food *systems* are lacking. This project aims to begin to fill the gap.

Current literature conceptualizes the intersections between food systems and communication in several ways. One is through food products themselves, as well as their preparation and consumption, as a mode of communication and a set of signifiers. Another is the idea of food as foundational to the formation of a cultural, national, or individual identity. In this conceptual framework, the identity of UVM Food Systems and the Food Systems Summit is constantly shaped through its discourse around food and agriculture. A third intersection occurs within the study of rhetoric in food discourse, much of which is created and utilized as part of the field of food systems.

### **Food as Symbol**

Though food is necessary for human consumption, its cultural and symbolic meaning goes much deeper than its biological function. Early examinations of food and communication are rooted in a semiotic analysis. A 1961 essay by Roland Barthes argues that food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages,

situations and behavior.” (p. 29) He writes that food, much like language, contains a grammar and a syntax which is universally accepted among a set of people. The scale of this set of people can be as large as a country, which is often the unit of analysis for studies of food culture, or it can be as small as a set of attendees at a conference in Burlington, Vermont. Barthes also suggests a useful linguistic tool for understanding meaning in food: performing a transformational analysis “to observe whether the passage from one fact to another produces a difference in signification.” He offers the example of ordinary bread versus pain de mie: “the former signifies day-to-day life, the latter a party.” (p. 30) This simple method provides much of the foundation for my analysis of the Summit.

Besides existing in language, food myths and signifiers appear in any number of media, including movies, TV, blogs, and literature. People consume these media every day, much in the same way that they literally consume the food products represented in those media. Parkhurst Ferguson, 2014, assess the cultural attitudes embodied by national food media: televised eating contests represent American values of excess and abundance, while competitive cooking contests in France exhibit French nationalism. These examples, though admittedly reductive, show that media can be an important showcase of the relationship between a people and its food. Thus, the diverse media produced as both a promotion for and a summary of the UVM Food Systems Summit were of critical analytical importance. These include blogs, news stories, press releases, social media and other texts.

### **Food as Identity Formation**

The field of media studies examines the myths and stories around food, often with regard to the role of those media in identity formation. De Solier, 2013, argues that

“material media” like food television and blogs are “central to how objects are used in postindustrial self-formation.” (p. 35) She uses a lens of consumption to explain that identity formation, in particular the “models of selfhood and self-improvement based around the consumption or the production of material objects.” (p. 35) Food products are unique in their role in identity formation, due to their biological necessity on top of their symbolic meaning.

Food movements as well can be utilized in identity formation, according to Greene, 2011. The author examines the Slow Food movement as one which creates “meaning through the use of style and performances.” (p. 75) The performances include the consumption of the “slow” meals themselves, as well as the procurement and preparation of foods in a way that subscribes to the values of the movement. Though this is a narrow example of potential members of the discipline of food systems, it is possible to apply this idea to any number of groups of people congregating within the discipline.

Several texts utilize the concept of “culinary capital” to explain another form of identity formation within food discourse. (Greene, 2011, Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012) Culinary capital draws on theories of Marx and Foucault to describe the acquisition of status and power through food and food activities. (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012) Greene, 2011, sees culinary capital as being a core feature of the Slow Food movement, due to the elite nature of its members and the association of its activities with good taste and pleasure. Thus, the performance and status seeking involved in food activities such as the UVM Food Systems Summit are important for understanding the event itself as well as the discipline that produces it.

## **Food Rhetoric**

Like any other academic field, food systems contains its own rhetoric which is utilized by its practitioners and aids in the formation of a community united by a shared knowledge and discourse. This shared language is used not only to convey information, but to do much more than that: “one of the things we do with [language] is build things (such as academic disciplines) and destroy things (like marriages) in the world,” says linguist James Paul Gee. (p. 80) Though very little study has been dedicated to an analysis of this rhetoric in food systems itself, analyses of food and environmental discourse covers many of the same topics. Food’s enormous power as a signifier allows for the use of compelling rhetoric that pervades current food systems media and discussion. Examinations of food discourse call back to mind the transdisciplinarity of the field of food systems itself: “What we mean when we say “food” reveals a complex set of land use and labor practices, corporate structures, public policy, plant and animal genetics, and human health impacts.” (Opel, Johnson & Wilk, 2010)

Bruner and Meek, 2011, analyze the language and rhetorical techniques utilized by food organizations and media groups in discussing seafood, a particularly interesting example due to the competing ideologies of sustainability and health. They also discuss the role of the critic in examining these rhetorical devices, a role which actively participates in the construction of the language: “Perhaps by making audiences aware of the largely unconscious seaFOOD paradigm, the critic could help audiences change the status quo of discourse.” (p. 276)

This piece has particularly salient implications for the examination of discourse within the Food Systems Summit. In order to read and understand the Summit as a text,

rife with its own rhetoric and symbolism, the researcher must utilize a discourse analysis framework of thought.

