

(De)constructing distinction: Class inequality and elite authenticity in mediatized food discourse¹

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Orienting to recent work on language materiality (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017) and elite discourse (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017a), I examine the discursive production of class status and the management of distinction/privilege in mediatized food discourse. Specifically, this paper presents a critical discourse analysis of a *New York Times* food section corpus comprised of 259 articles (e.g. restaurant reviews, celebrity chef profiles, features concerning cooking techniques or trending ingredients, etc.) in which I identify an over-arching discourse of *elite authenticity*. I show how elite authenticity is a key strategy by which distinction is nowadays both (re)produced and (dis)avowed in food discourse, and that it is accomplished via five rhetorical strategies: historicity, simplicity, pioneer spirit, lowbrow appreciation, and locality/sustainability. Thus, food discourse, rooted in familiar bourgeois anxieties and privileges, sustains the post-class ideologies (Thurlow 2016) and omnivorous consumption (Khan 2014) at the heart of contemporary class formations.

KEYWORDS: Elite discourse, materiality, food and language, omnivorous consumption, elite authenticity

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that food plays a central role in the production of culture; it is likewise a powerful resource for the representation and organization of social order (e.g. Belasco 2002). In this regard, status is asserted or contested both through the materiality of food (i.e. its substance, its raw economics, and its manufacture or preparation) and through its discursivity (i.e. its marketing, staging, and the way it is depicted and discussed). This intersection of materiality and discursivity (cf. Keane 2003) makes food an ideal site for examining the place of language in contemporary class formations, and for engaging cutting-edge debates in sociolinguistics on ‘language materiality’ (see Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017). In the

present study, I examine a particular mediatized, discursive site, the *New York Times* (hereafter, NYT) food section, as an especially relevant example of how food socialization occurs principally through language, and how this socialization contributes to contemporary social inequality. In analyzing an 'elite' publication like the NYT, I orient specifically to *elite discourse studies*, aligning with Thurlow and Jaworski's (2012) conviction that '[s]ocial research is far more effective if it also examines those who stand to benefit most from the status quo – those who generate the inequality rather than those at the receiving end of it' (490), and that communication is central to the production of privilege (see also Bourdieu 1984, 1991). Thus, my work, and elite discourse studies in general, is partly an attempt to reignite attention to class in sociolinguistics (cf. Rampton 2010; Block 2014) by centering the way privileged people live, speak, and consume. My thinking on social class, while not excluding Marxist concerns for structural economy, stems from Bourdieu's foundational *Distinction* (1984); it is thus decidedly more Weberian, largely concerning the cultural production of inequality. In examining how various forms of consumption correlate with one's class 'habitus,' Bourdieu argues that this notion of a set of normalized, embodied outcomes based on one's participation within a certain family and social group is key to the 'materialization of class taste' (190), and to our becoming classed through these same practices. Notably, 'taste' is especially pertinent for elites; as I elaborate in my analysis, it is also one important way in which they mask their privilege (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

'Elite' is a relative term, of course. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2017b) note, popular markers of eliteness are not reserved only for demographic elites, such as the so-called 1 percent; rather, these markers 'trickle-down' and permeate far wider semiotic landscapes. Thurlow and Jaworski further contend that we are 'being increasingly drawn into and positioned by elitist discourses and the rhetorics of luxury' (2017b: 185). In this way, I understand eliteness as not just a political, social, and economic category, but also as a discursive and rhetorical accomplishment, which woos us into perpetuating cycles of inequality. Key to this wooing is Thurlow's (2016) notion of 'post-class ideologies.' Similar to the workings of post-race or post-feminist ideologies, we are often persuaded that structural barriers have been, or can be, easily erased, and/or that social class no longer matters. Arguably, a quintessential example of post-class ideology at work is Donald Trump's notoriously successful claims to being a 'self-made' man, despite the \$1 million loan he received from his father to start his business.² He is someone who, in spite of his patently elite status, is also able to position himself as 'anti-elite.' Post-class ideologies thus represent the contemporary trend of disavowing entitlement and snobbery and, instead, asserting one's status on the grounds of individual effort and inclusivity: of being, in Peterson and Kern's (1996) terms, culturally omnivorous. Warde, Martens, and Olsen (1999) describe this sort of status competition as 'appear[ing] to honour the populist ethic of equivalence among

cultural preferences while still laying claim to cultural refinement and superiority by implicitly marking some genres as 'exceptionally worthy' (123). Thus, status is established by the appearance of varied, but refined, consumer choices. In this sense, omnivorous consumption is essential to the curating of an elite identity that is simultaneously not elitist: a cultural omnivore hides behind the mask of anti-snobbery, which in turn contributes to a disavowal of privilege (Kenway and Lazarus 2017), and an implicit denial of inequality. Whereas overt classism can be easily recognized, and criticized, omnivorous elitism is significantly more powerful in its ability to normalize. For instance, in his ethnographic work in an elite boarding school in New York, Khan (2014) describes an elite culture as one that is marked especially by ease, or 'feeling comfortable in just about any social situation' (141; see again Bourdieu 1977). Because this ease is championed by the dominant class it is presented as entirely natural – and it is something difficult, if not impossible, for the lower classes to master because their own, embodied class positions deny them the privilege of costly 'high-culture' experiences.

It is the complex ways in which we perform, and recognize, eliteness in a supposedly post-class society that is the motivation for this paper: the discursive production and maintenance of privilege in the NYT food section is inevitably subtle and nuanced. Classic markers of status – of what Veblen ([1899]2007) famously called 'conspicuous consumption' – are assiduously eschewed; rather, they are *inconspicuous*, and not explicitly elite. It is these qualities that are a more powerful, socializing rhetoric in contemporary, 'high-end' food discourse. To be clear, the core workings of privilege remain unchanged. The age-old distinction between 'old' and 'new' money, for example, often persists. However, an apparent disdain for flashy markers of wealth arguably takes on a more slippery shape under the guise of omnivorous consumption (e.g. Johnston and Baumann 2010). To this end, I demonstrate how part of the appeal and success of omnivorousness hinges on the construction of 'authenticity' – as Heller (2013) notes, with late (or advanced) capitalism comes a heightened emphasis on niche products whose value is based on qualities related to particular identities or authenticities. The centering of authenticity in elite food discourse parallels these processes. And indeed, it has been a persistent concern in both sociolinguistic, and food and language research (e.g. Coupland 2003; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Karrebæk and Maegaard 2017). However, I argue that the way elite authenticity is deployed in the NYT represents a particular surfacing of rhetorical maneuvers in which privilege is orchestrated, (dis)avowed, and circulated.

