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Is all the world a store or shopping cart? How we define ourselves through grocery shopping

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Introduction

Have you ever thought about why you shop where you shop? Why you buy what you buy? Have you ever wondered why breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and why bacon is considered to be a breakfast food? (Ghaninejad, 2022). My mom once told me that the reason why she always bought Jif over Skippy peanut butter when I was growing up was because, as Jif's ad slogan went, "Choosy moms choose Jif." Her answer really stuck with me: Somehow Jif's marketing guilted my mom, and I'm sure many others, into buying their more "wholesome" peanut butter. Never mind that I, my sister, and my mom actually preferred the taste of Skippy. But grocery shopping isn't so much about what we prefer and our own personal tastes. It's about signaling who we are and where we belong.

It's not surprising that when Procter & Gamble—the company that produced Jif peanut butter until 2001—teamed up with Grey Advertising to jazz up their marketing strategy in an effort to surpass Skippy (Krampner, 2015), they chose to focus on mothers. Jif did surpass Skippy by 1980, positioning their peanut butter as a wholesome family favorite. Growing up in the 90s, I remember seeing the commercial where the dad comes home from the grocery store and introduces his wife to Jif peanut butter a lot (Figure 1). It was the peanut butter from her husband's childhood. And after tasting one spoonful from the jar, the mom decides that they're a Jif family from now on. Historically, brands and advertisers have understood

women to be “natural shoppers,” targeting women with marketing that appeals to their desire to be good at performing whatever identity they were assuming, and even turning the woman’s body, as Rachel Bowlby (2003) claims, into an advertising space.

Figure 1

Still image of 1990 Jif peanut butter commercial

Note. Image showing a man, who has just returned from grocery shopping, presenting his wife with a jar of Jif peanut butter.

Peanut butter turns out to be the perfect product to begin this discussion about North American grocery stores, not just because it can be found on supermarket shelves and around 48.8 million Americans consumed one jar of peanut butter a month in 2020 (Statista, 2021), but because it encapsulates how much the supermarket relies on consumers only seeing and being enchanted by

their brand of peanut butter (Stevens et al., 2015; Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Endrissat et al., 2015; Hollein, 2003; Grunenberg, 2003). As food and culture writer Alicia Kennedy wrote in 2021, declaring her preference for natural peanut butter (one that uses as few ingredients as possible) is a surefire way to lose Twitter followers. Kennedy's been called "classist" and "elitist," since natural peanut butter tends to cost more than big brands. Her take is "controversial" because, obviously, peanut butter that you don't have to stir is much more *convenient*. "There is a lot of attachment to brands like Jif and Skippy, which require no stirring, and it's not well-known that if you leave a jar of natural peanut butter upside down in the fridge overnight, the oil incorporates," Kennedy says. "I try to mention this trick whenever someone brings up the supposed superiority of the big brands."

Natural is one of the many labels that have started to story our food in recent years. In the U.S., the natural and organic industry has seen an increase in sales since 2015 (Whipstitch Capital & New Hope Network, 2020), suggesting that Americans want to know what ingredients are in their food. This is something that large brands like Jif and Skippy have caught onto, as they now also offer natural versions of their peanut butter. There's still a problem with these versions, Kennedy says, and that problem is palm oil. Jif uses palm oil, which has led to deforestation and child labor in Indonesia (AP News, 2020). Skippy uses hydrogenated vegetable oil that has been linked to, among other health issues, diabetes (Mirmiran et al., 2019). These are the things Kennedy wants us to think about when we feel nostalgic for a brand of peanut butter. What, exactly, is creating that nostalgia? Because you're not just buying a jar of peanut butter—you're entering into a system that exploits labor and poses a serious threat to the planet.

I don't think nostalgia for a brand is the only reason why people get so defensive when Kennedy extolls the wonders of natural peanut butter. It's because she's pointing out the obvious. To some degree most of us know that we're complicit in a problematic food system and cycle of consumption, and we don't really want to be reminded of it. In fact, we're actively looking for ways out of feeling "morally conflicted," which might explain the rise of Michael Pollan and others like him who claim to have all the answers to how we should eat (Gordon & Hobbes, 2022). "It ought to be possible to combine the ethical rightness of fair trade, all the way from production to retail," Bowlby (2003) says, but we haven't figured it out and we often feel powerless. I wonder if we, as consumers, wouldn't feel so powerless if we could create a model that breaks down the hierarchies of our food system and shows how we're as much a part of the production as we are the consumption.

The supermarket rhizome: Points of transformation

A supermarket-style grocery store is still where most people in America buy their food. In fact, "the average adult will spend 2% of their life inside one" (Lorr, 2020, p. 5). Even though I've visited a grocery store at least three times a week for years, I've only recently started to notice the grocery store. I've noticed how different stores seem to have their own personalities, which are often reflective of the people they serve. I've noticed the workers, and how they blend into the background at some stores and are ready to attend to every customer's needs at others. I've noticed the number of self-checkout lanes and cashiers, the names of aisles, store layouts, promotional signs, and the size of shopping carts. What I've mostly started to reflect on is my own shopping behavior.

I live in New York City, and I don't know any New Yorker who is able to get all the groceries they need from a single store. A typical grocery run takes me to at least two stores, because I have my preferences for different items. One of the stores I always visit is Trader Joe's. On a Saturday, the Trader Joe's on Court Street in Brooklyn (I believe it's store #558) always has a line that goes out the door and wraps around the block before the store even opens. I don't mind the long line that snakes through every aisle of the store just to get to where everyone is assigned a cash register by a friendly employee; I always bring a book with me. And I'm only waiting in those series of lines to get two items that I know I can't find anywhere else: pancake bread and cookie butter.

Trader Joe's is known for its unique products and private label that founder Joe Cloumbe "needed to be an extension of the store's identity" (Lorr, 2020, p. 63). There's an Instagram fan account devoted to Trader Joe's finds that currently boasts 1.8 million followers (the account is @traderjoeslist). The company even has its own podcast, "Trader Joe's (inside)," where hosts Matt Sloan and Tara Miller discuss how different products come to be at Trader Joe's. In his 2020 book *The Secret Life of Groceries,* Benjamin Lorr describes Trader Joe's customers as "evangelical" (p. 36). Lorr devotes an entire chapter to Joe's and how the company disrupted the traditional grocery model by selling customers "integrity" and "authenticity." The brand seems authentic, which is something that consumers, at least consumers of a certain class, care about (Endrissat et al., 2015; Spielmann et al., 2018; Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007; Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Stevens et al., 2015).

