The Nature of Nature in Modern Day Cookbooks: A Qualitative Analysis of Social Constructions of Nature in Bestselling Cookbooks

Molly Fraser

SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the College Scholars Honors Program North Central College

May 13, 2019

Approved: ___________________________________________ Date: __________

Thesis Director Signature

Dr. Erin Condit Bergren

Approved: ___________________________________________ Date: __________

Second Reader Signature

Dr. Martha Bohrer
Abstract

Cookbooks can reveal a great deal about human perceptions of nature because much of the food we eat comes directly from the natural world through agriculture. This research argues that cookbooks’ depictions of food are a type of social construction of nature while exploring the question: how do *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks socially construct the relationship between humans, food, and nature? The analysis revealed that cookbooks reflect and contribute to value dualisms with respect to nature, and advance the perceptions that thin bodies, slimming foods, and women in the domestic sphere are “natural.” The sample of 20 *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks, selected from the 2013-2017 bestsellers lists, was analyzed using grounded theory method (GTM). GTM is an inductive, qualitative research methodology that consists of analyzing data to uncover and record broad categories, concepts, and themes relating to social and cultural phenomena.

Introduction

People interact with the natural world on a daily basis because most, if not all, of the food we handle originates in the natural world. To communicate this concept, I use the term “food nature” to refer to the elements of nature that provide us with food, such as agricultural lands, crops, gardens, farm animals and game animals. Through cookbooks’ treatment of food and the nature that provides us with this food, they have the power to inform and reflect humans’ relationships with the natural world. In other words, because food originates in the natural world, cookbooks’ depictions of food and food nature can socially construct humans’ perception of nature. Studying these depictions can reveal a great deal about how humans interact with food nature and why we interact in those ways.
To explore this concept, I asked the question: how do *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks characterize the relationship between food, humans, and nature? To answer this, I conducted a qualitative analysis of 20 bestselling cookbooks using grounded theory methodology (GTM). GTM is an inductive, qualitative research philosophy and methodology commonly used in social science research. This methodology emphasizes letting data, which in my research were cookbooks, speak for itself. Rather than using checklists or applying previous theories to the cookbooks, I simply examined the texts, searching for categories, concepts, and themes relating to the social construction of nature. After analyzing all the cookbooks, I compared the most prevalent themes in each cookbook and narrowed down my findings to three central themes: dualistic understandings of foods that are natural versus unnatural, and the perceptions that thin bodies, slimming foods and women in the domestic sphere are natural phenomena.

These themes are all contributing to existing harmful social phenomena, such as the distancing of humans from nature, the stigmatization of overweight individuals and the societal expectation that women should provide their families with healthy, delicious and fast home-cooked meals. If these social trends continue, our relationship with food nature will continue to be clouded by unjustifiable social norms, stigmas and expectations that will distract us from creating a mutually beneficial relationship with nature. Taken as a whole, these phenomena portray a human-centric relationship with food nature that is not sustainable in the long term.

**Literature Review**

The social construction of nature is a highly debated concept. This review explores the various meanings of the social construction of nature and the implicit and explicit applications of this concept in food studies. The works of popular food writers such as Wendell Berry and
Michael Pollen are examined alongside the works of scholars such as Leo Marx, Donald Thompson, Anne Portman, and Carolyn Merchant. Recent studies about the social meanings of text and images in cookbooks are also examined, compared to these philosophical works, and used to contextualize the research.

The Social Construction of Nature

The term “social construction” is rooted in the sociological and philosophical concept of symbolic interactionism, with Chicago School sociologists such as George Herbert Mead, Émilie Durkheim, and William Isaac Thomas being among the first to mention the concept in the early 1900s (Mercadal, 2013). As they described it, social construction refers to the cognitive process of building our social world. The term emphasizes that many aspects of reality are not real at all, but rather, are simply created and maintained within the human mind. Since the beginnings of social construction theory, many other scholars have studied the term and applied it to various topics, including nature (Fulk, 1993; Ely, 1995; Foster, 2018; Demeritt, 2001).

Because both “nature” and “social construction” are complex terms that can carry multiple meanings, scholars have debated how the concepts should be used (Hacking, 2003; Cronon, 1995; Demeritt, 2001). Hacking has been particularly critical of the term, arguing that although it can be liberating to know that many aspects of life are simply created in human minds, applying the term too broadly could undermine very real scientific progress or very real human struggles (2003). For example, arguing that humans’ perception of the world is socially constructed, and therefore highly subjective, could lead to the assertion that trying to learn about the world through an objective scientific method is an impossible and pointless endeavor. To
avoid this pitfall, I will use the term “social construction” to refer specifically to human perceptions of and physical manipulations of the natural world.

David Demeritt has also actively discussed the social construction of nature. In his 2001 article *Being Constructive About Nature*, Demeritt provides three definitions of nature: something’s ontological qualities or essence, the forces that control the world, and the external material world. When people discuss the social construction of nature they are most often referring to the last definition of nature, humans’ surrounding material environment. Under this definition, the line between nature and non-nature is blurry. Obviously plants and animals are considered part of nature under this definition, but when considering the things humans make using these plants, or even humans themselves, this definition becomes very unclear. Scholars have yet to agree on the precise boundaries of the term.

Although debating the precise definition of nature is beyond the scope of this project, my research is rooted in the argument that most food eaten by humans is undoubtedly part of nature. Even the strictest definitions of nature include plants and animals, which are the major components of most, if not all, people’s diets. Because of this, food is certainly part of nature and deserves a central position in scholarly work concerning nature.

Demeritt goes on to explain that scholars have created two major definitions of “social construction of nature” (ibid). The first definition refers to humans physically changing the material world. Activities like landscaping, planting gardens or agricultural fields, building homes, and paving paths are all included in this category. By this definition, humans are continuously socially constructing nature to better fit their physical, cultural, and social needs and desires.
The second definition refers to humans imagining nature in certain ways. Examples of this include believing that a strict dichotomy separates humans from nature, believing that unmanaged forests are frightening locations, or believing that natural things are superior to unnatural things. These perceptions may not always be conscious or obvious. Rather, they may simply be created and maintained through societal norms. Thus, social construction of nature can refer to both the process of physically manipulating the material world and the process of thinking about the material world in a certain way.

Cookbooks contribute to social construction of nature under both of these definitions. Pertaining to physically constructing the material world, all cookbooks instruct humans about manipulating and preparing food nature. In this way, all cooking can be interpreted as physical social construction of nature. Cookbooks can also contribute to cognitive social construction of nature because their discussions and portrayals of food in text and images can shape our perceptions of nature. Although I will reference both of these types of social construction, I will focus primarily on the cognitive social construction of nature.

*Nostalgic Perceptions of Human-Food-Nature Relationship*

Leo Marx (1964), Donald Thompson (2010) and Anne Portman (2014) extend humans’ social construction of nature to include humans’ perception of their relationship with food cultivation and consumption. Marx argues that members of the general public tend to perceive their relationship with the agricultural landscape in one of two ways: as a simple pastoral or as a complex pastoral relationship (1964). Notions of a simple pastoral relationship allude to uncomplicated and non-confrontational interactions between humans and the natural world, while ideas of a complex pastoral relationship recognize the tensions and intricacies, such as the
necessity of animal death and land exploitation, in the relationship between humans and nature (ibid).