### **Discourse Analysis in Food Systems**

The method of discourse analysis has been employed for the purpose of examining the meanings of food, notably in Frye and Bruner's 2012 edited volume *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality and Power*. This book provides many examples of discourse analysis used to examine topics as diverse as the annual Presidential turkey pardoning to narratives of hunger and food insecurity. However, these works do not necessarily include a food systems perspective: they generally remain within the ideological boundaries of a single discipline, such as linguistics or anthropology.

Guy Cook's *Genetically Modified Language* is one of the most in-depth examples of a discourse analysis for a food systems issue. Cook examines the discourse of different relevant parties in the GM debate (journalists, scientists, politicians, companies), as well as those who consume and interpret that discourse (the public). These distinct categories, and the discourse created by each, informed the analysis in this paper.

Several helpful guides to applied discourse analysis served this project. The first is *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit* by James Paul Gee, an extremely applied work that provides 28 "tools" for looking at a text in context. Though the examples used in the work primarily related to the field of education, it is clear how each tool is applicable to any piece of text. Another was *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, edited by Ruth Wodak and Michal Krzyzanowski, with sections tailored to specific kinds of discourse, such as new media and political rhetoric. This book informed my analysis of some of the more unconventional texts used in the project, such as twitter

postings and concurrent session descriptions. The methods section includes further information on the type and nature of the discourse analysis I performed.

### **Conclusion**

Food systems is as full of rhetoric and meaningful discourse as any other field, but due to its newness very little academic study has been dedicated to the language of the discipline. This project hopes to fill a gap in the current literature on food and discourse by analyzing a food systems perspective, at least the perspective of a particular group of people at a particular place over several days. Discourse analysis provides a means for addressing both my research questions as well as furthering the awareness of “what we talk about when we talk about food systems.”



# 2016 UVM Food Systems Summit

## Final PR & Media Report

08.26.2016

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## Summary

The UVM Food Systems Summit received media coverage from several outlets (Seven Days, UVM Communications, Good Food Jobs) and generated a wealth of social media postings both leading up to and during the conference.

## Published Stories

1. Call for Proposals Announcement (Food Feed Blog):  
<https://learn.uvm.edu/foodsystemsblog/2016/01/29/uvms-2016-food-systems-summit-releases-call-for-proposals/>
2. Press Release (UVM Communications):  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/?Page=news&storyID=22649&category=ucommall>
3. Press Release (Food Feed Blog):  
<https://learn.uvm.edu/foodsystemsblog/2016/04/11/defining-good-food-uvm-presents-5th-annual-food-systems-summit-june-14-15/>
4. Gastronomes Interview with Nija Rivera (Good Food Jobs):  
<http://www.goodfoodjobs.com/blog/nija-rivera-pa-food-bucks-coordinator-the-food-trust/>
5. UVM Summit Considers What Makes Food Good (Seven Days):  
<http://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/uvm-food-systems-summit-considers-localvore/Content?oid=3429884>
6. Summit Explores What Makes Food Good (UVM Communications):  
<http://www.uvm.edu/foodsystems/?Page=news&storyID=23077&category=food>
7. 2016 Summit Recap (Food Feed Blog [*note: written by the author*]):  
<https://learn.uvm.edu/foodsystemsblog/2016/06/17/uvm-food-summit/>

## Social Media

The 2016 UVM Food Systems Summit generated over 200 tweets among participating individuals and organizations. Prominent tweeters included Vera Chang (1,150 followers), Vermont Farm to Plate (3,280 followers), and the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (1,700 followers).

The Storify report of all tweets can be found here: <https://storify.com/haileygrohman/2016-uvm-food-systems-summit>

## Media Pitched

- Seven Days
- VPR
- Burlington Free Press
- WCAX
- WPTZ
- Civil Eats
- Barry Estabrook
- Eating Well Magazine
- UVM Communications

# UVM Summit Considers What Makes Food Good

By **HANNAH PALMER EGAN** [@FINDTHATHANNAH](#)



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PA FOOD BUCKS COORDINATOR, THE FOOD TRUST



## UVM Summit Addresses “What Makes Food Good?”

Posted by Guest Author | June 17, 2016

By Hailey Grohman

Who decides what good food is? Is it policymakers, researchers, corporate officers, consumers? How do they decide? Using scientific evidence, cultural values, or other factors? Further, what are the effects of these decisions? This week, hundreds of food systems activists and enthusiasts filled UVM’s Davis Center for two days to pursue just these questions.