Lorr maintains a skeptical tone when talking about Trader Joe's, never completely falling for Joe or his store's authentic aura. Instead, he dissects it:

> *"Trader Joe's, just like trader Joe, has perfected the ability to project integrity while simultaneously offering a very similar class of mass-produced goods that its competitors offer. It is no accident that the real dynamic deals at TJ's have always been in the frozen aisle, on the canned goods, the jar of cookie dough spread, or the bacon-cheddar-flavored popcorn, those hyper-packaged exemplars of mass consumption that achieve the most special aura of all by appearing on Joe's shelf: decency" (p. 21).*

"It is no accident" stands out to me in this passage, because this is true for many different aspects of the grocery shopping experience that I hope to make clear in this paper. It is no accident how we feel when we enter a grocery store, what we see, what we don't see, what's on sale, what we buy. It's all carefully constructed, and we all—every member and instrument of this weird, chaotic orchestra—has a part to play in the construction.

This is all to say that our industrialized food system doesn't operate on a top-down model; there's no man behind the curtain controlling everything like in *The Wizard of Oz*. And our interaction with the supermarket is only one small piece of this very large and interconnected system. What's needed is a model that shows points of connection between all the elements that create and construct our desire to consume, while still taking into account our individual tastes and temporalities.

Much of the literature around supermarkets and retail is focused on *desire*. But it's also focused on food deserts, accessibility, prices and our perceptions of what

prices should be, and what trends are driving consumer and industry behaviors. The common theme that cut across almost everything I was reading was the concept of *transformation*. For example, when does food become a brand, a consumer packaged good (CPG), a symbol? When does it return to being food? And what about *us*? What do we become or, rather, wish we could become when we enter a grocery store and take in the abundance of products on display?

Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome gives us a new way of thinking about supermarkets, our industrial food system, and the many ways every subject/object is also a subject/producer and subject/consumer (Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007). This framework rests on Deleuze's definition of *becoming*, "when A becomes B" without "giving up being A" (van der Klei, 2002). So food may become a CPG within the context of a grocery store, but it doesn't *return* to being food when someone eats it; it never stops being food. There are lots of transformation points within this rhizome system, but no identity is ever abandoned or replaced by another. As Berry & Siegel (2000) suggest, rhizomes "exist to suggest ways out of this all-too-common paralysis of our critical imaginations by providing sites for the emergence of new thinking, the not-yet-conceived."

Creating meaning through shopping: A literature review

I read a wide range of literature that focused on different aspects of the grocery store system, from the actual space of the supermarket we walk into to the people who work there to the history of how frozen foods were marketed from 1945-1965 (Hamilton, 2003) to why bacon was eventually marketed as a breakfast food (Ghaninejad, 2022). While this rhizome framework I'm proposing has been created

with American supermarkets in mind, several of the case studies used to shape this research were conducted in the U.K. and Australia (e.g., Harmer et al., 2021). When looking for literature, I wanted to ensure I found research that went beyond the physical space of the supermarket for, as Lorr (2020) finds, there are many "routes" that "define" the grocery store.

Lorr's work of investigative reporting is written for the average consumer, making visible the chain of supply and the work that goes into getting the products we want onto supermarket shelves. He begins with the innovation of Trader Joe's, moves to the commodification of the trucking industry and the expenses individual truckers incur delivering products to retailers, describes what it's like to develop and try to get a new specialty product on supermarket shelves, gives the retail worker's perspective of the grocery store, and ends with an example of the hard labor and violence people experience to produce our food.. It's important for us to know this about our food, and I get why Lorr created this linear food chain from his book chapters: It shows the impact our buying power has on every other link in that chain. It also dampens the magical "aura" of the products we find in our supermarkets. But what Lorr is missing is the hyper-mobility of the food system. Nothing is fixed, not even the definition of the grocery store, because meaning is always being created. I think the biggest takeaway from his work is that for all the thinking we do about food, we don't think enough about *groceries*.

Groceries are certainly an object of what Kniazeva & Venkatesh (2007) call "symbolic consumption." Neither food nor product, groceries seem to fit within Kniazeva & Venkatesh's theoretical framework of food consumption in the developed world, where food can be a "social connector and disconnector," an "object of desire,"

and a “globalized commodity.” Groceries, too, can be all these things, while also being a metaphor for what we need. A metaphor for abundance. A metaphor for what Lorr (2020) says is the new problem of simply having too much food. In the postmodern view of food consumption, we can see groceries as a “symbolic image” and the grocery store as a “symbolic environment” (Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007). In other words, they carry many meanings that are always *transforming*. But like Lorr, what Kniazeva and Venkatesh get wrong, in my opinion, is that it’s only consumers in this postmodern era that shape all these cultural, symbolic meanings.

Postmodernism comes up frequently in the more philosophical literature about shopping and supermarkets. These are spaces that bring the mundane and fantastic together, showing us how we might inject the “glamor” (Stevens et al., 2015; Brownlie & Hewer, 2011; Grunenberg, 2003; Tata, 2002) certain products promise us into our own lives. For Christoph Grunenberg and Max Hollein (2003)—whose collection of essays from writers and artists like Boris Groys, Anne Friedberg, and Rachel Bowlby—shopping and consumerism represent a kind of high art, especially when we consider the emotions they’re meant to evoke within us. “Shopping is a mode of visual speculation,” Friedberg (2003) says. And similar to the cinema, the shop window (and now e-commerce, Instagram, and other sites of shopping) have “facilitated and encouraged the mobilized gaze” (p. 62). We also connect with these shopping surfaces the way we connect with film: as voyeurs into lives we could embody.

Glamor and authenticity are both important, if not conflicting, aspects of the shopping experience. Glamor is an “enchantment,” an “otherworldliness” that once only inhabited an aristocratic world but has since been “democratized” and

"commodified" (Stevens et al., 2015). Authenticity is about "being true to oneself" and "genuine" (Ilicic & Webster, 2016), as a form of truth based on experiences (Spielmann et al., 2018). But glamor and authenticity aren't fixed in products and places; they're created through interactions, through appealing to what groups of people identify with. This is something the frozen foods marketing industry realized in the late 1950s. After years of targeting suburban housewives, they finally realized that their products also met the needs of "urban blacks, teenagers, and working women," and they began to diversify their marketing message (Hamilton, 2003).