Thompson asserts that thinking of nature in terms of the complex pastoral can help humans achieve a more balanced relationship with nature, in which humans are not recklessly exploiting nature (2010). Thompson further argues that the food nature with which humans most often interact is more accurately second nature, meaning it is part of the natural world that has been heavily influenced by humans (2010; Cronon, 1992). Because human actions have affected all components of the natural world, Thompson argues that defining nature as the relationship between humans and the material world, rather than as the material world itself, is a more useful definition when considering food nature (2010). To achieve a more balanced relationship with the non-human natural world, humans must continually recall this relationship in terms of the complex pastoral while rejecting the sentimental assumptions of the simple pastoral (ibid). This could most easily be realized through more intimate interactions with and a greater knowledge of food’s agricultural and biological origins (ibid).

Both Thompson and Portman discuss the rhetoric surrounding nature in modern food culture, agreeing that the current uses of “nature” or “natural” depict a simple dichotomy between humans and the non-human world (2010; 2014). Portman emphasizes that this dualism is dangerous because it tends to accompany the dualisms of good versus bad, purity versus impurity, and cleanliness versus dirtiness (2014). In the past, this dualistic vocabulary has been used to justify gross mistreatment of people on grounds of gender, race, sexuality and class, with some ways of life being more “unnatural” and therefore more impure, dirty, and punishable than others (ibid). I expand on this point later in this review.
Other researchers and journalists have more indirectly discussed the social construction of nature by arguing that the general public in Western society is ignorant of food’s relationship with the natural world. Among these are writer and farmer Wendell Berry, journalist Michael Pollan, and food historian Rachel Lauran, who all lament the general public’s lack of knowledge about their foods’ agricultural origins. Berry’s essay *The Pleasure of Eating* describes how the passive and unquestioning attitude of consumers distances them from the natural world (1990). Pollan raises a similar argument in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, which explains in great detail the state of food production in the United States (2006). At the end of the book, he too asserts that having a greater understanding of foods’ origins would allow people to better care for the natural world and themselves (ibid).

One could accuse Berry and Pollan of holding overly nostalgic views of a time when agricultural technologies were less advanced and people were more connected to the natural world. In Rachel Lauran’s 2001 article “A Plea for Culinary Modernism,” she does just that, arguing that current food rhetoric ignores the history of agricultural advancements in the US. Thus, unlike Berry and Pollan, Lauran argues that the public needs to recognize the benefits in addition to the weaknesses of industrial agriculture. Despite this difference in opinion, Berry, Pollan, and Lauran all agree that people’s inaccurate understanding of food production could lead to diminishing respect for and understanding of the natural world (1990; 2006; 2001).

In this way, Lauran, Berry and Pollan construct the natural world as something that is to be both respected and used to our advantage. However, Berry and Pollan perceive nature as something humans should alter only minimally, while looking to the past for guidance. On the
other hand, Lauran perceives nature as something humans should alter to fit their needs, which may change as technologies advance and human societies modernize.

**Race, Class and Gender in Nostalgic Perceptions of Food Nature**

Similar to Lauran’s argument, some writers and researchers accuse food writers of being overly nostalgic toward past relationships with the natural world, to the detriment of marginalized people (Kelting, 2016; Ranta, 2015; Phillipov, 2016). For example, Lily Kelting argues that in cultivating a sense of nostalgia for past food and foodways, many Southern cookbooks ignore the real suffering black people were forced to endure as a result of food production in the Antebellum South and the cultural traumas that linger (2016). Although this tendency to ignore or idealize past relationships with the natural world could be interpreted as optimism for a better future, it could also serve to discourage productive conversations about the racial representations of nature, agriculture and food preparation (ibid).

Similarly, Ronald Ranta explored the ways in which Israeli food harkens to Jewish cultural history in the Middle East while simultaneously ignoring the role of Arab-Palestinian food and food nature in their past and present culinary practices (2015). Both Kelting’s and Ranta’s research demonstrate that the construction of food nature in media represents certain people in certain ways, which has the potential to either empower or further marginalize people based on race and ethnicity.

Michelle Phillipov suggests a similar scenario with respect to class. After examining two television series in which middle-class men leave their city lives behind in favor of agrarian self-sufficiency, Phillipov argues that these shows romanticize old-fashioned agricultural practices by evoking “aestheticized leisure,” meaning they produce imagery of leisurely and idyllic
interactions with nature that do not reflect reality (2016). In reality, these men operate large, synergistic agri-media companies that could not have existed in the past or been created by less upwardly mobile people (ibid). In this way, they portray living off the land as a method of escaping the ills of neoliberal capitalism, despite being highly reliant on this very system and the fundamental oppressions within it (ibid).

Many writers have extended this concept to gender, arguing that appeals to simpler, more traditional or more nostalgic relationships with food can romanticize traditional gender roles surrounding nature and food (Kelting, 2016; Phillipov, 2016; Portman, 2014; Rodney et al, 2017). As Carolyn Merchant points out, demeaning associations between woman and nature have existed for centuries (2003). These associations are especially evident in Western cultures’ Edenic narratives, which depict males using science and technology to tame both nature and females in order to reclaim the Garden of Eden (ibid). Early American settlers used this rhetoric to subdue both women and nature, as evidenced by writings from the early to mid-1800s referring to taking from “nature’s bosom,” planting seeds in lands’ “womb,” or fulfilling soils’ “desire of reproduction” (ibid). In this way, the language surrounding land and nature has historically suggested masculine domination of female-gendered nature, which has encouraged the oppression of women and exploitation of nature (ibid).

Portman shows that this archaic way of thinking has in many ways extended to the present. She explains that “the association between ‘feminine,’ in its various manifestations, and the ‘natural’ are linked due to their shared positions as inferior in the conceptual framework of value dualism” (2014). In other words, patriarchal societies’ dualisms of men/women and culture/nature have contributed to and continue to reinforce the association of women and nature with subordination by men. Historically, this has manifested in women being confined to the
domestic sphere of nature: preparing and serving food (ibid). Therefore, appeals to nostalgic or traditional relationships with nature can encourage very gender-based and confining relationships with the natural world.

Paradoxically, nature has also been associated with superiority through the natural/unnatural dualism (ibid). This is evidenced by the general public’s assumption that “natural” products are healthier, more pure, or otherwise superior, and “unnatural” products are less healthy, more dangerous, or otherwise inferior. This assumption has manifested in a plethora of packaged foods toting the “natural” label. In this way, nature has been both oppressed through the culture/nature dualism and lauded through the natural/unnatural dualism.

The link between the natural and the superior in the natural/unnatural dualism has contributed to the oppression of certain people, most notably sexual and gender minorities (ibid). For example, early colonial Americans deemed gay and lesbian relationships “unnatural acts,” or acts “against nature” to justify the social exclusion and punishment of these groups (Gaard, 1997). This association is still very present in some social circles, as demonstrated by an English councilor recently describing homosexuality as “unnatural, perverted, immoral and wrong” (BBC, 2018). Although the councilor’s suspension following this comment shows that this way of thinking is not widely accepted, his statement proves that the association of LGBTQIA+ people with the “unnatural” is still present in Western culture.

The natural/unnatural value dualism is also tightly linked to the pure/impure value dualism because nature has often been defined as that which is untouched by humans, or “pure” (ibid). Like nature, purity has come to be associated with superiority. Historically, these connections have been used to justify gross mistreatments of people on the basis of race (ibid). In particular, the pure/impure value dualism has contributed to the oppression of black people on
the grounds that they could destroy the natural “purity” of the white race (Zimring, 2015).