FOOD, LANGUAGE MATERIALITY, MEDIATIZATION

Before turning to food and language specifically, it is worth pin-pointing 'food' itself. In this regard, I start with Riley and Cavanaugh's (2017) definition: food is 'the material and symbolic practices, institutions, and understandings

related to [its] production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and representation...’ (1). Implicit in this conceptualization is the way discourse fosters the development of a cultural understanding of food, as well as how these related practices are underpinned by the complex workings of power and status in society. Thus, food is much more than stuff we eat – however, it is precisely the materiality of food, its banal ‘stuffiness,’ that sometimes (or often) renders it a seemingly unpretentious semiotic resource. Food may function as matter-of-fact sustenance, but can, of course, also be deployed as a high-cultural art form.

Riley and Cavanaugh propose four analytic heuristics for examining how language and food, as systems of communication, are commonly connected: language-through-food (the idea that food itself communicates), language-about-food (e.g. the NYT food section), language-around-food (e.g. a dinner conversation), and language-as-food (the idea that both food and language provide nourishment). These frames sum up nicely the true importance of food to discourse, and of discourse to food; both are intersecting sites of cultural production and socialization on various levels, and in a range of domains/settings. This is commonly seen in sociolinguistics literature from the perspective of language acquisition and socialization (e.g. Ochs, Pontecorvo, and Fasulo 1996; Karrebæk 2012; Paugh 2012), but also specifically in terms of identity and status (e.g. Jurafsky 2014; Vasquez and Chik 2015) – what we eat inextricably reflects who we are. While food’s ability to delineate and discriminate has been addressed extensively (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1969; Belasco 2002), Bourdieu (1984) specifically discusses how those of a higher social standing develop a ‘taste of luxury,’ resulting in a stylized self that can be seen in the most mundane of practices, including eating. Implicated in this self-stylizing is language, and the ways in which linguistic signs come to connote particular traits in the speakers who utter them. This is where Silverstein’s (2003 [1996]) ‘indexicality of language’ becomes germane. There are always implicit, emergent meanings in language that transcend what words explicitly denote, and that serve important interactional and cultural functions. Thus, like food, words are also tools by which social actors create (classed) personas – they can be said to embody the language that is spoken, or the food that is eaten. Food and language, as dually material and discursive, are both matters of semiosis and politics. It is this interconnection that Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) speak to in their discussion of ‘language materiality’ in neoliberal societies. Key to their thinking is not only a focus on the communicative role of material culture in discourse, but also on the political economy of language. They argue that language is pivotal to the ‘commodification, circulation, and value formation’ of (im)material objects (356), which in turn contributes to social stratification and material injustices. Importantly, these social meanings are interdiscursive and ever-changing; as they circulate, they both actively transform and are

transformed across a variety of contexts. As one might presume, the role of the media in these processes is pivotal.

Throughout this paper, I refer to 'mediatization' as a means of making salient the complex relationship between mediated and mediatized communication to processes of recontextualization and commodification (see Agha 2011). While many have established the specifics of power and socialization in 'media discourse' (e.g. Fairclough 1995; Garrett and Bell 1998), mediatization encompasses a more holistic characterization of the way communicative texts and practices (re)circulate dominant meanings and cultural discourses. As Androutsopoulos (2014) notes, '[m]ediatization research challenges the understanding of media as an "external" force that influences social behavior. . .' (12); indeed, mediatized discourse is elaborately co-produced. It links persons to each other 'through the activities of those who respond to them in uptake formulations,' and makes explicit how 'cultural formations are routinely reshaped (recycled, revalorized, rescaled) through the activities of persons they link. . .' (Agha 2011: 169). Thus, the boundaries between explicitly discursive, mediatized texts and more material, embodied ones are blurred and collapsed; rather, it is in being 'hailed' (see Althusser 1971) as co-constructive subjects of mediatized representations that their power in society is reinforced, and their role in processes of neoliberal capitalism sealed. This becomes particularly transparent in Jaworski and Thurlow's (2017) discussion of the 'mediatization of Super-rich lifestyles' (276) and its 'sanctioning, rather than disrupting, the nexus of status, privilege and power, while also obfuscating inequality' (277). These authors illuminate nicely the crux of mediatized representations in contemporary society: the subtle schooling of consumers into behaviors (such as elite speaking and eating) continually reinforces systems of structural inequality. Against this theoretical and critical background, I turn now to my NYT dataset as an exemplary case study of this idea.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The NYT's status as a relatively 'elite' publication is realized in multiple ways. First, in the Pew Research Center's 2012 News Consumption Report,³ the NYT is ranked in the top 16 percent of news media, according to both income and education level of readers. Thirty-eight percent of NYT readers' annual household income is \$75,000 or higher, and 56 percent are college graduates (this percentage is significantly higher than the national average, which, according to the 2015 Current Population Survey is around 33 percent⁴). Thus, readers of the NYT tend to earn more, and are better educated. However, as Thurlow and Jaworski (2017a) note, ' "elite" is something people do, not something they necessarily have or are' (244). In this sense, the NYT must also assert its elite status by constantly stylizing its readers as elite; consider how the paper frames itself and its audience below, in an excerpt from their 'media kit' for advertisers:

The New York Times reaches a deeply engaged and highly influential reader. The NYT Weekday ranks #1 with Opinion Leaders, reaching 54% of this elite group. Our executive audience spends more than an hour with the Sunday paper...twice as long as readers of WSJ... We deliver an audience of readers who shape society.⁵