Enchantment isn't only an aspect of consumption, but of work. Endrisset et al. (2015) introduce the concept of "enchanting work" in their study of organic supermarket workers. Their goal was to move the research happening around work "beyond the dichotomy of meaningful versus alienated." Their framework looks at enchanting work on three levels: (1) injecting otherwise mundane work with "meaning," (2) not focusing on uncertain and poor working conditions, and (3) participating in the creation of an "enchanted workplace." By thinking of enchantment as aspects of both consumption and production, it helps bring the two closer together. The production of enchantment in the work domain even allows workers to create it for themselves and their customers (Endrissat et al., 2015, p. 1571).

Pettinger (2006) considers the materiality of retail service work. Central to these workers' jobs is making products and the store look desirable for consumption. It's "aesthetic labor" that relies on the interactions between customers and workers. But enchantment, I think it can be argued, can more easily be found in these sites of consumption than on a shrimping boat in Thailand (Lorr, 2020). Even so, this

enchantment exists independently from the low wages and poor working conditions of retail workers—and it's also intrinsically linked.

The remaining aspects described in the literature are healthfulness and environment, and how they impact community access to groceries (Harmer et al., 2020; Thibodeaux, 2016; Vogel et al., 2016; Riesenberg et al., 2019; Singleton et al., 2019; Drewnowski, 2012). A few of the studies consider how the quality of a grocery store's offerings impacts the neighborhoods they're located in and vice versa (Singleton et al., 2019; Drewnowski et al., 2012; Thibodeaux, 2016). Drewnnowski et al. (2012) use geocoded data on home addresses and shopping locations in Seattle to determine whether obesity in King County residents is linked more closely to proximity or price. Results indicate that most respondents don't shop at their nearest grocery store and that the healthy food option isn't always the affordable choice. This finding that healthy "core foods" often aren't as affordable as "discretionary foods" is confirmed by Riesenberg et al. 's (2019) study that found that products with lower health rating scores were more heavily promoted with steeper discounts. Additionally, a study from Harmer et al. (2021) found that the size of a store impacted the price of healthy and less-healthy items: smaller stores had minimal differences in price between healthy and less-healthy items, while larger stores had a greater difference.

Data collection

After reading Benjamin Lorr's *The Secret Life of Groceries*, I was interested in answering the following question: Are consumers at the center of the grocery store model? When I learned about Deleuze & Guattari's rhizome theory, I realized that I didn't have to use a hierarchical structure to map the domain of the supermarket. I

could show that nothing is at the center or the top or the bottom. Every element exists at once, generating new connections and meanings.

To create this rhizome, I needed to identify what I would be mapping. I started reading case studies and trade publications. I found philosophical articles about shopping and consumerism. I also conducted two qualitative interviews: One was with Anna Dausman who runs her own hot sauce business out of Philadelphia, and the other was with Katrina Cobain who created The Plastic Bag Museum and lives in Glasgow, Scotland. All these data points have helped me construct a theoretical framework that shows the points of transformation within our food system.