## **Part Two: Discourse Analysis**

It seems that there is a critical point in the food chain that goes frequently unmentioned: conversation. At this point in time, we are in the midst of important cultural and political discourses concerning food, and how we should deal with it, yet relatively little academic study has been devoted to how those discourses are conducted. This may have to do with the relative newness of food itself into some academic disciplines: as Rachel Ankeny pointed out during one Food Systems Summit panel, “philosophy [has been] really pejorative about looking at food...as being so base.”

Whatever the cause for the lack of literature, it seems that food systems discourse is a field rich in potential for research. In just two days of conference proceedings, plus some pre- and post-Summit texts, a wealth of material emerged for study. The 2016 Food Systems Summit is just one example of the construction and maintenance of a discipline and the academic structure that supports it, but a highly illustrative example nonetheless. Through discourse, meanings are made, cultural norms are reinforced or pushed back against, and identities are formed.

In my analysis of the discourse surrounding and within the 2016 UVM Food Systems Summit, three overarching themes emerged. One is the question of citizenship: as many keynotes, panelists and participants discussed the idea of being a “food citizen,” a narrative was constructed about how one might be a political, not just consumptive, actor within a food system. What does it mean to be a citizen of a food system? What rights and responsibilities are conferred upon a food citizen, and how do they differ from being a citizen of another political entity, such as a nation-state?

A second theme that emerged within the discourse has to do with the development of insiders and outsiders within the field of food systems. Many presenters

and participants at the Summit took time to mention those they did not see at the conference: people of color, farmworkers, those with low incomes. Defining ‘What Makes Food Good’ can’t be done by one limited group of people, and thus it was obvious that care was taken to consider the perspectives of others. However, the discussions around those outside groups were characterized by certain limited frames of thought, and unpacking that discourse is an important part of understanding the discipline. Who is an insider and who is an outsider in the field of food systems? How does discourse that is *about* other people, rather than *with* other people, inform the discipline?

Thirdly, food systems, like all other academic disciplines, is informed by and interacts with scientific ways of knowing. In the discourse of the three keynote speeches, speakers simultaneously utilize science as a method of legitimizing and normalizing their work while critiquing the science-based lens. Their navigation of scientific knowledge is influenced by their disciplinary backgrounds but the tension between “elite” science and “public” community-based knowledge is particularly strong within the discourse of food systems.

These themes emerged after emergent coding of the transcripts and other data contributing to the “text” of the Summit. In many ways, the Summit can serve as a representative space for the discipline of food systems and those within it. An analysis of attendance statistics for the Summit showed that out of 300 attendees, 28 were academic, 61 were from the nonprofit sector, 22 were from the business sector, 15 were farmers, 38 were community members, and 92 were students. This could be considered reflective of the larger field of food systems, with its intersections between the private, nonprofit and academic sectors.

## Part One: A Food Citizen

“I think too often we’ve conceived of people as food consumers,” declared Rachel Ankeny in the final keynote speech of the 2016 Summit. “I think we need to...run a strong dialogue about how we can be food citizens and root ourself in views that the public is entitled and even obligated to think reflectively about the food system, and think reflectively about the greater good.”

A month before, a Q&A was published in the UVM Food Feed (conducted by the author) that asked Jahi Chappell, another keynote speaker, about the difference between a food consumer and a food citizen. He replied: “The term *consumer* limits our conception of what we can do in terms of what we choose to eat and defines us as humans as the sum of our consumption choices. Besides being an impoverished way to look at our diverse and multifaceted people and communities, it is antidemocratic, and uncreative to boot.”

What is a food citizen? Citizenship outside of commonly understood entities, such as the nation-state, is hard to conceptualize. However, it may be that a re-conceptualization of citizenship in this new context is being developed through discourse such as that found at the Summit among keynotes and presenters. In many cases, a food citizen was described by what it *isn't*, rather than what it is (one indication that the concept is still emerging). The idea of food citizenship in this discourse is defined in opposition to the food consumer, someone who “can just read the labels...and everything is fine,” according to Ankeny.

The consumer framework, one in which a person expresses their beliefs and values through their participation in the capitalist marketplace, is described by several keynotes as being insufficient in some way. Chappell describes the term consumer as

“limiting.” Ankeny describes the food consumer framework as “very narrow,” echoing Chappell’s concerns. Even philosophy professor Tyler Doggett brought an ethical perspective to the consumer framework: “The idea that it’s your duty as a moral agent just to...buy the right stuff, seems to be morally questionable.” In all these examples, the consumer model is presented as simply not enough, whether for enacting change or for simply engaging with the food system.