Lawmakers in the mid-1800s often used this logic to argue for laws against interracial sex and marriage, known as miscegenation laws (ibid). These anxieties surrounding “racial pollution” and purity were also central to the Ku Klux Klan’s arguments for black oppression during the Civil War era and beyond (ibid). Thus, there is undeniable evidence demonstrating the dangers of value dualisms surrounding nature.

Through these mechanisms, nostalgic depictions of nature in food media can reinforce marginalization of groups based on race, class and gender. This suggests not only the power of cookbooks to promote and encourage negative social stereotyping, but also to promote positive social change. Relating to Demeritt’s concept of social construction of nature and more specifically to Marx’s argument of the sentimental pastoral, this research indicates that humans’ nostalgic appeals to a harmonious, unproblematic and gendered nature obscure real societal problems. Therefore, food media in general and cookbooks in particular are very deserving of scholarship.

**The Impact of Food Imagery**

Concepts in cookbooks are often communicated through images, which can also be powerful means of social construction. Numerous scholars have studied the ability of food images to reflect aspects of society, conjure feelings, and mold perceptions (Matalon-Dengi, 2010; Cloake, 2011; Fisher et al, 2012). Francine Matalon-Dengi demonstrates how food photography trends have mirrored political climates in the U.S. (2010). She found that during the conservative and prosperous years of the Reagan administration, food magazines were filled with ornate and tidy food images (ibid). On the other hand, the liberal cultural shift of the Obama
administration resulted in more “real” and “chaotic” food images (ibid). This analysis revealed the powerful ability of food photography to reflect societal norms and attitudes.

In addition to reflecting society, food images can communicate feelings and messages to the viewer, which could contribute to societal change. Researcher Hennie Fisher and his colleagues found that lab participants tend to associate certain food images with certain descriptors (2012). For example, Fisher found that participants most often associated a photograph of a dish styled with a myriad of deep red and bright pink garnishes with pleasure, arousal, and entertainment as opposed to other emotional descriptors (ibid). Although these connections between feelings and food images do not directly suggest that these images can influence behavior or intent, the researchers argue these associations could lead to attitude change and possibly behavior change in some circumstances (ibid). Thus, the feelings communicated through cookbook images could potentially have a powerful effect on viewers.

Lily Kelting (2016) and Michelle Philipov (2010) also touch on this, arguing that faded photography and romantic video footage of humans in nature can construct our relationship with nature as romantic and sentimental. These findings are especially important when considering commentary by Felicity Cloake, Kris Wilton, and Rebecca Roberton, who argue that cookbooks are becoming more and more ingrained in life in the US (2011; 2012; 2017). If people regularly see certain types of food images, these images could potentially influence their perceptions of human relationships with food and nature.

**Cookbooks, Nature, and Culture**

Because cookbooks are so deeply rooted in culture, a powerful reciprocal relationship exists between cookbooks and culture. Despite the abundance of literature on cookbooks and
culture, I have been unable to find scholarship directly connecting cookbooks, culture, and nature. In my research, I will fill this gap by exploring how cookbooks’ treatment of nature through food reveals and shapes our culture’s perception of nature. I will ask the question: how do *The New York Times* bestselling cookbooks characterize the relationship between food, humans, and the natural world?

This is an important question because cookbooks are a popular medium through which people encounter the relationship between food and the natural world. People’s perception of nature, as influenced by the representations of food and humans in cookbooks, could alter how people approach the world. If cookbooks continually represent food and food nature in certain ways, this could influence people’s treatment of food, nature, and other humans. Because cookbooks also reflect society’s perceptions of the relationship between food, humans, and the natural world, investigating these perceptions could help scholars better understand and possibly alter the nature of these relationships.

**Methodology**

I used grounded theory methodology (GTM) to analyze 20 *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks. From September 2013 to January 2017, *The New York Times (NYT)* published monthly lists of bestselling cookbooks. After January 2017, *NYT* reincorporated cookbooks into its larger category of nonfiction bestsellers. In deciding which books to include on its bestsellers list, *NYT* references unit sales submitted by vendors across the U.S. These lists are fitting for my research question because they represent cookbooks that are popularly purchased and read. When compared with less popular books, cookbooks from the *NYT* lists likely have more influence over and are more reflective of public perception of the relationship between humans,
food, and nature. Thus, the books on the NYT bestsellers lists provide the most informative means of studying this topic.

My sample includes the top 3 books from each month during the time period of September 2013 to January 2017. From this list, I eliminated diet books and self-help nutritional and fitness books because they differ in format and content from traditional cookbooks, making them harder to comparatively analyze. Additionally, I argue that these self-help books are not used as continual references to the same extent as cookbooks, and therefore occupy a different place in people’s lives and minds. As a result, my sample consisted of 20 cookbooks, ranging greatly in length, subject, and tone.

To determine how these cookbooks characterize the relationship between food, humans, and the natural world, I used grounded theory method (GTM), an inductive qualitative research philosophy and methodology rooted in the social sciences. As a philosophy, GTM emphasizes the importance of working up from data without relying heavily on previous literature (Richards, 2009). In working up from the data, the goal of GTM is to form new theory (ibid). Through this process, researchers should not try to force existing theories onto the data. Rather, the researcher must be open to learning from the data, and possibly changing research emphasis in order to best represent the data. In this way, the philosophy of GTM encourages an inductive and flexible mindset when approaching data.

As a set of methods, GTM involves examining data closely and writing memos about the relevant characteristics of that data (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Simultaneously, the researcher tries to uncover and record broad categories, concepts, and themes that span those memos (ibid). This method was appropriate for my research because it enabled me to scrutinize the cookbooks’ contents while continually thinking of larger themes. This method’s flexibility also allowed me
to re-analyze portions of the cookbooks as necessary, while keeping in mind both specific instances and broad themes of social construction of nature.

Applying these concepts and methods to my research question, I read each cookbook with only preliminary research into cookbooks and their relationship with the natural world. I did not use a predetermined criterion or checklist when analyzing. Rather, I simply noted how specific text and images convey the relationship between humans, food and the natural world. After I finished analyzing a book, I wrote more extensive memos about the major themes and portrayals in that book, referring back to the book as necessary to clarify and provide examples in my memos. I continually examined how the themes in each cookbook could inform or relate to those in the other cookbooks, rereading the cookbooks and amending memos as necessary.

After I read all the books, I drafted several informal concept maps to find the similarities and distinctions between the cookbooks. After combining several themes into broader categories, I created a list of the most prevalent themes throughout all the books. To focus the scope of my research, I determined which themes were present in the greatest number of cookbooks. I discuss those themes in detail below, relating them to existing literature on the topic and reflecting on their cultural and sociological significance.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that cookbooks communicate a plethora of themes related to the natural world. Among these themes are the importance of place, the role of sustainability in food procurement and processing, romantic interpretations of nature, the need for perfection in cooking and nature, the role of race in cooking, and the importance of tradition in human relationships with nature. However, three themes stand out as the most obviously and widely
present in the sample: the dualistic characterization of natural foods as superior to unnatural foods, the representation of thin bodies and slimming foods as natural, and the characterization of women as the natural providers of food. The extent to which each cookbook demonstrates these themes is represented in Table 1. Cookbooks were scored on a scale of 0-3, with higher scores representing greater presence of the theme and lower scores representing lesser presence of the theme. The cookbooks are organized from those that represent the themes most strongly at the top of the table to those that represent the themes least strongly at the bottom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Nature and the Natural</th>
<th>Thinness as Natural</th>
<th>Women Cooking as Natural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Skinnytaste Cookbook (Homolka, 2013)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skinnytaste Fast and Slow (Homolka, 2016)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Days of Real Food (Leake, 2014)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's All Easy (Paltrow &amp; Isager, 2013)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh She Glows Every Day (Liddon, 2016)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Whole30 (Hartwig &amp; Hartwig, 2015)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cravings (Teighan, 2016)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat to Live Cookbook (Fuhrman, 2013)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking for Jeffrey (Garten, 2016)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime (Drummond, 2015)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Kay's Duck Commander Kitchen (Howard, 2014)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pioneer Woman Cooks: A Year of Holidays (Drummond, 2013)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chew -- What's for Dinner? (Hall et al, 2013)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thug Kitchen (The Thug Kitchen, 2014)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everydaycook (Brown, 2016)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerdy Nummies Cookbook (Pansino, 2015)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made it Ahead! (Garten, 2014)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Can't Cook Book (Steinfeld, 2013)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem (Ottolenghi &amp; Tamimi, 2013)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appetites (Bourdain, 2016)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0 = theme not present  1 = theme present  2 = theme very present  3 = theme exemplified