Thus, prefacing its circulation statistics, the paper describes itself as reaching a 'highly influential reader' who 'shape[s] society.' This includes 'Opinion Leaders' (described as an 'elite group'), as well as business executives, board members, and millionaires. The NYT thus explicitly markets itself as a publication consumed by the socially powerful, the wealthy, and the intelligent. Whereas many other publications' media kits provide the demographics of all their readers, the NYT hones in on its 'affluent' audience, whose median household income is reported as \$189,000. This particular focus on its wealthiest subscribers connects also to the paper's reference to the (luxurious) leisure time experienced by its readers, who spend 'more than an hour with the Sunday paper...twice as long as readers of [the *Wall Street Journal*]...' Clearly, the NYT readership can afford to spend extra time consuming news – and not just any news, but news written by Pulitzer-prize winning journalists. Not only are NYT readers statistically more educated and better-off than the majority of U.S. Americans, they are also framed (and hailed) this way by the paper's discourse. This is the audience which the NYT strategically designs for itself (cf. Bell 1984). Thus, 'less elite' readers are taught to aspire to the consumptive behavior of the wealthiest portion of the populace, and likewise 'more elite' readers are instructed on how to maintain and manage their status. It is worthwhile to view all NYT discourse as having this same sort of instructional potential, including their longstanding food section.

Data selection

In their study on 'foodies,' Johnston and Baumann (2010) found that American 'foodie media' (e.g. magazines like *Saveur* and *Bon Appétit*) normalize privileged eating by de-emphasizing the many ways in which it is elite. I examine the NYT food section as a means of engaging with these same issues, but in the context of an explicitly elite publication. My orientating to NYT food discourse naturally fosters an interest in their infamous restaurant reviews⁶ – specifically those concerning Brooklyn restaurants. As a contemporary site of gentrification, Brooklyn has been of increasing sociolinguistic interest in recent years (e.g. Trinch and Snajdr 2017). Historically a borough of immigrants, it has been named the fifth most expensive city (for residents) in the U.S.,⁷ and additionally experienced a so-called 'culinary renaissance' (LeBesco and Naccarato 2015). For these reasons, I limited my first NYT dataset to include only contemporary articles about Brooklyn restaurants, including starred reviews and other features, all of which were posted in the NYT 'Restaurant Search' online archive. These articles, collected between 15 June

and 15 August 2016, include all posted articles concerning Brooklyn food establishments, from the year 2000 up through the final collection date, resulting in a corpus total of 195. In addition to my interest in restaurant reviews, I am motivated also by a general concern for which particular NYT food section articles are most likely to be read by consumers. Thus, my second corpus consists of the top-viewed articles/posts on the NYT food section website between 11 September 2016 and 11 November 2016 (dates chosen for analytic convenience). These articles are listed on the food section homepage in sets of ten, and were collected and archived weekly. Overall, the second corpus comprises 64 articles/posts, including restaurant and cookbook reviews, 'celebrity' chef news and features, cooking techniques and ingredient profiles, and recipes.

Analytical process

My analytical process is based on the steps outlined in Thurlow and Aiello (2007) – moving from a descriptive content analysis, to interpretive discourse analysis, and then lastly to critical discourse analysis (see also Fairclough 1989). To start, I recorded themes during my initial close reading of the data, and then proceeded to code patterns more precisely. From this loose content analytic process, I determined five interrelated rhetorical strategies: historicity, simplicity, lowbrow appreciation, pioneer spirit, and locality/sustainability. Table 1 documents my general characterizations of each one of these. While I have teased the strategies apart for analytical convenience, their interconnectedness is paramount to my thesis; historicity alone is not remarkable or new to food discourse (although the other strategies, according to studies concerning omnivorous consumption, are certainly more modern phenomena; e.g. Khan 2014). However, it is their combined rhetorical work that is so compelling, and that is responsible for the production of an overarching discourse of 'elite authenticity' in my data.

Table 1: The rhetorical strategies of elite authenticity

Rhetorical strategy	Description
1. Historicity	a focus on origin, longevity and continuity, tradition
2. Simplicity	an attitude of 'less is more'; a minimalist aesthetic in design of food, space, and marketing; (performed) effortlessness
3. Lowbrow appreciation	a fascination with foods/environments associated with 'the poor': the working class, immigrants, rural areas
4. Pioneer spirit	a celebration of innovation, personal labor, adventurousness
5. Locality/sustainability	consistent references to (responsible) sourcing of ingredients, and/or environments and community practices

Having already established how eliteness is a political and socioeconomic reality, and at the same time a discursive and rhetorical construction, I argue now that the intersection of 'elite' with 'authenticity' is what separates the current study from earlier sociolinguistic and anthropological work on the topic – in part, because it is a combining and re-orienting of one discursive claim, or trope, with another. This relationship reveals the paradoxical potential of elite authenticity: it is a resource for producing distinction, and yet this distinction is also a resource for asserting one's unpretentiousness. Thus, I define elite authenticity as a condition or positionality which appeals to notions of sincerity, genuineness, naturalness or tradition, but which is rooted in, and only made possible by, privilege and socioeconomic advantage. It is precisely the apparent oxymoronic quality of elite authenticity which makes it so effective in obscuring privilege. Therefore, I argue that a pursuit of authenticity in food discourse is framed as natural, omnivorous, and egalitarian; as such, it disguises the ways status, 'good taste' (Bourdieu 1984), and cultural capital are manufactured and sustained. In what follows, I present qualitative analysis of samples from the NYT food section corpus, according to each of the aforementioned rhetorical strategies, as evidence of the discursive production of elite authenticity. I have selected the extracts below as particularly illustrative, and representative, and include various other quotations from my corpus as supplementary evidence.