Discussion

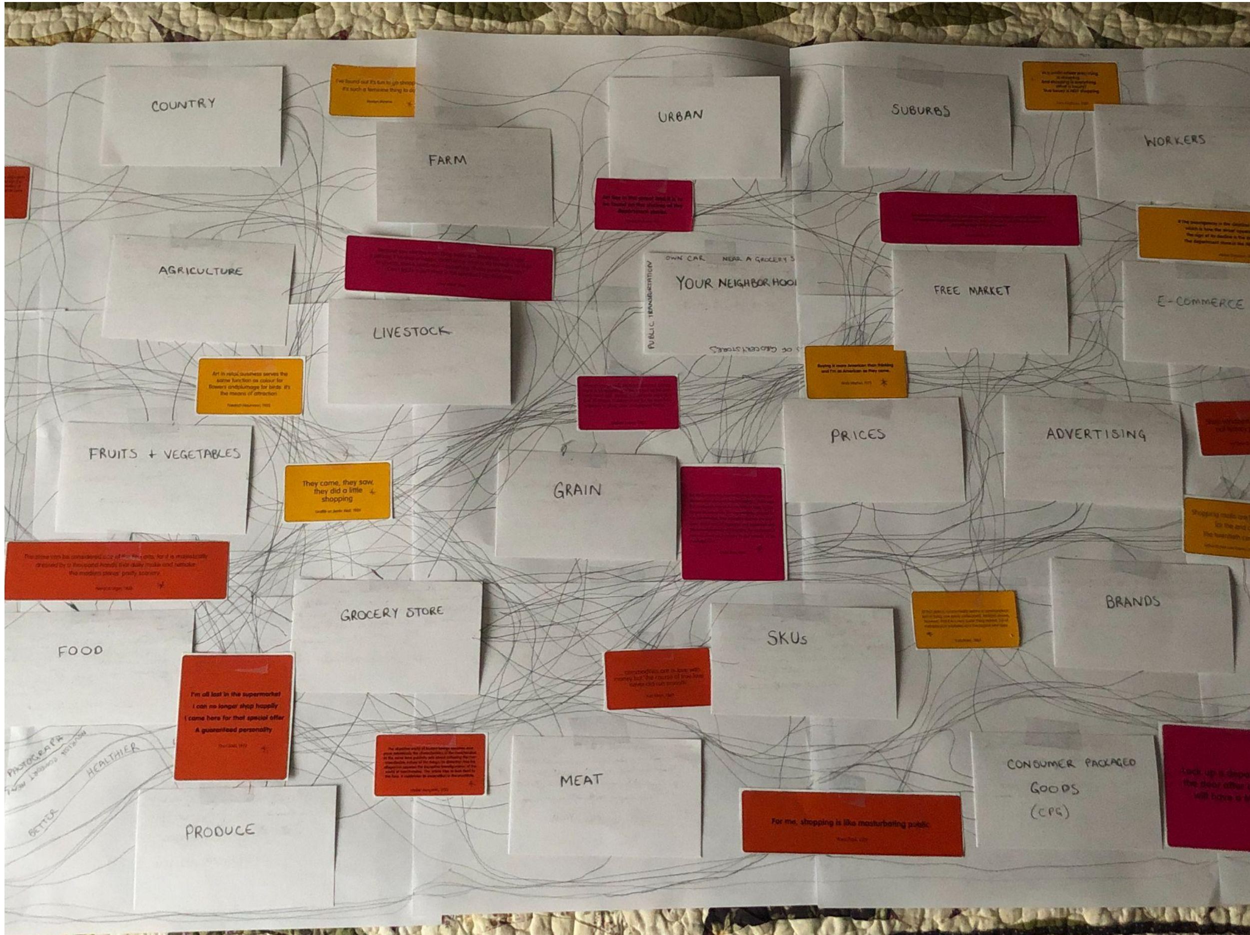
Transformation

This study uses Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome and becoming (van der Klei, 2002) to approach the grocery store. *Shopping* is a kind of becoming, for when do we ever fully move from *shopping* to *shopped*? In other words, do we ever stop shopping? More importantly, can we ever isolate shopping from the rest of the food system? According to Deleuze's concept of becoming, "when A becomes B, A does not give up being A. It continues to be A, yet it becomes B without transforming itself into B" (van der Klei, 2002, p. 48). This is because, as Kniazeva & Venkatesh (2007) would claim, it's the subject's perception of an object that transforms into a symbol. This postmodern view of consumption defines the consumer "as someone seeking to produce (construct) symbols" (p. 422). Of course in a free market system defined by a desire for profit, it's never easy to tell the difference between subjects and objects. We're all commodities.

These transformations happen so fast that they're invisible to us, so routine that they're a faint background. We all have *our* stores and *our* brands. We don't even realize how when we enter a store we become the choosy mom who chooses Jif, the cool and collected at-home chef who wants to make that dish we saw Bobby Flay or Nigella make, the person who might finally lose weight on Slim-Fast or some other diet drink this month. In the grocery store, we embody the symbols of what we could become. This has to do with the "bliss points" that we encounter throughout the grocery store, which are surfaces designed to "activate" customers and get them to buy (Lorr, 2020). It's about showing customers the "glamor" of things: "The world of consumer goods, its aesthetics and strategies are a vital, integral part of our urbane surroundings" (Hollein, 2003, p. 203). I want to expand on this idea of bliss points and introduce *transformation points*, the points within the rhizome where transformations are always happening and ending and generating new meanings (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Image of supermarket rhizome map



Note. Zoomed-out view of the rhizome map that shows the different transformation points and connections between them.

Transformation points indicate the many meanings that are produced and consumed by every subject/object within the system. This shows how food can be a CPG or shop keeping unit (SKU) to retail workers and an object of desire or source of comfort to consumers (Lorr, 2020). It's how, as Glasgow-based artist and creator of The Plastic Bag Museum Katrina Cobain says, the plastic shopping bags we use to carry our groceries could at once be status symbols and blights on the environment (see Appendix A).

There are six key transformation points I'd like to define in more detail (see Appendix C):

(1) You

It's important to note that the rhizome is not meant to be interpreted from our perspective or with us at the center. But we are a transformation point, where meanings are created based on how we engage with other points in the system and vice versa. Everything in the rhizome has agency.

(2) Nature

This transformation point is meant to represent a context where nothing is processed or manmade.

(3) Urban

This transformation point is meant to represent a context where cities, factories, and other manmade systems operate.

(4) Brands

This transformation point is a context that shapes and carries many identities.

(5) Food

As Anna Dausman—founder of Goodlands Food Co.—says, "food is everything." This is why we're so concerned about what we eat and get so emotional about it. In short, "food is a proxy for control in our increasingly detached lives" (Lorr, 2020, p. 6).

(6) Supermarket

The supermarket isn't central to our food system; it's a transformation point. It's the interface with which most consumers engage with the food system as a whole.

Authenticity

I don't wish to dissect authenticity to declare the concept as fake—I just want to understand it, because it's something we're all looking for. Whether that means bringing our authentic selves to work or buying a product because it appears to be "genuine" (Ilicic & Webster, 2016), we want to believe that there's something *real* or *true* that we can count on. We want to believe that not everything is socially constructed, not everyone is trying to sell us something. In a world where we feel morally conflicted about everything we do (even grocery shopping), we want someone to tell us what we could do better, which is why Michael Pollan's views about how we should be eating are so wildly popular (Gordon & Hobbes, 2022). Pollan locates a more authentic way of eating in an agrarian past and has been criticized for glossing over the fact that it was only the upper classes who ate well, due to the slave labor that worked on their farms. Pollan's views of eating are an example of how we think of authenticity in the wrong way. We like to think it's an inherent quality, because otherwise it would be constructed and, therefore, fake. But I think this rhizome framework shows that what's socially constructed isn't necessarily bad or untrue.

Anna Dausman, who started a hot sauce company called Goodlands Food Co. in 2021, wants her potential buyers to know that her hot sauce is "made in small batches with care and the utmost attention to flavor and quality. I don't take any shortcuts" (see Appendix B). This is who Anna is, and this might translate to marketing copy on her website or her decision to sell her product at farmer's markets, which customers might interpret as her brand being authentic. There are aesthetics to authenticity, and it's these aesthetics that meld the brand story and product together, making consumers want to buy them. Within a context of

consumption where workers perform "aesthetic labor" (Pettinger, 2006) to stage a retail setting for customers, this could seem inauthentic, but only if we continue to define authenticity as an inherent quality and not something produced through interactions.

Conditions of supermarket access

Missing from Lorr's (2020) dissection of the supermarket supply chain is any mention of access. As Thibodeaux (2016) points out, research around "food justice" and "food deserts" shows that supermarkets are less common in areas with high poverty rates and a large African American population. His study focused on "minority competition theory" and how it might be used to show how "macro-level processes" could affect which neighborhoods get grocery stores and which ones don't. The results show that as the percentage of African Americans within a city rises, supermarkets are located away from them.

Research from Vogel et al. (2016) also shows how education levels impact a person's ability to make healthful in-store choices. Their study of mothers of both high and low educational attainment indicates that mothers with low educational attainment are more susceptible to things like marketing for less healthy products. All of these factors are important for the rhizome framework because they show where interventions for real change can be made.