Food citizenship is in many ways antithetical to food consumerism. The food consumer model “defines us as humans as the sum of our consumption choices,” as Chappell points out. Consumption, and the consumer model, is made possible through a capitalist market in which actors interact only through economic exchange. In this model, food systems problems and solutions are addressed through this kind of exchange (buying Fair Trade, for example). Conversely, the citizenship model allows for a wider lens for viewing these same problems and solutions, one in which political action or engagement is even more meaningful than purchasing power.

Linking citizenship (and its related ideas of sacrifice and responsibility) to a non-governmental framework has been done in other instances, such as within the realm of “corporate citizenship.” A 2006 article by Burchell & Cook points out that while businesses were unable to agree on a concrete set of behaviors associated with the corporate citizen, yet it could be broadly defined by characteristics such as “greater interaction with civil society, more ethical business strategies and the provision of greater openness and access to information.” In parallel fashion, it seems that the citizenship model in food systems is not well-defined in terms of its characteristics, but may include greater engagement with the political process or civil society as a primary feature.

It's important to note that neither Ankeny nor Chappell is critiquing the consumers themselves for thinking too narrowly. Indeed, when Ankeny says "we've conceived of people as food consumers," she seems to refer to a societal "we" limiting the agency or powers of people in some way. In opposition to this consumer framework, Chappell and Ankeny present the citizenship model: "[voting] with your vote," according to Chappell's Q&A, rather than with your fork, as some food activists have suggested.

The food citizenship model imbues the subject with rights and responsibilities outside of those which are accorded to a mere consumer, it seems. When Ankeny refers to the "greater good" as part of the food citizen, she implies that food citizens may have to make sacrifices to achieve this goal. Later in her talk, she states this more explicitly: "I think a democratic food supply is what we need...and that may mean at the end of the day, I don't get my way." The connection between the citizen and the democracy is thus made explicit. A democratic food supply requires food citizens to populate it and to maintain it.

Though the exact rights of the food citizen were not stated (the right to food being the theme of last year's conference, it may be that that discourse was avoided), certain responsibilities were alluded to. Besides having to make sacrifices, the food citizen may have to endure undesirable contingencies in the quest for good food: "one simple trick to save our food system...that's higher food prices, which I'm sure no one has any qualms about," states Chappell jokingly. The food citizen may be required to spend more of their income on food, with the idea that wages for all will eventually go up through a series of economic causal relationships. This is one way in which the food citizen is required to think in the long run. Another is through "long-term commitment" to "a

deliberative approach,” according to Ankeny. Giving up the pleasure of short-term rewards, like cheap food or reductive discourse, is par for the course for the food citizen.

Another responsibility of the food citizen seems to be information gathering and awareness of food systems, in a way that goes further than the label-reading of the food consumer. Biltekoff suggests that we can become “more critically aware of the different frames and lenses on what makes food good.” By encouraging critical thinking instead of scientific or nutrition literacy, she asks for a deeper level of commitment and engagement from the food citizen.

However, this task is not simple: one participant asks in a written question for the keynote speakers, “How would [Rachel] suggest that the public become informed/trained enough to even be able to effectively communicate/dialogue/debate about food?” Here, the question asker identifies themselves as part of the public, and by underlining the word, suggests that a discrepancy exists in critical thinking between the academic researcher and the wider community. It also implies that the food citizen, without this knowledge, cannot (or maybe should not) participate in the discourse. This emphasis on critical thinking and literacy may set barriers to entry into the food system or the discipline.

Outside of direct references to the food citizen, the discourse of democracy and political approaches to food systems are rife within the data. Chappell believes that achieving good food means “cooperating with private interests, talking across different lines,” while Charlotte Biltekoff, another keynote, uses the political tone of “working across disciplinary difference.” This “across the aisle” rhetoric implies collaboration among myriad interests (Chappell is talking about food citizens and corporations, while

Biltekoff refers to academic disciplines), perhaps in line with the transdisciplinary nature of the program and the conference.

It may be that the political undertones of the discourse of the Summit is part of an identity formation process for the field of food systems, an identity associated with wider sociopolitical implications than the traditional academic discipline. Chappell, during the keynote panel, implies that food citizens have a responsibility to participate in other types of citizen activism: “if you’re not fighting for other kinds of sovereignty with people then why would you expect them to show up for your thing?” He later links climate scientists to Black Lives Matter, giving equal weight to the activism of both movements.

Certainly, the motive to *do* something, rather than just to listen and reflect, came through as part of the discourse of the Summit. Many of the audience questions begin with “how do we tell,” “how do we change,” and other how statements that are used not simply for fact gathering but for advice and instruction. This reflects food systems as a highly applied discipline, one which touches the community outside of academia.