THE DISCOURSE OF ELITE AUTHENTICITY

1. Historicity: Elite authenticity staged as cultural tradition and continuity

The rhetorical strategy of historicity in the data is realized in various ways; first, it is defined by a focus on origin (or provenance) – of both ingredients (e.g. 'wild yeast culture shipped from Italy' for a particular pizzeria⁸) and of people (e.g. the owner of a Guyanese restaurant is a native of Guyana). Linguistic anthropologists who study food products and/or practices have documented this tendency well (e.g. Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014), especially as a sense of origin relates to 'terroir,' a term which encompasses both the formal relationship between place and taste (e.g. domain-specific standards in European countries) and the informal (e.g. how 'place' or 'locality' might be indexed in food branding or food talk, and relatedly, how they are used to represent uniqueness; see Heller 2013 and Weiss 2016). While the complex connections between place and taste evoked by 'terroir' are less applicable in the context of the NYT food section, the historical rootedness of a particular restaurant, or of particular cooking practices, abounds in my corpus. In several cases, this historicity is indexed by the specific language used to describe a cuisine. In the extract below, for example, a 2004 review discusses the 'proper' name for marinara sauce in an Italian-American restaurant:

Extract 1

- 1 The difference between Frankies 457 Court Street Spuntino and the
- 2 trattorias multiplying across New York is that Frankies serves gravy.
- 3 Granted, the menu calls it marinara, and some servers say sauce, but
- 4 many of Frankies' customers – the long nailed women mopping their
- 5 plates with bread, the tough teenager barking a request for more – refer
- 6 to the long simmer of tomatoes, meat and seasoning by its proper Italian-
- 7 American name: gravy.

Note how 'gravy' is used to demarcate this restaurant from the other (perhaps less authentic) trattorias 'multiplying across New York' (line 2) – this establishment stands out because of its chosen terminology. Immediately, we are made aware of how language authenticates, and thus lends value. While the critic tells us that gravy is named 'marinara' on the menu, most customers call it 'by its proper Italian-American name' (lines 6–7) – that is, the customers with the appropriate historical origins call it by its appropriate Italian-American name. These customers, we learn, are representative of a particular interactional style and, in Bourdieu's (1991) terms, 'bodily hexis': the critic observes them 'mopping their plates' and 'barking' requests, behaviors which imbue the scene with a certain 'tough' (lines 4–5) working class *Italian-Americanness*. Thus, the restaurant's reputation is made credible by the assumed origins of its patrons (as descendants of Italian immigrants), and specifically by their authentic linguistic style.

Extract 2 evokes a similar sense of historicity; however, here the emphasis is more specifically tied to family lineage and expertise rather than terminology; this is perhaps the most common way historicity is employed as a marker of elite authenticity across the NYT dataset. Historicity is often seen in references to chefs' and restaurateurs' mothers and grandmothers – to their traditional recipes or methods, or simply to their presence in the home kitchen as solidifying one's love for food. In this regard, the cultural politics of class is, of course, a fully intersectional one (see Crenshaw 1991). Accordingly, my data show various gendered discourses (or discourses of environmental sustainability, for example) being enlisted into the service of eliteness. These intertextual moments are instantiated slightly differently, but are invariably deployed for claiming superiority. Thus, nostalgic depictions of women's gendered place in the home are common in food writing and food talk. In the extract below, from a 2016 article profiling a pastry chef, Alex Levin, we learn of his Jewish heritage and influence of his grandmother, illustrating how the price of valuing historical continuity can be a romanticizing of patriarchal privilege:

Extract 2

- 1 When Alex Levin became a pastry chef, he decided he wanted to keep his
- 2 grandmother's Rosh Hashanah traditions – though with a few
- 3 modifications. . . His grandmother Martha Hadassah Nadich wasn't just any

4 home baker. She was Craig Claiborne's go-to expert on Jewish cooking in
 5 the late 1950s and early 1960s. . . 'My grandmother had a strong influence
 6 on me from childhood,' said Mr. Levin, who spent many after-school dates
 7 cooking with her. 'I still use one of her aprons and some of her favorite
 8 pastry tools.'

The writer of this article begins by indexing the chef's Jewish heritage: Levin is described as wanting 'to keep his grandmother's Rosh Hashanah traditions' (lines 1–2). This detail seems to frame the chef as a particular sort of Jewish person – one who was raised piously and traditionally. In this sense, the NYT establishes the chef's authenticity as a Jewish chef, a quality which is made more impressive by his grandmother's status as 'Craig Claiborne's go-to expert on Jewish cooking' (line 4). This is quite a meaningful detail for the assumed readership, as Claiborne is arguably the most famous restaurant critic in NYT history, and his approval of Nadich's skills serves by association to elevate Levin's own cooking. Notice, however, that despite the grandmother's considerable reputation, and this writer's description of her as not 'just any home baker' (lines 3–4), she is still very much used to index a stereotypical grandmother (or mother) role: we learn that Levin 'spent many after-school dates cooking with her' and still uses 'one of her aprons and some of her favorite pastry tools' (lines 6–8). Thus, it is perhaps not enough that Levin is related to a Jewish cooking expert – rather, it is also that he was 'grandmothered' by a Jewish cooking expert, and that he inherited her skill, and kitchen tools (materialized proof of this lineage). The glorifying of this particular sort of motherhood is at the same time an inevitable reinscribing of traditional 'values' – embracing women's historical place in the home for the authenticity it affords is a simultaneous capitalizing of gender (and class) inequality. These commonplace, nostalgia-producing narratives of origin and continuity serve as examples of the problematic ways in which producers (i.e. restaurants, the media) and consumers (i.e. restaurant patrons, readers) construct authenticity.

2. Simplicity: Elite authenticity staged as modest and unaffected

References to a minimalist aesthetic and minimal effort are typical in NYT food section articles. In the reviews, Brooklyn restaurants are praised for offering food that is 'earnest and unshowy,' 'plain spoken,' and 'sincere.' Importantly, these descriptions are also found in reference to the plating of the food, to the restaurant's décor or design, and even to its general ambiance – including patrons. A particular sort of authentic eater is valued by NYT food writers, and specifically not 'hipsters,' who are pointedly disparaged in several of the Brooklyn restaurant reviews. As eaters, hipsters are deemed *inauthentic*, because they exhibit too much effort and ingenuity; NYT articles begrudgingly admit their presence at many worthy establishments, but it is always with an air of skepticism. In short, part of what is prized in restaurants and cooking practices is effortlessness, and this is indexed in multiple ways. Extract 3 is from

the 2004 review of a Brooklyn restaurant, Ici ('Here' in French), and features a number of lexical items that are key to the staging of elite authenticity as modest and unaffected:

Extract 3

- 1 Sometimes restaurants succeed precisely because they do not try too hard.
- 2 Because they are humble in reach . . . Ici provides a good example. Its
- 3 menu is extremely brief, with as few as a half-dozen appetizers and a
- 4 half-dozen entrees. The handiwork behind some dishes is as simple as a
- 5 sauté pan, butter and a few accents and herbs.