Concepts in the Literature Review inform each of these themes. As discussed in the Literature Review, dualisms separate the world into simply dichotomies, such as natural versus
unnatural, nature versus culture and masculine versus feminine. These dualisms do not accurately reflect the grey areas of reality. For example, the perception that natural foods are less environmentally harmful than unnatural foods is highly inaccurate. This is because foods that are natural are not distinctly different than foods that are unnatural and because foods commonly considered “natural,” like fruits and vegetables, might be produced using environmentally harmful farming practices. This point, along with the social problems associated with the masculine versus feminine, slim bodies versus non-slim bodies, and slimming foods versus tasty foods dualisms will be expanded later in the analysis.

Thompson’s interpretation of simple pastoral and complex pastoral landscapes is also present throughout each of the themes (2010). As Thompson argued, people in modern society tend to think of agricultural landscapes in terms of the simple pastoral rather than the complex pastoral, meaning that they only perceive the uncomplicated and non-confrontational interactions between humans and the natural world, while ignoring the inherent species alteration, land exploitation, animal death, and other tensions that accompany extracting food from nature.

The theme of relegating women to the domestic sphere of nature can also be interpreted using Carolyn Merchant’s Edenic narrative. As the narrative goes, after God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, man was destined to use science and technology to tame women and the earth in order to cultivate a new Garden of Eden on Earth (Merchant, 2003). In this way, women have been associated with nature for centuries and both have shared a place of inferiority in their respective dualisms (culture/nature and masculinity/femininity).

Comparing the cookbooks to these works, it is clear that the sample of The New York Times best selling cookbooks reflects and contributes to the persistence of value dualisms with respect to nature and the natural, traditional Western notions of the naturalness of thin bodies and
slimming foods, and the relegation of women to the domestic sphere of nature. As a consequence, modern cookbooks are distancing humans from the natural world where much food originates, encouraging unhealthy mindsets with respect to food and weight loss, and pressuring and constraining women to feel comfortable handling food, which are products of nature, in the domestic sphere.

**Reinforcing Dualistic Interpretations of Nature and the Natural**

The cookbooks in this sample create a value dualism between “natural” and “processed” foods in which “natural” foods that are supposedly the result of an unproblematic relationship between humans and the natural world are superior to unnatural, or “processed,” foods that are supposedly the result of a problematic human-nature relationship. Through this dualistic characterization of natural and processed foods, the cookbook authors suggest that consumers should only buy and eat natural foods. However, food that fulfills the cookbook authors’ idyllic definition of “natural” can never truly be obtained because the tension of exploitation will always exist between humans and the natural world. This unrealistic dualism is also advanced through pictorial references to nature and the use of terms like “real” or “whole” as substitutes for the term “natural.” The advancement of this natural/processed value dualism through both direct and indirect praise of natural foods is socially detrimental because it separates humans from the natural world and reinforces associated dualisms, such as slimming foods versus tasty foods and masculine tasks versus feminine tasks, which are contributing to unhealthy relationships with food and the perpetuation of gender norms.

Many authors directly advance the natural/processed value dualism by using the term “natural” to positively describe foods that conjure romantic images of an untouched natural
world. Angela Liddon of *Oh She Glows Everyday* (2016), Gina Homolka of *The Skinnytaste Cookbook* (2015) and *Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow* (2016), Joel Fuhrman of *Eat to Live Cookbook* (2013) and Daphne Oz and Clinton Kelly of *The Chew: What’s for Dinner?* (Hall et al., 2013) all use the term “natural” as a positive attribute of foods. Some of these authors leave the term largely undefined, while others suggest that natural foods are closer to nature, healthier, more pure or derived through more benevolent means than unnatural, or “processed” foods.

Liddon uses the term “natural” numerous times, such as when she instructs her readers to use “all-natural” nut butter in her recipes, explaining that when buying almond butter “you only want to see almonds on the label” (p. 199; p. 213; p. 231). In this case, the most “natural” almond butter is that which contains the fewest ingredients. The sparseness of ingredients that Liddon associates with naturalness is mirrored in Homolka’s use of “natural” in the introduction to her Heavenly Banana-Nut Oat Muffins recipe, where she states that bananas “add a natural sweetness, allowing you to use less sugar” (2015, p. 45). In other words, using ingredients that have “natural” properties allows the reader to use fewer ingredients overall. Through both Liddon’s direct appeal to minimal ingredients and Homolka’s implication that using more “natural” foods enables using fewer ingredients, naturalness is associated with the concepts of pureness and minimally altered food.

The association between pureness and naturalness is also evident in the suggestion that natural foods are those that humans have not altered through processing. Homolka raises this definition of the term in saying “I love food in its natural state, rather than things that are packaged and processed” (2016, p. 9). In this case, Homolka sets up a clear dichotomy between “natural” foods and “packaged and processed” foods. The dualism between processed foods and natural foods is also evident in *The Chew: What’s for Dinner?* (2013) when Clinton Kelly says,
“Sure you could order in a pizza or open up a can of soup and throw it over a chicken breast, but it is so much more fulfilling and healthful to cook a meal with the best-tasting natural ingredients” (p. 3). Similar to Homolka, “natural ingredients” are contrasted with delivery pizza and canned soup, both of which have been heavily processed through gathering ingredients, chopping, cooking and packaging before reaching the consumer. Thus, Kelly also establishes “natural” foods as opposite from and superior to processed foods, which continues the association between naturalness and untouched, pure, or minimalistic foods.

Similarly, in the introduction to Joel Fuhrman’s *Eat to Live Cookbook* he claims, “Eating healthfully also allows us to derive the maximum pleasure and enjoyment out of life. When we eat right, over time, our tastes are modified and we truly enjoy and prefer natural foods” (2013, p. i). Later on, Fuhrman includes a list of foods the reader should embrace and a list of foods the reader should avoid in order to attain this lifestyle. The list of suggested foods includes “nutrient-dense, natural plant foods,” while the list of foods to avoid includes “foods that are completely empty of nutrients or toxic to the body, such as sugar, sweeteners, white flour, processed foods, and fast foods” (p. 4). Similar to Kelly and Homolka, Fuhrman creates a distinct separation between natural foods and processed foods in which more natural foods will help people be healthier and feel more fulfilled. In telling his readers to avoid processed foods and consume natural foods, Fuhrman contributes to the idea that natural foods are superior to processed foods because they are closer to nature and less altered by humans.