Action-oriented and politically-leaning discourse may also reflect the roots of food systems scholarship in earlier food movements. Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011, describe the breadth of food movements that have emerged in response to various global economic and political forces, such as neoliberalism or globalization. These include land reform and food sovereignty, agroecology and sustainable agriculture, fair food, local food, and more. That these movements have been responsive, rather than standalone discourses, may impact the conversation in the field of food systems today. The food citizen is an argument against the food consumer, and it may be that another model may eventually emerge as a response to the inadequacy of the citizen model.

It may be that the food citizen is a symbol or marker of food systems as a discipline. It may represent the goals and values of the field, goals that include a paradigm shift in how the very political and economic structures of our society are conducted. Certainly, those ideas would be a lot to handle for an academic conference participant or anyone who interacts with food systems as a discipline. Thus, the food citizen as a concept packs those values and goals into a more digestible, understandable narrative, however undefined.

### **Part Two: Insiders and Outsiders**

Part of the crucial identity formation of a discipline (or of any “being”) includes the development of its opposite: what is inside, and what is outside. In this particular set of data, insiders and outsiders are marked partially by who is literally *there* (attending the conference), and also more figuratively by who is talked about (outsiders) versus who is talking (insiders).

The groups of people not in attendance at the conference, and thus whose voices were not represented, was made most evident by the audience questions. Here are some illustrative examples:

- “Where are all the people of color at this conference? (from a white person)”
- “I collect food for our local food shelf (distributes food to the poor). They want cans of Chef Boyardee ravioli, preferably with tab tops, because all you need is a spoon, and even a child can get a satisfying meal. This whole population is left out of the discussion. What are we going to do about that?”
- Where does “convenience” fit in when defining “good food?” (especially in regard to defining non-middle/upper class “good food.”)
- If the less affluent communities did not take to the new food recommendations in 1890, and continue to do this today, how do we help give access and utilization of these “new” foods?

Each of these questions shows a participant reaching to include the needs or interests of a population they see as being unrepresented at the conference. In various rhetorical ways, these outsider groups are “otherized”: using the pronoun *they* (“they want”), defining the speaker as a *we* (“how do we help give access”, “what are we going to do about that”), the presumption of a certain type of lens used by “non-middle/upper class” people (the lens of convenience).

By identifying these same otherizing strategies in other texts, I identified many “other” groups that exist within food systems: food animals, food plants, farm workers, and the hungry or food insecure. The way that speakers talk about, rather than with (insofar as that is possible), these groups can shed light on the nature of the discipline and its norms.

Beth Dixon, a philosophy professor and panelist, began her panel narrative in this way: “I’d just like to start...by saying that for many people who are food insecure, what makes food good is just that there’s enough of it.” This perspective could be read as somewhat reductive of the agency of food insecure people, limiting their ability to have preferences about the “good” so long as they have enough. A similar statement was part of the description for one Summit session proposal: “When the question is not ‘Is the food good?’ but rather ‘Is there food?’ then what role does good food play for low income people?” The phrasing of these statements creates a threshold of “enough,” before which the food insecure or low income person cannot characterize food as good or bad. Further, ideas about the needs or preferences of low income people can be incredibly reductive: one participant at a City Market workshop describes the supermarket’s less expensive food as “cheap, or, I mean, desirable for low-income people.” This discourse

takes the otherizing process one step further, by making the word “cheap” into something inappropriate or naughty, and then linking it to low income status.

In Dixon’s panel session, she was not alone in her emphasis on those who were not present. In response to a presentation on the ethics of killing animals, one attendee poses the question: “Why are we isolating it to just animals? I mean, to eat fungi is killing them too, even plants.” Several times, this attendee brings up food plants and the ethics of killing or eating them. Around her, other participants giggle; her statements evoke laughter because it is considered ridiculous to consider the ethical implications of killing a plant or a fungi. However, delving deeper into her statements, a poignant exploration of otherness occurs: “But we’re learning more about plants...it’s just a different kind of sentience,” “But we go out and hunt for mushrooms, right? We go out and hunt for fiddlehead ferns?”

At times, her comments are difficult to hear on the recording because the rest of the audience is laughing audibly. Yet, it seems that the questions posed are pushing at the boundaries of otherness, of who and what may be considered worthy of a certain type of consideration in the field of philosophy and the field of food systems. It seems that fungi and plants are not considered a relevant other, at least in the eyes of the presenters and audience members, yet Doggett makes an important point about how that definition changes: “Typically we’re wrong in under ascribing consciousness. We used to not even think that, like, dogs were conscious.”

That the question asker came across as so ridiculous points to certain boundaries and norms within the field, and, as Doggett points out, those boundaries may change. At this point in time, animals and workers matter. Plants and fungi do not, at least in terms

of considering their needs and desires. It may be that as the discipline evolves, who and what is considered relevant to think about critically could broaden.