Aside from the obvious matter-of-factness of the restaurant's name (cf. Trinch and Snajdr 2017), note the critic's positive evaluation of 'not [trying] too hard' (line 1) and of being 'humble in reach' (line 2). This is the effortlessness I mention above, or rather, it is the *guise* of effortlessness. We can, of course, assume this restaurant is trying to impress both its critics and its patrons – or at least the critic authoring this NYT article. Which it apparently does – in part by appealing to the simplicity that is indexed by the brevity of the menu, with just a 'half-dozen appetizers and a half-dozen entrees' (lines 3–4). However, in this case, limited options correlate directly with prestige; in his computational analysis of restaurant menus, Jurafsky (2014) finds that, statistically, high-status restaurants offer fewer options than low- and middle-status restaurants. They also use fewer words to describe their individual offerings – discursive simplicity in this case is a clear marker of eliteness, no matter its use by the NYT to frame Ici as 'humble.' And while the ingredients behind some dishes are 'as simple as a sauté pan, butter and a few accents and herbs' (lines 4–5), this description also indexes skill, or 'handiwork' (line 4). A well-crafted dish might be simple, but it is still perceivably *crafted*, a quality that food writers continually praise. Thus, we begin to see how elite food discourse is rife with juxtapositions; in this case, between surface-level simplicity and the prestige buried in references to skilled labor and aptitude.

Another indication of the status associated with simplicity can be seen in its consistent paralleling to modernity, and cosmopolitanism. In their article about '[d]istinction-making' signage of restaurants and storefronts in Brooklyn, Trinch and Snajdr (2017) write that 'elegance and sophistication are projected through the absence of dense public textual displays' (79) – again, linguistic simplicity marks elite spaces. However, in food discourse it also conveys unpretentiousness, and is consequently used discursively to downplay the high status of particular practices, or in Extract 4, of particular ingredients. This example comes from a 2016 article reviewing a series of cookbooks; the author asserts that a 'modern cook' can be identified by the foods occupying her refrigerator, a list which includes preserved lemon and kimchi. Despite the relative exoticism of these foods, the writer takes a nonchalant stance, and frames them as staples of a modern kitchen:

Extract 4

- 1 Regardless of the food she grew up with, she is acquainted with a wide array
- 2 of global flavors, from fish sauce and tahini to pomegranate molasses and
- 3 miso. These ingredients aren't advertisements for sophistication or
- 4 adventurousness. They're just part of today's pantry, along with crème
- 5 fraîche and smoked paprika.

Thus, 'global flavors' (line 2) aren't showy 'advertisements for sophistication' (line 3); rather, these material artifacts are 'just part of today's pantry' (line 4). This sweeping characterization is interesting on multiple levels: first, 'just' marks a mitigating of the kaleidoscopic range of items referred to in lines 2–5, serving instead to highlight the (constructed) commonality of the foods. This is successful in part because of the pointed omission of *whose* pantry – it is surely not everyone's. Rather, the writer chooses 'today's,' marking an epistemic stance (see Jaffe 2009) which functions as a rescaling of the world's population (i.e. what is true for this privileged writer must be true for everyone) and a lifestyle schooling of the reader. It becomes the individual's responsibility to claim her own global modernity by choosing to see 'crème fraîche and smoked paprika' (lines 4–5) as basic, rather than as 'sophisticated.' In many ways, this example speaks to the ethos of the NYT as a decidedly international and cosmopolitan publication; as Cook and Crang (1996) discuss, the modern metropolis has been fashioned as a site for sampling diversity and consuming the 'world on a plate.' However, the specialized and privileged access to these foods is not mentioned. Elsewhere in the article, the writer instead reinforces 'modern home cooking' as 'comforting' and 'practical' – albeit with a 'global point of view.' In this way, simplicity is routinely touted in the NYT as a virtue of contemporary, authentic eating, despite it being a performed simplicity, available only to those of us who are accustomed to excess.

3. *Lowbrow appreciation: Elite authenticity staged as 'common' yet elevated*

The popularization of lowbrow cuisine among the elite is one of the most recognizable elements of contemporary food discourse, and of cultural omnivorousness in general. For example, the famed, current NYT restaurant critic, Pete Wells, reviewed Shake Shack – a ubiquitous, slightly-better-than-fast-food chain restaurant that is popular in the U.S. He admits in his review that, while he would 'give stars to a hamburger stand,' he would probably not give four; Shake Shack received one – by NYT standards, this is a 'good' rating (four is 'extraordinary'). Wells' admission is a key component of the rhetorical strategy I call 'lowbrow appreciation.' While there is a marked appreciation for the cuisine of 'commoners,' its positive evaluation in elite food discourse is always hedged discursively. It is oftentimes 'elevated' (e.g. 'working class' style pot stickers made with dry-aged beef) or, as in the Shake Shack example, it is

described as ‘good’ but never four stars-good. Or, as with Extract 5, a 2010 review of a Brooklyn restaurant, it is framed as a ‘guilty pleasure,’ along with consuming alcohol in excess:

Extract 5

- 1 ...there’s a kitchen that turns out a vaguely Southern array of crunchy,
- 2 spicy, greasy, gooey and salty dishes that push all the right buttons
- 3 when you’re rolling through your third drink of the night...It’s mostly
- 4 fried, or in a bun, or both.

The ‘lowbrow’ cuisine in this passage includes unhealthy food from the Southern U.S.: food that is ‘crunchy, [...] greasy, gooey and salty’ (lines 1–2) and ‘mostly fried, or in a bun, or both’ (lines 3–4). Here we see a centering of the banal materiality of this cuisine; it is informal, messy, and oftentimes eaten with one’s hands, reminiscent of the ‘mopping’ in Extract 1. It is food that tastes good ‘when you’re rolling through your third drink of the night’ (line 3) – perhaps when your senses are dulled, and you’re not practicing the bodily restraint prized by elites (see Bourdieu 1984). What this example and others demonstrate is a privileged person’s list of reasons for consuming lowbrow cuisine; elite participation in lowbrow food culture is never without an explicit (or implicit) qualification of its worthiness.