Although these authors’ distinctions between natural or processed might seem clear at first, they become muddier when considering foods’ origins and preparation. Much of the food we eat today looked very different when humans first adopted agricultural lifestyles. Humans have selective bred food plants to have larger fruit, have higher yields or become better adapted
to certain environments. This means that humans have heavily altered most plant foods before they have even left the ground. Additionally, most foods that we eat can be considered “processed,” or changed from their original states, because there are many different ways food can be processed. Food and food products can undergo simple processes like being chopped or boiled, or foods can undergo more intricate processes like having vitamins, minerals, dies or preservatives added. Some of these alterations are useful because they can help us chew or digest foods more easily or help us get the essential nutrients we need. For example, baking a potato is a form of processing that enables us to eat the vegetable more easily, while adding iron to breakfast cereals can help consumers avoid iron deficiency.

Clearly, the authors are not suggesting that we stop cooking food. But are they suggesting that humans should stop refining flour? Or stop adding nutrients to breakfast cereals? Or stop pasteurizing milk? The answers to these questions would likely differ for each of these authors. Thus, in deeming “natural” foods as better than “processed” foods, these cookbooks authors are not conjuring concrete definitions. Rather, they are conjuring vague ideas that will differ from author to author and reader to reader. This means that instead of offering their readers clear suggestions about which foods to eat and which foods to avoid, these authors are simply reinforcing the readers’ existing ideals about what is and is not natural.

For people who are not educated about their foods’ origins, appeals to nature likely conjure images of idyllic landscapes and harmonious relationships with the natural world. This simple pastoral interpretation of the natural is harmful because it enables people to be ignorant about their foods’ origins. If cookbook authors suggest that people should buy natural foods, and someone considers cows’ milk with an image of a peaceful ranch on its label to be “natural,” they will likely purchase that milk with a clean conscience. However, in simply following their
personal definition of “natural,” this person may have unknowingly purchased milk that has an overabundance of added sugar or that was produced in a confined animal feeding operation (CAFO) associated with pollution and unethical treatment of animals. Clearly, this person’s definition of “natural” would not be consistent with eating healthfully, ethically or sustainably.

Many recipes or ingredients that are labeled as “natural” could involve very unharmonious relationships with nature. For example, a hazelnut butter that is made using only hazelnuts and a pinch of salt would likely be labeled “all natural.” However, this hazelnut butter might have been made with hazelnuts that were grown using forced child labor in Turkey, as many hazelnuts are (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2017). Although this nut butter uses “natural” ingredients, it is not a good food product because it is associated with massive human rights violations. Child labor is likely not what consumers will picture when they buy hazelnut butter labeled as “natural,” as Angela Liddon recommended they do.

In these ways, the authors’ use of “natural” alludes to images of the simple pastoral natural world, as described by Thompson, and fails to recognize the complex pastoral processes that necessarily accompany many “natural” foods. As Thompson states,

The pre-industrial pastoral ideal calls to mind an idyllic country scene, depicting a shepherd and his domesticated animals. Although such a scene represents an ideal, it need not be a simple one. Despite the apparently sanguine relationship of the man to the animals, the scene foreshadows the future use of the animals by man, including their ultimate slaughter and physical consumption. Thus a complex and morally troubling subtext exists for the idyllic pastoral scene. (p. 176)
In other words, the term “natural” and its associated terms portray an uncomplicated and peaceful relationship with the natural world even though the tensions of death, extraction and exploitation inherently accompany acquiring food from the natural world.

Ignoring these complex pastoral processes makes it easy to ignore the real progress humans have made, and the problems humans have created, in transitioning to agricultural lifestyles. Agriculture has allowed humans to create sedentary settlements, with increasingly developed technologies and sciences with respect to food. Many of these developments, like information about proper nutrition and medicines, have enabled humans to live longer and with increased quality of life. However, this sedentary lifestyle has also brought along a host of ill effects, such as topsoil loss, monoculture agriculture, pesticide contamination, and slave labor on farms. As described above, perceiving all agricultural landscapes as natural, as one could easily do based on the cookbook authors’ simple juxtaposition of natural and processed, could be harmful for our health and our planet.

The authors’ appeals to nature are also problematic because they suggest that humans and nature are opposites of one another. In the natural/processed dualism, less human intervention is equated with more naturalness in food. Thus, a second dualism between nature and human culture manifests from the natural/processed dualism. This nature/culture dualism is harmful because it ignores that humans are very much part of and dependent upon the natural world. Perceiving humans as separate from nature can justify the destruction that accompanies agriculture by suggesting that these adverse outcomes will not affect us, and will only affect nature. In reality, any damage done to nature is also damage done to human kind. In other words, the dualism between human culture and nature suggests a distance between humans and nature, which erases the necessary aspect of partnership between nature and humans.
Many cookbooks advance the natural/processed and nature/culture dualisms through veiled references to the natural, in both texts and images. This theme is most evident in Lisa Leake’s *100 Days of Real Food* (2014), Melissa and Dallas Hartwig’s *The Whole30* (2015), Gina Homolka’s *Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow* (2016) and The Thug Kitchen’s *Thug Kitchen* (2014). Lisa Leake references the natural/processed dualism when she creates a hierarchy of bad foods and good foods, which she deems “real food” (2014). Her book begins by calling on readers to eat real food in order to live healthier and happier lives. She goes on to list the characteristics of real food, saying real food is: “whole food” with only one ingredient, packaged foods with fewer than 5 ingredients, dairy products, foods that are 100% whole grain, wild-caught seafood, “locally and humanely raised pastured meat products,” dried fruits, nuts and seeds, “naturally made sweeteners,” and foods that are “more a product of nature than a product of industry” (p. 10). Leake’s list of acceptable foods directly appeals to nature twice, similar to what Liddon, Homolka, Kelly and Fuhrman do. However, Leake also alludes to idyllic nature numerous times using other terms, like “pastured,” “wild-caught” and “humanely raised.”

Like the word “natural,” these terms bring to mind images of peaceful landscapes with minimal and unproblematic human intervention. As described above, this ideal construction of humans’ relationship with the natural world is contributing to the distance between humans and the natural world by reinforcing romantic constructions of humans’ relationship with nature and the dualisms that accompany those constructions. Although “wild-caught” and “pastured” are legitimate labels used on seafood and meat, these terms do not always indicate more benevolent relationships with the natural world. For example, fish that are wild-caught are often caught using unsustainable methods, such as bottom trawlers, and “pastured” animals only need to be pastured for a small portion of their lives in order to carry that label. Additionally, the term
“humanely raised” lacks any clear definition by the USDA. Rather than corresponding to legitimate farming methods or certifications, these terms are simply used to conjure images of idyllic agricultural landscapes. Leake places these terms under the umbrella term “real,” which establishes “real” as a synonym of “natural” in the context of Leake’s writings.

Spouses Melissa and Dallas Hartwig also allude to “real food” in their set of rules for the Whole30 diet. The Whole30 diet is based on a synthesis of nutritional science conducted by the couple and described in depth in their first book *It Starts with Food* (2015, p. viii). According to the Hartwigs, under the Whole30 diet, readers can “eat meat, seafood, eggs, vegetables, fruits and natural fats” (p. 13). Although this list is does not contain any veiled references to nature, the foods that the Hartwigs deem acceptable to consume during these 30 days are referred to as “real” and “whole” many times. For example, the Hartwigs explain later on, “We want you to spend a month learning to appreciate real food” (p. 72). They also answer a question about vitamin supplements starting, “We know, you’re eating real, whole, natural foods. And yes, all of this good food is loaded with vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients…” (p. 74). Thus, the words “real,” “whole” and “natural” are all used seemingly interchangeably to describe the Whole30 diet.