The food citizen and the insider seem to intersect in the discourse, through the responsibility that “insiders” (those at the conference) may have towards outsiders. The “what are we going to do about that” of the attendee who can only serve Chef Boyardee at their local food shelf implies that providing healthy food to those who cannot afford it is necessary or obligatory. Indeed, at least 6 Summit session descriptions make reference to providing healthy food to low income or food insecure populations.

That participants and presenters primarily use “healthy” food as the kind of food needed by low income or food insecure people says much about narratives of hunger. Like the “perfect victim” critique Dixon presents of hunger narratives, in which hunger organizations present the hungry as only circumstantially or temporarily hungry in order to solicit donations, it may be that “healthy” food is the only food seen as okay to provide to those who are food insecure. Dixon’s narratives present hungry people as victims of circumstance, worthy of help, and Summit narratives present that help in a narrow way: fruits and vegetables.

Using Gee’s “Making Strange” tool from his discourse analysis toolkit, it’s becomes more obvious how healthy food is essential to the narrative of hunger relief. Replacing health signifiers like “vegetables” with “chips” in the titles or descriptions of Summit concurrent sessions shows how, by shifting the narrative to one of unhealthy food, the discourse comes across as unsavory: “For many low-income shoppers, SNAP incentives help make chips more affordable,” “inadequate SNAP benefits that leave families hungry or unable to purchase chips at the end of each month.” More than

anything, this exercise shows that food systems may be as susceptible as any other discipline to potentially harmful norms relating to “others.”

Though conference participants do not see themselves as interacting with “other” groups during the Summit, they may do so when they return home. The keynote speakers provide some guidance on connecting with these “others”: “whoever it is you’re interacting with, maybe whose food habits or consumer habits...you’re trying to change, listen, try to understand goodness from their perspective,” says Biltekoff in the final panel.

It would seem that rather than trying to bring “others” to the conference to interact, the focus is on taking insider perspective back to the community with the intention of enacting change. In Summit Steering Committee notes, very little can be found about who is desired at the conference, or how to bring those who might not otherwise come. Scholarships are offered, particularly for students and farmers, but soliciting attendance from those in “other” groups is not considered (at least, during the meetings I attended).

Being an outsider of a group or academic discipline is, of course, not inherently bad (just as being an insider is not inherently good - it’s simply one way to be). Were the discipline of food systems to include everyone possible, its identity would become less specific or defined. However, it’s worth considering that the development of a disciplinary identity will create insiders and outsiders, and the discourse will differ depending on who is in those groups. Strategies for future Summits could include deliberation on who is invited to be an insider, and who is not.

### **Part Three: Science in the Food System**

The third theme that emerged within the Summit data involves the use of and interaction with scientific knowledge. Summit speakers support food systems arguments in a variety of ways and employ a number of experts, intertextual references, and discipline-specific methodologies. Science, and scientific ways of knowing, are clearly an important way of legitimizing their arguments and their work more generally. However, it is not a sufficient lens for viewing food systems problems and issues. Summit data revealed ways in which the food systems discipline simultaneously rejects and participates in traditional scientific discourse.

Gee's "Systems and Knowledge Building Tool" refers to the ways in which "words and grammar...privilege or de-privilege specific sign systems." The purpose of privileging or de-privileging a sign system such as scientific knowledge, Gee says, is because "the mastery, use, maintenance of language, dialects, sign systems and ways of knowing the world, are, for the people who 'own' them, social goods." (142) Using this tool helps in understanding how negotiating with science, for food systems speakers, can normalize their work and gain legitimacy in the field while pushing back against scientific knowledge as the dominant academic lens.

All three keynote speakers refer to the insufficiency of science or scientific knowledge in some way during their speeches, particularly in reference to defining what makes food good. Biltekoff's research "[plays] with the edges and limits of what science can tell us." Much of Ankeny's research addresses public perception of science and how science is only one small part of a person's food values: "context, history, goals: all those things matter." And both speakers point out the need for qualitative and not just quantitative research to tell us about the food system.

Chappell, who identifies as having a natural science background, uses a plethora of scientific evidence to make arguments about the food system. He quotes economists, biologists, agroecologists, and other experts in highly quantitative fields. Yet, he admits, “putting all the socio-political in the first and last paragraph of your paper is wildly insufficient.”

All three keynotes clearly identify the need for both natural quantitative science and social qualitative science for answering food systems questions. They push back against the idea of quantitative science as being a dominant lens of knowing. However, most still rely on experts from the “hard sciences” to support and strengthen their arguments. Sometimes this support is specific (Chappell citing the work of economist Bina Agnarwal), or sometimes it is more vague: “there’s good scholarly evidence,” says Ankeny about consumer perception of risk. Using “scholarly evidence” as a mass term, rather than referring to a specific study, reinforces its power to legitimize.