Conclusions

Findings suggest that a rhizome framework of our food system in which the grocery store is a transformation point can help us see the ways we create meaning through

every interaction. This could have implications for health and food justice researchers who aim to find points within the system to intervene and make change. More generally, it could help consumers see our connection to the rest of the food system in a way that doesn't make us feel powerless.

This map of transformation points is a good starting place, but future work can be done to understand the full breadth of our food system and how it might shape this rhizome framework.

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Appendix A

Interview with Katrina Cobain about The Plastic Bag Museum

Interviewer: How did you start collecting bags, and how did the idea of creating a museum come about?

Katrina: My name's Katrina Cobain, [and] I am an artist that works in Glasgow. I created The Plastic Bag Museum, which is currently an online-only museum for plastic bags. It only went online back in May of 2020, because the whole idea in my head has been rattling around for a year or 2, and I've been collecting bags for about 2 years, but I only really got the time during the lockdown here to really create the site and photograph all the bags, which was quite a good project for quarantine.

I guess it was a very random idea to begin with. I started to receive all these bags through my door in the post in envelopes, and I thought, "Where are all these coming from?" They're all handwritten and addressed to me and, about a week or so before that, I'd had the flu, so I had a really bad fever. And then I looked in my phone notes and discovered this manifesto for the plastic bag museum, and how plastic bags were these great things that would tell us so much about the future.

Then, the more I thought about it, I was thinking a lot about Egyptian objects, because in a lot of museums around the world people love to look at Egyptian objects cuz it's this kind of civilization that was lost and we have sort of unpacked all this information about their lives and their society from the interesting objects.

I was thinking a little bit about, "Well, if something were to happen to us"—this was before the pandemic, so it's not as dark— "what would be left to learn about us?" And then I was thinking a lot about landfill sites and how the only things that would be surviving in the landfill site would be made of plastic cuz they will outlast everything else. And I was thinking about digging up all this plastic and what it would mean, and there are so many interesting ways to spin off on that. Like there's a whole section of archaeology called gamer archaeology where they dig up old games that were mass buried in 1980s LA because they weren't very successful.

So the bag museum has just been kind of developing from there with other people getting involved sending bags. A lot of it was started just from my own collection, which I kind of gathered from a range of places: some of them are bags I've purchased on eBay from other collectors, some of them are bags that I sort of happened upon or that friends have given me. And then since

the site's gone live, we've received a lot more posted donations, which has been fantastic, cuz then I can get bags from much further afield, which is obviously very difficult in the current pandemic context. So, it's been really wonderful just people's response to it and wanting to engage with it.

Interviewer: You say on the museum website that single-use plastic bags can tell us a lot about ourselves and our social history. Can you expand on that?

Katrina: Yeah, so, plastic bags, definitely from the 1960s onwards, are amazing items just to tell us a little bit more about the development of capitalism and consumption in the Western world. We can really see this kind of steep incline in use and, also, a variation in plastic bags, which really kind of mirrors consumption in our society. We can also see, hand-in-hand with that, how brands and franchises develop and become huge players in, not only on our high streets, but also as icons that people know and recognize from advertising.

A good way to look at plastic bags is that they can really chart our spending habits, what types of bags people have kept over the years, cuz not all of them have survived, obviously. And, also, they do document businesses that don't exist anymore that maybe have been lost due to recessions; the kind of boom-and-bust cycles of capitalism. But then, as well as the obvious kind of links to business, they really chart public opinion about certain items.

For example, a really good one is tobacco use, which has just completely taken a u-turn in the last 20 years. So we've got a collection on the site which is solely dedicated to tobacco and tobacco marketing and the plastic bags that are linked to that.

Marlboro Cowboys from the 1990s. You'll see that Katrina has a whole [collection dedicated to bags that advertise tobacco].

As a 24-year-old who didn't grow up around much tobacco advertising, cuz it was really clamped down upon in the U.K. and in Europe, it's mental to think that there were all these different brands with all this really powerful advertising, like the Marlboro cowboy. So it's really interesting to chart that huge shift in public opinion around cigarettes and tobacco.

Then, also, another good thing that it charts is, of course, the public perception of the climate crisis and the environment. On all the bags throughout the 80s and 90s there's nothing at all about 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.'

Since the year 2000, there have been big shifts in public opinion about looking after the environment and threats of climate change. You can see this creeping into plastic bags and onto their designs, because they'll have these

kind of, you know, half-assed sentences like, “Oh, you can recycle this bag!” Even the bags that you can get today here in Scotland, you would be very hard-pressed to find a bag that doesn’t have that kind of statement on it. It’s really remarkable how [plastic bags] chart that shift as well, and, eventually, the final charting of that will be their complete disappearance from our day-to-day.

Interviewer: Is there a psychological aspect to how a business chooses their bag? A Disney one, for example, I imagine would be bigger because they want you to buy more stuff.

Katrina: Throughout the whole collection there’s a real marked difference in types of plastic. It’s interesting that you mention the Disney bags. We do have some Disney bags in the collection from about as early as the 1980s, and whenever you go to a place like Disney World everything becomes a souvenir.

[This is] because of the branding, because, you know, you went there and you wanna remember all the stuff from your trip. So that’s why people collect things like napkins, or plastic bags will often fall into this category. You don’t really see this so much now, but definitely when I was growing up people would reuse plastic bags as a kind of souvenir status thing. So it would be like, “Oh yeah, I’m gonna bring my Disney World bag, just so everyone knows that I went to Disney World.”

One of the many Disneyland bags from the collection. In the episode, you'll hear me and Katrina discuss how Disney designs these bags to be kept as souvenirs.

You can actually see this reflected in the plastic bags you get from Disney World, because some of them actually have hard plastic handles and then a bag attached underneath, which obviously indicates reuse but not from a sustainability standpoint. It's more like, "You want everyone to know you went to Disney World and so do we, so we're gonna make sure this bag is fit for the job."

A lot of the bags that have been donated in recent months since the site has gained a bit of exposure have been bags that have been kept as souvenirs, which is another thing that's interesting about human beings in general. We would never keep a flimsy plastic bag from the corner shop around the corner, but if I was to visit the bodega around the corner from your apartment I would keep that plastic bag because I'd be like, "Oh, it's from New York! It's amazing!" You might say the same about a random shop here in Glasgow and

Scotland. And that obviously is reflected in the collection, as well. Those are the bags that survive, which ultimately can be collected into something like this.