One such method of establishing value is via ‘elevation,’ which generally involves the use of particular ingredients thought to be especially innovative, expensive, or high quality. A burger made of Kobe beef is a common example of this practice. Elevation also applies to expertise and skill (see Extract 3, ‘handiwork’) – a chef elevates a food when he or she brings expert knowledge and technique to what otherwise might be unworthy. Another way we see elevation in lowbrow cuisine, however, is in the people who consume it – a lower-class person eating a burger at an unknown diner is quite different than a ‘posh’ person eating it at a NYT-reviewed restaurant. Extract 6, from 2012, is one such example. It explains how patrons of Gran Eléctrica in Brooklyn consume Mexican food:

Extract 6

- 1 The plastic gloves are handed out discreetly, midmeal, rolled up and tied like
- 2 transparent diplomas. They are an unexpectedly downmarket accessory for
- 3 the young and lovely patrons in Gran Eléctrica’s thrumming near dark who
- 4 glance covertly around the handsome room, carefully affecting nonchalance.
- 5 The gloves are intended for the torta ahogada (\$13), a sandwich drowned in
- 6 salsa, a street-food specialty from Guadalajara. ...One diner kept hers on for
- 7 the rest of the night. ‘I love them,’ she said, daintily nibbling a taco.

Consider how, according to the critic, this ‘downmarket accessory’ (line 2) is ‘handed out discreetly’ (line 1): the critic frames the reception of these plastic

gloves as somewhat embarrassing and ‘unexpected’ given the restaurant’s ‘young and lovely’ patrons (line 3). This is a hedged participation in lowbrow culture – a form of ‘slumming’ (Koven 2006) amidst uncouth ‘street-food’ (line 6), for just an evening at a time. A glamorizing of the lowbrow ‘mess’ is seen also in the description of the setting: a ‘handsome room’ filled with people ‘carefully affecting nonchalance’ (line 4). The writer’s choice to qualify this affectation as ‘careful’ signals a certain acknowledgement, and critique, of the performance of status in this elite space – one that is enhanced by the description of a patron ‘daintily nibbling a taco’ (line 7). The juxtaposition presented here – surely a purposeful rhetorical move by this food writer – is striking: Mexican street food is no longer messy when it is consumed by those who are presented as embodying privilege (or who have been taught how to aspire to privilege by elite media like the NYT). Thus, encasing hands in plastic elevates the material experience of ingesting lowbrow cuisine; it is an elite reclaiming of the banal. By lowering ourselves (somewhat) to the culinary practices of the non-elite, we play with low culture. As Bourdieu (1991) famously notes, ‘The person who is sure of his cultural identity can play with the rules of the cultural game’ (125) – so by eating the (romanticized) food of the working class, the immigrant, and the peasant, we are able to experience the authentic fare of the masses and simultaneously disavow the ‘uncool’ pretension of traditional elites.

4. Pioneer spirit: Elite authenticity staged as do-it-yourself innovation and adventurousness

Some time ago, Trilling (1972) observed how the contemporary pursuit of authenticity follows a prioritizing of individual agency and self-awareness. Additionally, others have noted that this same individualist, neoliberal ideology is key to the justification of contemporary privilege (e.g. Khan 2014), and that the rational, capitalist individual is associated with an ‘authentic self’ (Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2012: 87). The independence and individualism of the (elite) actor in contemporary society is thus seen simply as reasonable, and natural. It follows that appeals to entrepreneurialism and a ‘pioneering’ spirit are key to the staging of elite authenticity in food discourse. This is exemplified in my NYT dataset in multiple ways, all of which can be generally divided into two distinct categories: first, a general sense of adventurousness in life and in eating (e.g. trying ‘exotic’ or ‘funky’ ingredients), and second, a focus on do-it-yourself innovation and labor (e.g. making things ‘by hand’). For the sake of space, I expand only on this latter category in my analysis, demonstrating how the protagonists of NYT food section articles are framed as modern-day pioneers, embodying not only the neoliberal ideal of success and authenticity, but also an unbridled sense of adventure and fearlessness. Consider Extract 7, which is excerpted from a 2014 article about the rehabilitation process of a restaurant after Hurricane Sandy ravaged the east coast of the United States:

Extract 7

- 1 ...she mucked the place out, banged in new, mold free walls, began a
- 2 Kickstarter campaign to fund repairs and fresh equipment, and hired
- 3 Aaron Taber, a chef she had met at the dog run.

It is clear from this passage that the owner of this restaurant is framed as exemplifying a do-it-yourself, frontier spirit: she is depicted as cleaning up the building herself, funding ‘repairs and fresh equipment’ (line 2) through an online campaign, and hiring a chanced-upon chef. This is the narrative of a contemporary pioneer overcoming material obstacles through sheer grit, determination, and social (media) know-how. One would expect that this passage is, in part, a dramatization. However, the owner’s economic, social, and cultural capitals are heavily featured (see Bourdieu 1984), and the way this narrative is framed by the critic – a positive evaluation of individual labor – demonstrates its perceived value to readers. As privileged consumers, we are encouraged to believe in a direct link between hard work and success; that our society is a functioning meritocracy; that everyone is capable of overcoming natural disasters, or poor circumstances if they simply possess (capitalist) determination.

This sort of entrepreneurial pluck can be detected in other ways in my NYT corpus, particularly in references to featured chefs’ or restaurateurs’ success despite their relative inexperience in the food industry. The overwhelming impression left by these compelling tales is one of respect and awe: their ability to prosper despite a lack of training (according to the NYT, at least), renders these protagonists the admiration of the food writers, and of the readers. Consider how the owners of a popular restaurant in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn are discussed in the following review extract from 2010:

Extract 8

- 1 The owners are two friends, Chris Young, a bartender, and Taylor Dow, a
- 2 recording engineer. It’s their first bar. Mr. Young found the rental on
- 3 Craigslist.