Viewing science as simply one lens for understanding food issues, rather than *the* lens, allows Biltkoff a broader perspective. Describing one research subject’s dilemma about whether to eat farmed salmon, she says, “science could probably even tell us whether or not salmon can suffer, but it can’t answer this person’s dilemma...of whether she should understand salmon primarily as a form of nutrients or...understand its goodness through an ecological lens.”

Speakers’ understanding of expert knowledge versus public knowledge also informs their discourse around science. “Elites have led the dialogues around many things within our food system,” Ankeny states at the end of her keynote. And both Ankeny and Chappell refer to research projects characterized by collaboration between experts and locals: “using [growers] as expertise rather than just saying scientists...are

the experts,” “forest conservation in Tanzania was significantly hampered by the disproportionate power had by experts.” Both quotes create a dichotomy between experts and the general public, where experts are also representative of the scientific lens.

This opposition between scientists/experts and the public is not intrinsic to the nature of science, according to Boulter’s 1999 article describing the public’s perception of scientific endeavor. “The similarity of science to non-science and everyday affairs hasn't been emphasized enough by scientists who have rather seen themselves as a thing apart,” he states. Boulter sees science as an organic human process, one characterized by “powerful problem solving, self correcting activity with a specific critical attitude, criteria and coherent subject matter, differing only in scope and approach to many other human activities.” Portraying science as a useful and natural tool, rather than an elitist knowledge base, could help the discipline of food systems to have coherence among its diverse parts.

Much of the work of food systems, it seems, involves closing the knowledge gap between experts, who speakers claim generates scientific knowledge, and the general public, who consume the knowledge. This may be because the stakes and outcomes, more so than with any other discipline, are relevant to everyone. Nearly every Summit speaker suggests addressing this gap with communication and collaboration: “no matter what our approach is to good food, we need to have this conversation,” states Chappell. It may be that the future of food systems will be characterized by a movement towards equal distribution of knowledge and expertise amongst everyone, and a privileging of other, non-scientific ways of knowing.

## **Concluding the Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis, as an academic method, is not necessarily intended for applied research or project work. However, the themes that emerged from the 2016 Summit data, analyzed using this method, do have practical application and lend themselves to suggestions for food systems communications.

All three themes from the data indicate something about how we communicate in the field. Narratives of food citizenship instead of consumerism confer certain rights and responsibilities to the listener. Emphasizing the power associated with citizenship (over the limited consumer model) may be better received than descriptions of the responsibilities or “civic duties” of the food citizen. Though the citizenship model uses a broader definition of human agency than the consumer model, it still imposes certain restrictions on the types of actions that are considered relevant to the food system (namely, civic actions). Another model may be more inclusive, and further research could investigate the limits of the citizen model in other fields.

The creation of insiders and outsiders, through the use of rhetorical tools, creates a kind of identity for the discipline. This process also acts reflexively, as the insiders and outsiders of a discipline will then inform what kind of discourse is created. Being careful to avoid generalizations that create a simple “us” and “them” could allow for a less dichotomous identity, one which is porous for outsiders to enter. Widening the lens of what is considered relevant to speak about, as exemplified by the philosophy panel attendee concerned about fungi, is another example of opening up the discipline.

Finally, the navigation of scientific versus other, more community-based types of knowledge privileges certain types of communications over others. While food systems as a discipline requires scientific methods and practices for academic validity, other

types of knowledge could be just as informative or useful. Including those other types could create a more equal playing field for the creation and understanding of knowledge within the field.

The Food Systems Summit both facilitates and represents the discourse within the discipline; this event has the potential, as one of the major conferences in the field, to affect the direction of future conversations. For these reasons, careful consideration of how discourse is created and disseminated in this space is necessary.

### **Section Three: What Makes Food Good**

I have a suspicion that every idea I've had, every opinion I've held, came to me from someone else. This is true most obviously in the field of food systems: everyone from my grandmother to Ina Garten has told me how to think or feel about food in a way that I have retained. Sometimes, I will find myself saying something that might be a *sui generis* opinion, only to realize later that Amy told me that exact thing a few days before. Originality is dead, as they say.

I had hoped that graduate school might be the cure for that, that this year would be the time when I finally discovered how I *really* think and feel. Now I wonder if it's possible that more education simply makes you better at choosing which opinions to retain, which thoughts are most aligned with the type of identity you're striving for. Maybe that idea itself came from an essay or an academic paper that I read somewhere. Who's to say?

All these doubts make the question of What Makes Food Good so difficult as to be laughable. Here are some of the answers that I have heard, over my 23-year career of interacting with food:

- Good food is food that roams around the hay field.
- Good food is food that helps the local community.
- Good food is food that serves your body.
- Good food is food that customers will pay the most money for.
- Good food is food that you pay the most for.
- Good food is food that is morally correct.