Interviewer: Tell me about eBay. Are there a lot of plastic bags for sale on eBay?

Katrina: eBay is one of my favorite things. If I could just have a job where I'm just on eBay all day long, I think I would just—I'd be happy. I think eBay is the ultimate rummage sale and anything, even the most random thing, you can find it on eBay. It's just brilliant. But, yeah, there is a plastic bag scene on eBay.

There are bags that are on my watchlist in the US actually, so there are definitely US sellers. I've never committed to buying one because postage is so expensive, but maybe someday. I think there are a lot of people who collect plastic bags out there, it's definitely not just me. They're quite fun things to collect because [they're] very accessible. It's not like collecting art or even some records that are very expensive. The most I've ever paid for a bag is about 5 GBP, and other ones you can get for about 2GBP, and they can still be very interesting and could be like 30 years old.

Interviewer: What is Scotland's relationship to plastic bags?

Katrina: I think that the relationship to plastic bags here is changing slowly, and it kind of goes hand-in-hand with things like plastic water bottles. Maybe 5 or 7 years ago people wouldn't think twice about buying a bottle of water with their lunch every day, whereas now people are much more likely to carry a proper water bottle to fill up and reuse. But obviously the biggest change to all of that is the pandemic, which has really increased people's plastic use here and around the world.

But I think after this once-in-a-lifetime event, we're on the road to phasing them out and they're definitely used much, much, much less than they were. And I think a lot of people really do make a conscious effort to carry their reusable tote bag.

Also some shops here have started to use paper bags, which I know is common in the US, but it's never really been a thing here. But there are some grocery stores that are now using paper bags, which people are very up for using, so that's good as well. Once the COVID-19 impact is over, it would probably be good to take some more steps in reducing the use of them.

Interviewer: Where are most of the bags in the collection from? And how can people submit a bag to you?

Katrina: Most of the bags are from the UK, because they've been the easiest to get a hold of. But, recently, I've been receiving a lot more bags from abroad through the post, which has been absolutely fantastic.

In recent weeks, there have been a lot more bags from across Europe. I think we've got a bag from nearly every European country now, and we do have some bags from the United States. We are starting to get a little bit more from East Asia. We've got a few from Japan, a few from New Zealand. A lovely lady in New Zealand sent me some bags that she had collected as souvenirs from her own travels, so they were from very interesting places like Mongolia, Iran.

I don't think there are any bags currently from South America, which is interesting. I don't think there are any bags from Africa, there might be one from South Africa, but I'm not entirely sure. Ideally it would be great to have bags from really different places on a global scale.

The way to get in touch is on the website.

Interviewer: What do you see as the mission of The Plastic Bag Museum?

Katrina: I think that the Plastic Bag Museum and the project is really about a positive outlook about something which can seem like a very overwhelming environmental crisis.

Thinking about how placing these items in the past can be, with a bit of care and attention, something that actually is an asset to our lives in getting rid of them. And changing people's perceptions about them in a fun way, rather than a very bleak way, I think often changing people's minds is about a combination of both.

If you think of a plastic bag as a museum object, as well as thinking of it as something that really harms the environment for animals or coral reefs, you'll eventually get there in not using them anymore. I think participation is something that is embedded within that, because it makes it accessible to people. Museums are sometimes seen as places which can be unwelcoming and inaccessible to all different types of people, whereas with the Plastic Bag Museum it's literally trash. Anyone's trash can be exhibited and be part of the collection with absolute pride of place.

One man's trash is another man's treasure, and I am that man.

Appendix B

Interview with Anna Dausman, owner of Goodlands Food Co.

Interviewer: Why hot sauce? How did you start making it?

Anna: I've been wanting to start a food business for years, but couldn't find the right angle. Years ago I sold homemade, decorated cakes, and most recently I'd entertained the idea of marketing my family's granola recipes – but cakes aren't scalable as quickly and require delicate preparation and delivery, and granola has very low profit margins, based on how expensive most of the ingredients are.

When the pandemic hit, I snagged a plot in a nearby community garden and started growing ghost peppers. After I harvested them that August, I started making hot sauce, and as soon as I began giving it away, friends and colleagues started coming back and asking for more. I had a feeling then that I should pursue hot sauce.

Interviewer: When and why did the business idea come about?

Anna: A couple months after I started making my own hot sauce, I gave away a bottle of green hot sauce to an athletic coach of mine, at my martial arts gym. Two days later she DM'd me asking if she could buy more, and posted on social media that it was one of the best hot sauces she'd ever had. It was at that point that I started thinking more seriously about this as a business idea. That was Oct/Nov 2020.

Interviewer: Where and how do you sell your hot sauce?

Anna: In spring of 2021 I started making larger batches and selling them at my martial arts gym, just by posting on Instagram, charging them at–cost (not including labor), and hand-delivering them at the gym. In retrospect, those batches were so small (12-15 bottles each), but it gave me an opportunity to refine my process, test new recipes, and connect with a specific market.

In fall 2021 I started working out of a commercial kitchen, licensed my business officially under the brand Goodlands Food Co., and began selling at markets and through my (newly launched) website. So far, all of my sales have been direct-to-consumer, which has definitely been more profitable, but also a huge amount of work.

Interviewer: What would you say is your brand message? Or, rather, what do you want potential buyers to know about your hot sauce?

Anna: I talk about our hot sauces + products as hot sauces that are high in flavor with (generally) mild heat – they're great for everyday use if you want to elevate what's on your plate, juj up an office lunch, or otherwise just love hot sauce and want more of it. They also highlight seasonal flavors and local ingredients, whenever possible. The brand is much softer and more feminine than most hot sauces on the market, with a botanical feel.

What I want potential buyers to know most about my hot sauce is that it's made in small batches, with care, and with the utmost attention to flavor and quality. I don't take any shortcuts.

Interviewer: Who would you say is your audience?

Anna: I'm still struggling to define my audience. Generally, they've been community-oriented, laidback (read: former-punk) professionals in their 30s and 40s, into healthy, low-fuss foods, who like to support local businesses. They lead active lifestyles (combat sports, climbing, hiking, running), and are willing to pay a little extra for high-quality, small batch products. They may not always have the time to cook, and use hot sauce / condiments to add flavor and dimension to food. This group is active on social media.