In contrast, the Whole30 diet instructs, “Do not consume sugar, alcohol, grains, legume or dairy. Do not consume baked goods or “treats”” (p. 13). Although this list includes sugar, alcohol, grains, legumes and dairy alongside foods that are more easily recognized as “processed,” the Hartwigs disparage processed foods and refer to their list of off limits foods as simply “junk foods” numerous times. For example, the Hartwigs explain that their diet is “the exact opposite of the cycle you’ve been stuck in—feel bad, eat junk food, feel even worse, eat even more junk food” (p. viii). In this case, their diet, which is characterized as “natural,” is
declared the opposite of a diet consisting of “junk” food. Later on they claim “our plan focuses on changing your tastes and breaking cravings, so by the time the Whole30 is over, the junk foods you used to love are suddenly far less appealing” (p. 98). Again, the Hartwigs categorize the food that their readers have been eating as “junk” when compared to their “natural” diet. Although The Whole30 uses different language to do so, it establishes the same juxtaposition between natural and processed foods that is apparent in the other texts.

These veiled references to the natural are mirrored in Gina Homolka’s Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow (2016) and in The Thug Kitchen’s Thug Kitchen (2014). For example, The Thug Kitchen says, “We don’t understand why eating real, healthy food has to be such a BIG FUCKING DEAL” (p. xi). Later, they use the term “real” again, saying, “Forget the five-dollar fake out. Eat a real fucking sandwich” (p. 52). Like the other authors, The Thug Kitchen seems to contrast “real” food with pre-made or pre-processed food, like fast food sub sandwiches. In this way, real is positioned as the opposite of processed, making it a synonym of “natural” as the authors have used it.

Veiled references to nature may be even more harmful than those that directly refer to food as natural. This is because terms like “real” and “whole” do not even acknowledge that nature is part of the equation. By using these terms, the authors are catering to the apparent desire of their readers to be closer to their foods’ origins without actually informing their readers about where food originates or the inherent conflicts that accompany obtaining food from nature. Simply buying wild-caught fish, eating more produce, or removing added sweeteners from our food would not remove the tensions and complexities that exist between humans and nature during food production. Solely individual changes would not eliminate the killing of animals, reliance on industrial processes, or conventional farming methods. To create a more mutually
beneficial relationship with the natural world, we need to alter our entire food system to recognize and tend to the needs of both humans and our natural environment.

Additionally, many of the tensions that exist between humans and nature in the realm of food can never be resolved because we have irreversibly changed the earth in the name of food. The cattle and sheep that we have engineered through selective breeding could not survive on their own and exist solely for human exploitation. These domesticated animals can never become un-domesticated. Even if humans could reverse domestication, we will always need to extract from the earth in order to survive, which inevitably requires altering and killing natural life. Yet, the cookbook authors do not recognize these deeply rooted problems. They simply suggest quick fixes to our food purchasing habits as the solution to the supposed lack of naturalness or realness in our diets. This perpetuates the concept of the simple pastoral landscape, which distances humans from real agriculture and food production.

Gwyneth Paltrow of It's All Easy (2016), Ree Drummond of A Pioneer Woman Cooks: A Year of Holidays (2013) and A Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime (2015), Ina Garten of Make it Ahead (2014) and The Thug Kitchen of Thug Kitchen (2014) all communicate the superiority of the natural and advance concepts of simple pastoral landscapes through photography and images that either directly or indirectly represents the natural world. Gwyneth Paltrow does so through continually including images of herself or her children in manicured natural landscapes. This theme begins as early as the front cover of the book, which features Paltrow wearing earth tones and holding a box filled with freshly cut herbs and vegetables. The calm look on Paltrow’s face, the slight messiness of her hair and the green and brown tones she is wearing all portray Paltrow as being close to, or almost at one with, the natural world. Paltrow’s natural aesthetic continues in the book’s introduction, where Paltrow is pictured leaning against a wall with a floral
decoration, and in her “On the Go” section where a bag is pictured sitting among a plethora of greenery and she and her children are pictured climbing a tree and standing by a lake surrounded by greenery (p. iix; p. 18; p. 22; p. 23; p. 36). Similar images of peaceful or idyllic nature are continually evoked throughout the book.

Each of these images nods to simple pastoral landscapes, in which Paltrow and her children have calm and benevolent interactions with the natural world. However, these images are never linked explicitly to food through images of gardens or farms. Rather, they most often feature environments with non-edible plants. Additionally, Paltrow and her children seem to be experiencing a very tamed version of the natural world, with manmade paths that allow for fashionable rain boots and cable knit sweaters rather than hiking shoes or farming boots. Thus, Paltrow communicates the superiority of naturalness through pictures portraying nature as the ideal space to be. However, the nature that Paltrow alludes to is very different from the nature where our food originates. Similar to the terms “natural,” “real,” and “whole,” these images do not inform the reader about their food’s origins. Rather, they conjure notions of stylish, benevolent and aesthetically pleasing experiences with the natural world.

(Paltrow, 2016, p. 22, 23, 36)
Aesthetics of benevolent nature are also present in both of Ree Drummond’s bestselling cookbooks (2013; 2015). Drummond’s family owns a cattle ranch, so Drummond frequently includes photos of cattle, horses and other ranch animals in her book. Along with these photos, she includes cutesy captions, like “Why did the cattle cross the road?” accompanying a picture of cattle crossing the road, “Our version of a family gathering” accompanying a picture of a herd of cattle, or “Say ‘cheese’! I mean ‘moo.’” accompanying a picture of Drummond photographing the cattle (p. 165; p. 175; p. 221). Although Drummond’s photographs of her family ranch capture part of the food production cycle, her commentary about these pictures portrays a much simpler and more benevolent relationship with the natural world. Drummond never mentions that the cattle are destined for death or that they could be contributing to depleted soils in the American west. In addition to these allusions to the simple pastoral, Drummond includes graphics of butterflies, flowers and greenery throughout her cookbook. These aesthetically pleasing images of the natural world contribute to the sentimental notions of nature already depicted in Drummond’s photography. Although Paltrow’s images portray a much more stylized version of the natural world, Drummond’s captions portray a version of nature that is not substantially different than that of Paltrow.

*Thug Kitchen* (2014) also contributes to simple pastoral interpretations of food nature. The cookbook continually uses scenes of beaches, trees, or greenery as the backdrop for their food photography. For example, the interior cover of the book features an illustration of a garden, while the pages for their quinoa oatmeal and tofu scrambled tacos recipes both feature images of palm trees and a setting sun, and their strawberry shortcake is photographed outside (p. 2; p. 9; p.190). In *Ina Garten’s Make it Ahead* (2014), she features pictures of beautifully manicured gardens and floral arrangements (p. 44, 200, 221; p. 40, 116). Like Paltrow and The
Thug Kitchen, Garten’s images are not of food nature, but rather of landscapes that humans have significantly altered and manicured.

The inclusion of photographs and representations of manicured simple pastoral landscapes contributes to the distancing of humans from our food sources. Like the words “natural,” “real” and “whole” allude to ideals of nature without acknowledging the complexities of our relationship with the natural world, these photographs portray exactly what those ideals are. While the direct and indirect textual references to nature distance readers from the natural world by enabling them to define of these terms based on their personal idyllic images of the natural world, photographs distance readers from nature by encouraging those personal definitions to reflect the simple pastoral landscapes represented in those photographs. In other words, photographs portraying highly manicured natural landscapes are even more socially damaging than unspecific texts about the natural world because they directly feed the reader inaccurate portrayals of the nature where food originates. This inaccurate portrayal is fueling
idyllic interpretations of terms like “natural,” “real,” and “whole,” and thus contributing to the distance between humans and our food sources.