Note how these two men possess a marked lack of food expertise – one is a bartender and the other a recording engineer. Furthermore, ‘[i]t’s their first bar’ and the space was found ‘on Craigslist’ (lines 2–3), the notoriously democratic (and free) online classifieds site used by the masses in the U.S. The cultural capital indexed by this unexpected reference serves to solidify the in-group status shared by the entrepreneurs, the restaurant critic, and the readers alike; in emphasizing the inexperience of the owners, the critic stylizes them as appealingly *not* elite, but rather as ordinary and self-made. However, these

details are actually subtle ways of building distinction (remember the restaurant that does not ‘try too hard’ from Extract 3). If one can succeed at something one has not been trained in, or possesses no specialized knowledge of, they have achieved status through their own intellect and diligence. They have been ‘true’ to themselves, and have therefore earned their privilege (Kenway and Lazarus 2017), thus embodying the neoliberal ideal of success: independent creativity equals professional, social, and financial gain. Contemporary theories of social class find (e.g. Fiske and Markus 2012), of course, that this is really only possible for the middle and upper classes, who are socialized to value independence and innovation, and who have the economic capital to embark on the risky endeavor of opening a restaurant in Brooklyn (for example). It is thus partly through elite publications like the NYT that these do-it-yourself success narratives are presented as commonplace; they become models of authentic living.

5. Locality/sustainability: Elite authenticity staged as responsible, tasteful ‘choice’

Many have documented the ways in which discourses of locality and sustainability occupy contemporary food practices (e.g. Cramer 2011); as the precise definitions of these terms vary depending on geographic location, I will not attempt to engage in a discussion of how the NYT specifically defines these concepts. Rather, I focus on how appeals to the local, environmentally-friendly, and humane sourcing of food/practices are deployed across the dataset. Oftentimes these references hearken to a romanticized agrarian life of years past, coming to index that which is supposedly natural and authentic. Interestingly, locality/sustainability is the only rhetorical strategy out of five which seems to be knowingly tied to eliteness in the NYT corpus; it is thus treated, at times, with skepticism, and even disdain. While I argue overall that each of these rhetorical strategies allows elites to *implicitly* disavow their privilege and pretension, the clear mocking of locality/sustainability in food discourse is unique in that it represents an *explicit* disavowal of a practice known to be status-producing. However, while it may be discussed warily in the NYT food section, locality/sustainability is still featured prominently – in the restaurants it reviews, in the cooking practices it profiles, and in the particular foods it prizes. Locality and sustainability lend value to whatever they are ascribed to: salads are said to ‘bristle with farmers’-market assertion’ and dumplings stuffed with pork from a local supplier ‘elevate’ an otherwise mundane menu item. This same value seems to be attributed to the people who consume local/sustainable food – humans come to embody the quality of the ingredients they ingest. Extract 9, from 2016, discusses an artisan butcher in Manhattan; it not only makes the connection between eliteness and sustainable food practices clear, but also explicitly refers to a class of elite eaters:

Extract 9

- 1 ... a growing demand for alternatives to factory chickens and plastic
- 2 packages of chuck steaks has inspired a butcher's renaissance in many
- 3 places. Now, Upper West Side carnivores can have their pastured beef,
- 4 air-chilled poultry and heritage pork, along with charcuterie like head
- 5 cheese...

Notice how the writer creates a strikingly dichotomous relationship between the two categories of meats: 'factory chickens' (line 1) versus 'air-chilled poultry' (line 4) and 'plastic packages of chuck steaks' (lines 1–2) versus 'pastured beef' (line 3). Of course, the difference between a factory and a pasture is clear; the latter represents romanticized notions of nature and land – along with a simultaneous erasure of the farm worker's labor, and of the other unsavory aspects of farming – and the former, industrialization.⁹ What I find most interesting, however, is the writer's register shift in differentiating between chicken and poultry, and between chuck steak and beef. The elitiness indexed by the former terms in these two sets is clear. The writer switches from the 'common' word, chicken (derived from the German, 'küchlein'), to the less accessible 'poultry' (derived from the status-producing French, 'poulet'); from a specific cut of (relatively affordable) steak, to just 'beef' – preceded, of course, by the pricey (and iconized) qualifier 'pastured.' Likewise, the writer's negative stance toward the materials encasing these products (e.g. 'plastic packages') paints them as more lowbrow and offensive. Thus, the discourse here is rife with elitist stancetaking (Jaworski and Thurlow 2009). Consumers who dare to eat 'chicken' or 'chuck steak' become irresponsible or uncultured; rather, we aspire to the consumptive patterns of 'Upper West Side carnivores' (line 3), who are apparently known for choosing to consume responsibly, and by association, authentically. In this sense, the schooling nature of mediatized food discourse becomes more transparent: these are the do's and don'ts of elite eating.

As I mentioned, however, there also exists the tendency in the NYT corpus to be somewhat critical of these practices, arguably disavowing the explicit pretension discussed above. For instance, one NYT article essentially describes the farm-to-table movement as a marketing ploy while another mocks the 'reclaimed wood' at a restaurant in Williamsburg – a detail which reveals how a sustainable ethos is often applied to more than just food. Consider Extract 10, from 2012, in which a successful Brooklyn restaurateur is (gently) accused of being too concerned with locality and sustainability:

Extract 10

- 1 Reynard, which opened not long ago on the ground floor of the new Wythe
- 2 hotel in Williamsburg, can get a little 'Portlandia' at times. Andrew Tarlow,
- 3 who built the restaurant and is a partner in the hotel, carries a briefcase of
- 4 leather tanned from the hide of a cow that once passed through his butcher
- 5 shop, Marlow & Daughters.