Interviewer: What is the hot sauce market like? How do you compete?

Anna: I haven't gotten a distinct sense yet of the competition. I'm certainly operating on a small scale still, but one thing that's already a challenge is that by nature of my more complex recipes, flavors, and emphasis on fresh ingredients, my production costs are higher than other similar small-batch producers like me. For that reason, it's more difficult to justify bulk retail pricing, but it's something I need to experiment with more.

Interviewer: How do you come up with new hot sauce flavors? Do you follow trends?

Anna: Like with other creative work, I keep track of new ideas when I have them, and test ideas and recipes as I go. I keep a log of all test recipes with notes about what I like and/or would do differently next time, and feedback from taste testers (ie, friends and family). I wouldn't say I follow other trends (generally) unless it's a flavor that I also really like, but rather I follow the tastes of my customers. If they're enthusiastic about something in particular, I'll make more of it – but I also believe in myself to lead with new and novel flavors.

For example, this year I created a hot sauce flavor, Spiced Cranberry, that I hadn't (and haven't!) seen anywhere, and produced it as a sample size in my "Spice Flight" – a gift pack of four sample size seasonal flavors. Whenever I've watched someone taste it, their face lights up and I can see their reaction change as they get each stage of the hot sauce. It hasn't been a popular flavor yet because it's still new and not well-known, but people who've tried it consistently say they love it and haven't ever tried a cranberry flavor like it. I'm very proud of that flavor, and believe it's going to become much more popular over the next few years!

Interviewer: Where would you like to see this go? Would you ever want to see your product in stores? If so, what type of stores?

Anna: So far I've been pretty conservative with my dreams for the brand/company. I'd like to figure out how / when to scale production first, but then – yes, I would absolutely love to see this in stores. I'm so proud of this line of flavors and hot sauces and I think each one adds a lot to home cooked dishes. I'd love to collaborate with other producers and cooks to bring in their own flavors and brands, and keep innovating on the flavors we experience from home. I see Goodlands' products being sold in smaller grocery stores with a cultivated product selection focusing on high quality, ethically sourced goods. But more so than the stores they're sold in, I would love for Goodlands' products to be in as many homes in the US as possible.

Interviewer: How much of this work is about food, peppers, hot sauce, etc.?

Anna: <3 For me, this work at its core is all about flavor – which is why these aren't the hottest hot sauces out there. But in producing hot sauce, I've learned so much more about peppers, fermentation, etc., and I'm so excited to dig deeper and see how far I can take this. There are so many incredible chili peppers out there, and I want to make a hot sauce that showcases each one of them. This work feels limitless!

Interviewer: Has anything surprised you about starting this business? Either about yourself, production, the food industry in general?

Anna: Well, everything has surprised me about starting this business! First of all, it's been so fun (albeit exhausting) to have to be so scrappy, and get to / have to do everything myself. The learning curve is steep but I also feel like I'm learning so quickly, which is so gratifying. I've been pleasantly surprised with how popular each of the flavors are (and I have ideas for so many more!), while also intimidated by the demands of continuing to produce so many different hot sauces. It's a constant give and take – but even just the thrill of doing this on my own, in a way that I think (I hope!) is unique, inspires me to keep going.

Interviewer: Where do you like to shop, particularly for items like hot sauce?

Anna: Obviously, I have my favorite hot sauces (namely Sriracha, but there are others!) but I also love to support other small hot sauce producers. I'm on a couple of Facebook groups for hot sauce fermenters and hot sauce professionals, and occasionally if someone posts something really cool or mentions something that makes me want to support them, I'll go and buy a few of their bottles. If I'm at a market and someone else is selling hot sauce, I'll support them, also. I don't think I'll ever get tired of trying new hot sauces! I also love looking for new brands and flavors at H Mart, and my local grocery store, Supremo, which stocks more Caribbean and West African brands and sauces.

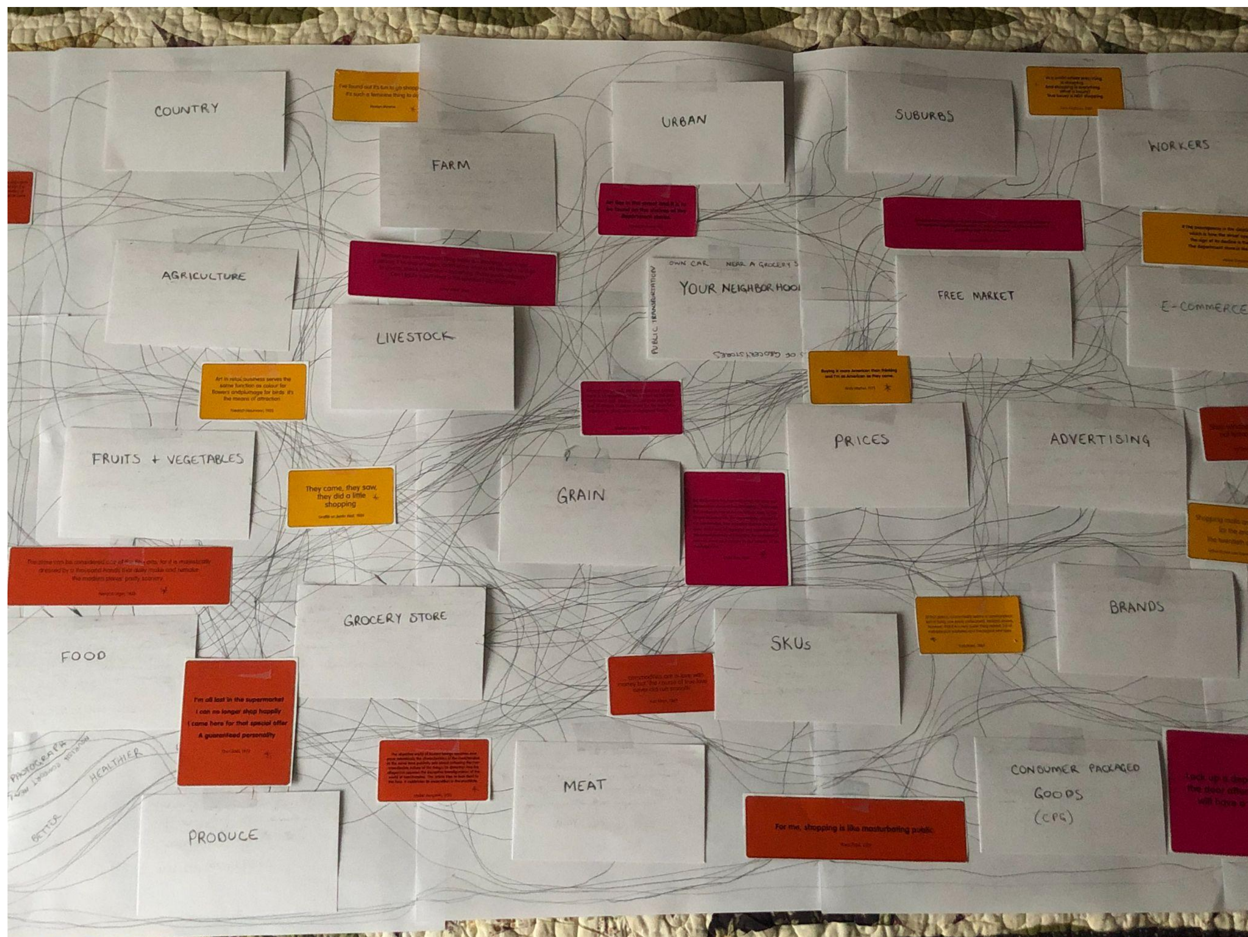
But for everything else – I'm basic and mostly shop at Trader Joe's, sometimes Aldi. It's so much easier to not have to choose between brands. I'd like to get back to ordering more local whole foods for my groceries, though, and I have many ways to do that here.