Among the plethora of simple pastoral portrayals of the natural world, Anthony Bourdain’s *Appetites* portrays the natural world in a much darker way. Rather than including stylish, manicured, or cutesy photographs of the natural world in his cookbook, Bourdain includes much more gruesome photographs of the food we eat. Among these are a photograph of a dead fish with all flesh removed except its head and tail, the feet of a dead chicken sticking out of a red plastic bag, the guts, head and feet of a dead chicken placed on a cutting stone, a close-up of the severed head and feet of a pheasant, a piece of meat cooking on a blood red background, and an array of raw bird heads and feet, with a fake human thumb thrown in for good measure (p. 152, 154, 156, 179, 222, 258). These photos all portray the necessarily unpleasant death that is involved in much of human cooking. Bourdain’s photos suggest omnivorous humans should not turn a blind eye to the death and destruction of nature that they cause. Instead, humans should celebrate this death.

The portrayal of natural foods as superior to unnatural foods through both language that praises natural foods and images that portray the natural world as aesthetically pleasing contribute to dualistic interpretations of the world. In addition to perpetuating harmful constructions of the natural world, the tendency to assign value dualisms to the natural is a

(Bourdain, 2016, p. 258)
slippery slope that could lead to applying these dualisms to every other aspect of life as well. The prevalence of value dualisms can serve to make complicated issues seem simpler. This idea of simplicity is appealing, but it does not accurately reflect reality. This harkens back to Thompson’s evaluation of the simple versus the complex pastoral views of food production (2010). Although the simplified and unproblematic perspective of humans’ relationship with food is appealing, the complex pastoral perspective, which accounts for grey areas and complex tensions, can lead to a more balanced and mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world.

In addition to promoting an unrealistic view of the world, value dualisms can also be dangerous to certain groups of people. Throughout history, value dualisms have been applied to justify cruel treatment of people based on their race, class, gender or sexual orientation, as discussed in the Literature Review. This phenomenon becomes even more obvious when examining the use of dualisms to portray slim bodies as more natural than non-slim bodies and to portray women as naturally belonging in the domestic sphere of food procurement and preparation.

Creating Thin Bodies and Slimming Foods through Nutritional Science

The sample of cookbooks suggests that readers should consume primarily “natural” foods in order to lose weight. In deeming natural foods as more slimming and better for human health than processed foods, slim bodies are portrayed as more natural than non-slim bodies. This association between naturalness and slimness contributes to the cultural stigma against weight gain and people who are overweight. However, some cookbook authors reject this notion of natural bodies by suggesting that humans should eat non-slimming processed foods to satisfy their natural desire for tasty foods. This creates a paradox because although the books suggest
that it is more natural for humans to be thin, they simultaneously imply that humans should follow their natural desire to eat things that taste good, which are characterized as non-slimming. In effect, foods that taste good become both an ally that will bring people pleasure and a villain that needs to be held back by modern nutritional science. This leaves cookbooks readers with mixed messages about health and wellness, which could lead to unhealthy relationships with food and encourage unattainable health and weight goals.

As shown in Table 1, the connection between “natural” foods and skinniness is very present or exemplified in Joel Furhman’s Eat to Live Cookbook (2013), Angela Liddon’s Oh She Glows Everyday (2016), Gina Homolka’s SkinnyTaste: Fast and Slow (2016), The Chew cast’s The Chew: What’s for Dinner? (Hall et al, 2013), and Gwenyth Paltrow’s It’s All Easy (2016). In each of these books, the authors suggest that their readers should eat natural foods to achieve weight loss. Because the authors suggest that skinniness is the result of eating a natural diet, skinniness is characterized as a more natural way of being. When coupled with the natural/processed dualism, or more broadly, the natural/unnatural dualism, this leaves overweight bodies to be associated with unnaturalness, the inferior element of the natural/unnatural dualism. This stigmatizes weight gain and being overweight as inferior ways of being, thus contributing to our cultural aversion to overweight bodies. Consequentially, people who are overweight are forced to carry the burden of social judgment, which could have negative mental and physical health effects.

This theme is very present in Joel Fuhrman’s Eat to Live Cookbook (2013), which continually argues in favor of “natural” diets as a means to lose weight. He claims that there are numerous benefits of his nutritarian lifestyle, which he characterizes as more natural than other diets, as discussed earlier. He explains a few reasons why one would want to follow his diet,
saying, “You may want to address a current medical concern. You may want to reach and maintain your ideal body weight. You may just want to naturally optimize your health and longevity” (p. 4). In this context, Fuhrman suggests that this natural diet is designed to address numerous aspects of health, including but not limited to weight. However, throughout his book he continually focuses on the weight loss effects of his diet above the other elements of health that he originally mentions. For example, the first line in the book’s inner front cover asks the reader is “do you want to lose weight and keep it off permanently without hunger or deprivation?” (cover). Being the first line that readers encounter in this book, Fuhrman sets up weight loss as a, if not the, primary goal of his suggested nutritarian lifestyle.

Additionally, the case studies that Fuhrman includes continually mention weight loss as a positive result of Fuhrman’s diet. One person who has their success story featured, Robert, claims, “I was over 400 pounds. I had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, chronic allergies, osteoarthritis, and rheumatoid arthritis…So far I have lost 200 pounds and counting” (p. 4). In this case, weight loss is presented as the primary means to health. Although weight loss may have been necessary to solve Robert’s other health ailments, other cases fail to prove a connection between weight loss and health. For example, another person who has their success story told, Lacey, describes, “I dealt with debilitating migraines for more than 13 years, getting about 3 to 4 per week…Since the day I started [Fuhrman’s nutritarian lifestyle] – February 1, 2011 – I have been 100 percent migraine free and have lost 40 pounds” (p. 21). In this case, weight loss is not described as a means to better health. Rather, weight loss is mentioned in the last sentence of Lacey’s success story as if losing 40 pounds is an unequivocally beneficial result accompanying Lacey’s other health improvements. In all these instances, Fuhrman portrays weight loss as the positive result of eating a more natural diet. Because weight loss is associated
with eating more natural foods, he contributes to the characterization of slimness as a more natural way of being.

Like Fuhrman, Angela Liddon uses the word “natural” to describe her ingredients and recipes, as demonstrated previously, and also emphasizes the potential for her recipes to lead to weight loss. In her introduction, Liddon explains “I do realize that many of you appreciate nutritional information, whether it is for a health condition, a weight loss or weight gain goal or simply because it helps you enjoy a plant based diet” (p. xiii). In this case, Liddon mentions both weight loss and weight gain as potential goals of eating a more natural diet. However, at other points in her book Liddon only mentions weight loss as a benefit of her ingredients. For example, in her discussion of chocolate as an ingredient, Liddon states, “as an added benefit, dark chocolate may help control cortisol, a stress hormone associated with weight gain and inflammation” (p. 311). In this case, weight gain is characterized as a solely negative consequence of cortisol. This association between weight gain and poor dietary choices lessens the significance of Liddon’s earlier normalization of weight gain goals. In promoting a more “natural” diet, while also mentioning the potential of her recipes to lead to weight loss, Liddon, like Fuhrman, associates naturalness and slimness.