The writer's reference to 'Portlandia' marks a clear stance of incredulity towards this restaurant's sustainable practices. The sketch-comedy TV program features an episode in which a couple visits a restaurant serving local fare and is provided excessive details regarding the background of the chicken they are considering ordering – including its diet of local hazelnuts. However, the skit's critique is not just of the restaurant, but also of the consumers themselves; the couple demands even more information, which culminates in a visit to the farm where the chicken was raised, while the server (absurdly) holds their table for them at the restaurant. Referencing this scene is another example of elitist stancetaking by NYT food writers; their otherwise implicit critique is made explicit by the cultural capital required for getting the joke, for being in-the-know. Thus, while the NYT continues to feature restaurants and chefs who engage in sustainable and local sourcing, food writers maintain a cool distance from those who take it too far – like Andrew Tarlow, for example, who 'carries a briefcase of leather tanned from the hide of a cow that once passed through his butcher shop...' (lines 3–5), another example of the indexical value of material objects. It is quite possible that in other articles the NYT might praise this eco-friendly practice. However, they carefully choose when to explicitly support locality/sustainability, and when to mitigate their own participation in it. As Thurlow and Jaworski (2012) note, elites have the luxury of 'performing choice' in these instances; we can therefore afford to mock others for their zealous participation in the local and sustainable food movements because we share their privileged access, and see it as a natural, authentic part of our own existence. Many others, of course, do not, and cannot. It is in this striking contradiction that the true power and impact of elite authenticity reveals itself.

CONCLUSION

Food representations have historically been understood as mere barometers of cultural sensibilities; instead...these representations actively produce cultural sensibilities and the possibility of transgression. (LeBesco and Naccarato 2008: 13)

What one begins to realize across this NYT dataset is that, just as language ideology is not necessarily about language but about speakers (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994), food ideology is likewise often not about regulating food as much as it is about disciplining eaters. In this way, my study has considered how some eaters are framed in an influential, elite newspaper. These mediatized representations, however, are not just snapshots of society. As LeBesco and Naccarato suggest, food discourse is instrumental in the production of social norms and expectations, which in turn demand obedience – and all of which are caught up in the seemingly harmless,

banal materiality of food. In this sense, the NYT food section not only contributes to a perpetual renewing of elite power and privilege through its own self-styling, but is also engaged in an ongoing stylization of its readers into socially-appropriate ways of being elite – all under the guise of fashionable ‘authentic’ living. As Bruner (1994) observes, authenticity is always caught up in issues of power; it is about who has the right to authenticate. The discourse of elite authenticity, while similar to a sociolinguistic commodification of authenticity in its relevance to the neoliberal nation-state, differs in that it is deployed across material and mediatized representations as a mechanism by which a disavowal of privilege is carefully – omnivorously – orchestrated. Elite authenticity allows us to maintain what Žižek (1989) calls ‘cynical distance’ from snobbery or overt elitism: it is one way we ‘blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy...’ (33). However, as Žižek also notes, this blinding does not prevent us from participating in these systems. Thus, elite authenticity not only masks our involvement in elite practices, it also affords us higher status for having the ‘good taste’ to appear egalitarian, and therefore, inclusive and innocuous.

What I have sought to demonstrate in my analysis is the following: first, elite discourse justifies and disguises elite consumption by framing it as a natural or reasonable pursuit of authenticity, via five rhetorical strategies. Historicity, a focus on tradition and continuity, often capitalizes on cultural stereotypes, and normative expectations concerning gender roles. Simplicity, or (staged) modesty and minimalism, masks the performance – and the various types of capital – which are required for displaying ‘effortlessness.’ Lowbrow appreciation, a romanticization of ‘low’ cultural practices, depends on the elevation of ingredients, environments, or participants as a means of justifying consumption. Pioneer spirit, a celebration of (privileged) personal labor and innovation, perpetuates the rarely attainable, capitalist ideal of individualism and success. Lastly, locality/sustainability, via which ‘responsible’ consumer behavior is framed as tasteful choice, privileges pastoral fables over the economic realities of farm-to-table eating (and is often downplayed, for this very reason). These rhetorical strategies are realized in complex and interconnected ways, through a number of discursive tactics such as epistemic and elitist stancetaking, hedging, and (classed) register shifts, for example.

Second, processes of mediatization – involving both discursive and material representations – are pivotal to the lifestyle schooling of consumers, to a general veiling of social inequality, and to the subsequent reinscribing of classic regimes of power and status on contemporary life. Third, this study is further evidence of how privilege is effectively masked and obfuscated in increasingly competitive markets. Status does not straightforwardly hinge on conspicuous consumption but rather on one’s purposeful distancing from these more traditional hierarchies. It is thus very often unnoticed or unseen, and in this sense, is representative of Thurlow’s (2016) post-class ideologies. This sort of naturalizing and concealing of privilege represents a larger trend in society

to ignore the ways in which we claim eliteness because we do not perform it in obvious ways. It is my argument that this sort of omnivorous elitism is more troubling than its traditional, noticeable counterpart; it divides covertly, allowing us to paint our privilege as egalitarianism, and rest comfortably.

NOTES

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 2. Donald Trump likely received more than \$1 million; see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/03/03/trumps-false-claim-he-built-his-empire-with-a-small-loan-from-his-father/?utm_term=.1c81d6891f24.
 3. See <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>.
 4. According to the Current Population Reports article published in March 2016 and posted on the U.S. Census website, 'Educational Attainment in the United States' by Camille L. Ryan and Kurt Bauman.
 5. For this quotation, and all other statistical information referenced in the preceding paragraph, see <http://nytmmediakit.com/newspaper> (click on 'Weekday/Sunday Audience' tab).
 6. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/09/dining/craig-claiborne-set-the-standard-for-restaurant-reviews.html>.
 7. See the 2017 cost of living index press release, issued by the Council for Community and Economic Research: <http://coli.org/quarter-2-2017-cost-of-living-index-release/>.
 8. This and all other examples quoted from the dataset are available online at: [https://bern.academia.edu/GwynneMapes/Data-referenced-in-Mapes-\(2018\)-Elite-Authenticity](https://bern.academia.edu/GwynneMapes/Data-referenced-in-Mapes-(2018)-Elite-Authenticity)
 9. I do not have the space (nor expertise) to discuss the myriad, and complex, problems associated with factory farming practices; I am merely pointing out the discursive construction of eliteness in sustainable alternatives.
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