By themselves, of course, none of these answers are perfect. But I imagine I have ingested them all, enacted them through some action, and molded them in a way that

makes it easier to get through the day without starving to death. This is not unlike, I think, how most people interact with their food values and beliefs. We feel them, sometimes very strongly, until they clash with another firmly held value and then everything is out the window.

My definition of good food also changes dramatically depending on who my current influences are. During the two semesters in which I took philosophy and ethics classes related to food, I stopped eating meat, convinced there was no way I could justify eating animals. This fundamental shift in my ethos still lingers and makes me uncomfortable. I grew up in a farm family, eating food that I had recently named or petted. I saw my meat-eating family as sensible and well-intentioned, not murderous. Yet during those semesters, immersed in those arguments, I saw no way that Peter Singer could be wrong: eating animals when I didn't need to do it to live was immoral.

Problem is, as soon as I stopped reading the books and moved on to new classes, that wrongness faded away somehow. Distance-induced ignorance is an excellent solution to existential crisis. That may be why, as a society or a discipline, we can only seem to stomach one ethical dilemma at a time. Years ago, the rights of animals first came to the forefront. Now, it's the rights of agricultural workers. To care doubly, to live on the right side of two ethical conflicts at once, seems particularly overwhelming.

The challenge in studying food systems is that the researcher must often "practice what they preach," or not, because food is a necessary daily reality. I was struck by the words of Chuck List, philosophy panelist and avid hunter, at a Summit panel. A panel attendee asked List about his thoughts on hunting "shortcuts," strategies that make the task easier, such as baiting. He replies: "Some bird hunters, for example, will start out

by shooting a bird sitting on the ground. I no longer allow myself to do that...cause I'm attempting to constantly improve my skill level and what I think excellence is."

To me, this sounded like List thinks killing animals for food is okay if the hunter makes it as challenging for himself as possible. Baiting a deer, luring it to a place simply to kill it, was impermissible due to its ease. But if I went into the woods, wrapped in a straightjacket and a blindfold, and shot blindly until I got an animal, would that be the most morally permissible killing of all? The arbitrary designator of "excellence" as Chuck's threshold for permissibility resonated, for I saw much of my own logic in his. Things are morally okay once we've, or I've, decided they are. Maybe it has to do with the immutable need to eat, maybe it has to do with the immutable need to feel satisfied with our choices.

There isn't any comprehensive food ethic, much like there isn't any comprehensive life ethic. As a diagnosed perfectionist and failure-phobic person, this is highly dismaying. How to live with the knowledge that I am always, knowingly or not, doing something wrong? That even if I grow all my own food and move to a cabin in the woods, I still crushed insects or paid taxes to a war-funding government or simply stood by while structural injustice churned away. I need to eat. Why can't I do it while being constantly, or at least occasionally, in the right?

On my way to the Summit, I hit a bird with my car on the highway. I had somehow avoided doing this for my entire driving career, and even I was surprised by how suddenly and strongly I was affected. I pulled over, sobbing over the tiny crushed animal. I thought about trying to go back and get the dead bird, for God knows what purpose, until a friend on the phone talked me out of it. This has been the most recent crisis in my food ethic. I was directly responsible for the death of this bird, I couldn't

take it back, and I would continue to be responsible for the deaths of many more animals through my participation in society. I somehow felt even more powerless than the bird, just a cog in the killing machine of humankind.

I was affected by the bird just like I was affected by Peter Singer during my philosophy classes. I felt strongly that I had done wrong, and I didn't know how to become "right." I stopped eating meat for a few days, donated \$20 to the Audubon, and continued feeling guilty until time gradually dulled the memory of the mangled bird. Constant awareness of my wrongdoing, it seems, is the only way to ensure I make my small reparations.

I want to be better; I want to hurt as few people, animals and ecosystems as possible. I think this is a commonality among people who study food and food systems. But I also want, in my short life, to feel joy. The inertia of my selfishness is strong. So for me, defining good food means clumsily and guiltily navigating this tension.

I don't think, realistically, good food is only the most moral or ethical food. I think that maybe good food *attempts* to be moral – it is careful, thoughtful, and empathetic towards the land, animals, and people involved in its production. But the pursuit of ethical food as good food seems fruitless, as long as we are cogs in the killing machine of humankind.

I think what I'd like good food to be, for me and for anyone else who might agree, is food coupled with joy. We can easily lose joy amongst the news of suffering, economic collapse and ecological destruction. I don't think progress to right any of these wrongs will occur quickly. But if food could bring joy, bring warmth and care and community, bring pleasure, then the suffering and destruction might go down a little easier. This isn't an easy task, but it seems to be one worth pursuing.

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