Interviewer: What does food mean to you? What do you think it means to society as a whole?

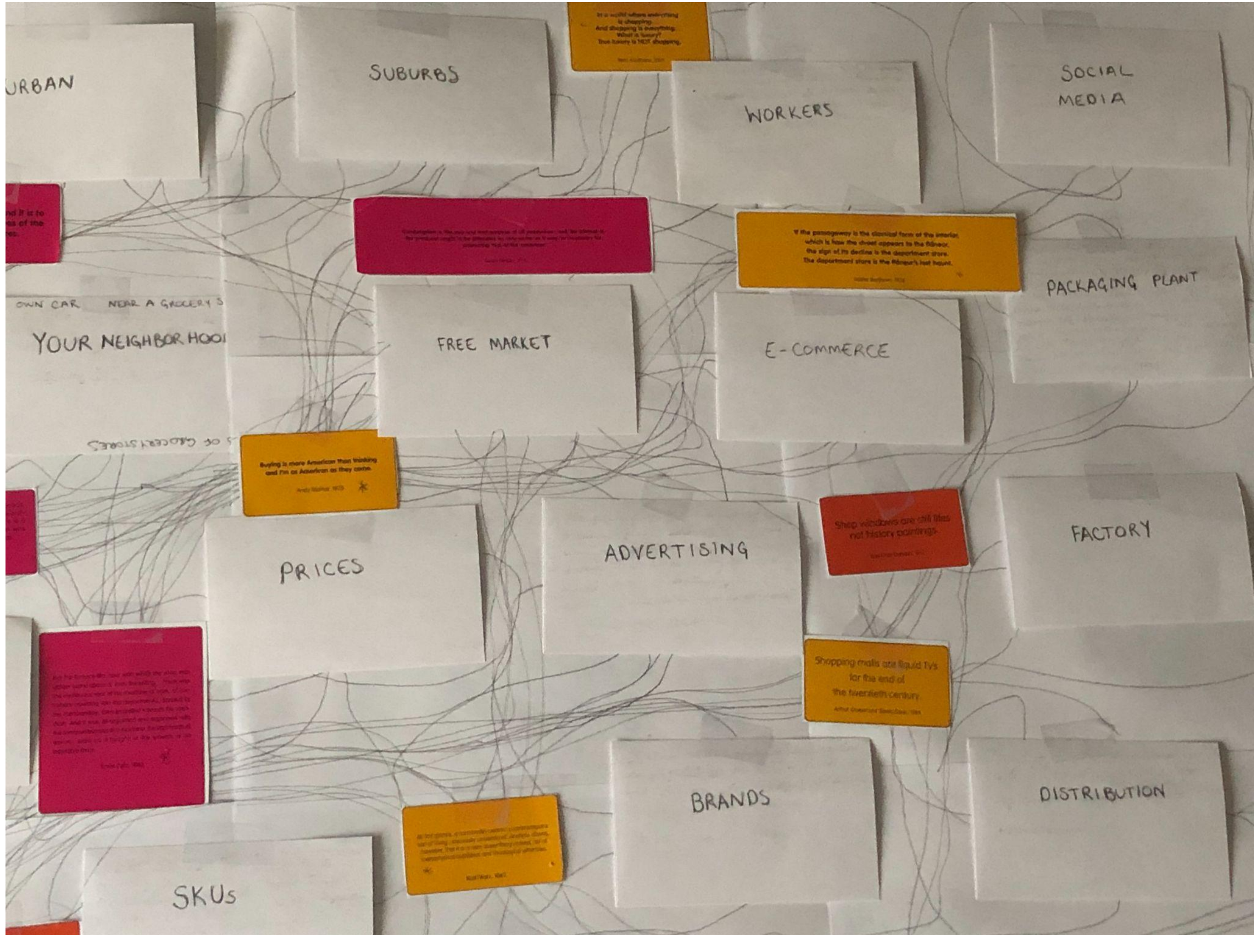
Anna: Food is everything. Food is sustenance and nourishment, it's family and comfort. Food is tradition and exploration, and on a day-to-day basis, for me, food is pleasure. Food is history and memory, and a perennial opportunity to gather. No matter who you are or where you are, everyone must eat; It gives us a reason to be together, and an opportunity to provide for- and rely on one another.

Appendix C

Image of the full Supermarket Rhizome with transformation points



Full rhizome map that shows the transformation points and famous quotes about consumerism layered on top of them.



Detailed section of the rhizome.

Detailed section of the rhizome, specifically showing the ‘You’ and ‘Food’ transformation points.