Gina Homolka’s *Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow* (2016) also demonstrates this theme. Even the name of this cookbook, “Skinnytaste,” portrays thin bodies as good by suggesting that skinniness should be a primary consideration, alongside taste, in people’s food choices. Homolka’s introduction directly references thinness in touting that her recipes will “slim your waistline,” and help readers achieve “weight loss” (p. 6). These direct references to weight loss portray skinniness as a universal goal because they are never countered by positive references to weight gain. In this way, being skinny is portrayed as superior to not being skinny. Because
“skinny” shares this position of superiority with “natural,” and one of the major qualities Homolka assigns to her recipes is naturalness, as discussed previously, skinniness is portrayed as a normal goal and a more natural way of being.

The direct association between thinness and eating natural foods that authors like Fuhrman, Liddon and Homolka demonstrate suggests that thin bodies are natural because they are the result of eating natural foods. Because naturalness is also associated with superiority, the association between thinness and naturalness not only speaks to the naturalness of body types, but also to the superiority and inferiority of body types. In this way, the association between thin bodies and natural foods deems being skinny as superior to being overweight. This leaves overweight bodies to be associated with processed foods, or more broadly, unnaturalness.

The presence of this theme in the cookbook reflects a broader societal stigma against weight gain and people who are overweight. This stigma is often justified by arguing that weight gain is the result of personal laziness and unhealthy choices and that people who are overweight are necessarily unhealthy. The valuation of non-thin bodies as unhealthy is grossly inaccurate because slimness is not a reliable indicator of health. Although being severely overweight can lead to serious health problems, being thin does not equate health. Some thin people may not be eating enough calories or getting enough nutrients to properly fuel their bodies. For others, their bodies may be predisposed to be less thin, even though they live a healthy lifestyle. The assumption that thin bodies are healthier than non-thin bodies could lead some people to obsess over becoming increasingly thin even though thinness is not their most healthy state. This could potentially lead to more serious medical conditions, such as bulimia, anorexia nervosa or body dysmorphic disorder.
Contributing to this theme, Gina Homolka’s *Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow* (2016), *The Chew: What’s for Dinner?* (2013), and Gwyneth Paltrow’s *It’s All Easy* (2016) characterize weight loss as positive through the use of more indirect language. The use of less direct associations between naturalness and weight loss is perhaps more socially harmful than direct appeals. This is because indirect references to weight loss as a more natural way of being normalize the desire to be thin and entrench the superiority of weight loss in our language. The normalization of weight loss as inherently good cannot be easily removed from our social thinking because it very present in our everyday language. On the other hand, when readers encounter direct appeals to weight loss as natural or superior, they can more easily recognize and dismiss those appeals as inaccurate or contributing to existing cultural stigma. When the cookbook author’s use more veiled references to weight loss as superior, their negative social effects are less apparent. This makes those negative social effects harder to call out and therefore more powerful.

Throughout Gina Homolka’s introduction in *Skinnytaste: Fast and Slow* (2016), she continually establishes thin bodies as more natural than larger bodies through indirect language or veiled references to thinness. For example, Homolka claims that her book will provide “nutritious, flavor-packed, figure-friendly meal[s]” (cover). Although the term “figure friendly” does not explicitly reference thinness, it carries the connotation of “slimming” or “non-fattening.” Similarly, Homolka uses the terms “light” and “low calorie” throughout her introduction to describe the positive attributes of her recipes (p.6). In the remainder of the cookbook, several of Homolka’s recipe introductions focus on calorie counting and lightness, and each recipe also includes a chart of nutrition facts, with the recipe’s serving size and number of calories per serving displayed at the very top of the chart (2016). Eating light and low calorie
foods does not necessarily lead to being slimmer, but the general public commonly associates these nutritional characteristics with weight loss. Therefore, although these terms do not directly refer to body size, like the term “figure friendly,” they suggest that consumers should be eating foods that are commonly characterized as slimming.

Calorie counting and lightness are also mentioned in other books from the sample and are characterized as means to better bodies. For example, Daphne Oz of *The Chew: What’s for Dinner?* (2013) directly associates weight loss and light food with health in her Thai Chopped Chicken Salad recipe description, saying “Most of us think when we order something called “salad” that automatically means we are really eating healthfully,” continuing “A normal serving of chicken salad is 600 calories, but this light salad...is hundreds less” (p. 211). In this passage, Oz suggests that “light” food that is lower in calories is necessarily healthier than food that is higher in calories. This portrays foods that promote weight loss as superior to those that do not.

In Angela Liddon’s *Oh She Glows Everyday* (2016), she pairs lightness with the feeling of energy, calling her spiraled zucchini summer salad “the light and energizing salad [she] turns to” (p.103). In this way, lightness is portrayed as superior through the positive feeling it creates.

Rather than veiling the suggestion that slimness is superior with reference to health, it veils this valuation in terms of human feeling by implying that humans feel better when they feel lighter.

Gwenyth Paltrow of *It’s All Easy* (2016) takes this position a step further by disparaging “fast food and...sad wilted salads from a grab n’ go bar” for making her feel “heavy” (2016, p. 18). In this context, heaviness is the negative result of eating fast food. By this point in her book, Paltrow has already primed the reader to think about weight loss by touting that her breakfast recipes prevent her “from passing out in morning cardio class” (p. 2). Although weight loss is not the sole purpose of cardiovascular exercise, Paltrow’s casual mention of working out alongside
her praise of lightness and disapproval of heaviness brings weight to the forefront of the reader’s mind. When analyzed alongside the other references to lightness, weight and natural foods, slim bodies and slimming foods as portrayed as superior to and more natural than non-slim bodies and non-slimming foods. Thus, not only do these cookbooks portray lightness and the foods that lead to being or feeling light as superior, they also portray heaviness and foods that lead to feeling heavy as inferior.

The indirect references to weight loss in these cookbooks demonstrate the deep roots of stigmatizing weight gain in our vernacular. Rather than directly disparaging overweight bodies, authors can simply say that their recipes are “figure friendly” or “light” to suggest that being slim is a superior way of being. This language communicates the same message while appearing to be less critical of people who are overweight, which allows the cookbooks authors to criticize overweight bodies without seeming disrespectful. Although this language seems less harmful, these indirect references stigmatize overweight bodies in the same way that more blatant criticisms do. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in the authors’ references to calories and use of nutritional terms like “light” because these references justify stigmatizing weight gain in the name of health. In other words, arguing that weight loss is healthy allows the authors to criticize people who are overweight by suggesting that losing weight will help them live longer and happier lives. Although weight loss would be healthy for some people, it is not to answer to all health problems, and obsessing over weight loss would be mentally detrimental even for those who are overweight.

In this way, the authors’ indirect characterization of thinness as superior normalizes the desire to be thin, which contributes to the portrayal of thin bodies as more natural than non-thin bodies. Previously in this section, slim bodies were characterized as “natural” because of their
association with natural foods, but in these cases, slim bodies are characterized as “natural” simply through the authors’ attitudes that the desire to have a slim body is normal. In this context, natural is defined as “normal,” rather than “not processed” or “the result of eating non-processed foods.” The authors’ normalization of weight loss as a universal goal reinforces the social harm discussed earlier, which could lead people to adopt unhealthy lifestyles in order to become increasingly slim or adopt unhealthy mindsets about the adequacy of their bodies. Thus, the cookbooks not only associate slimness with naturalness not only through their promotion of natural foods as a means to slimness, but also through their normalization of the desire to be thin.

Other cookbooks make an argument directly opposed to that of the authors above by suggesting that non-slimming foods are more “natural” than slimming foods because they appeal to the natural human desire of taste. These cookbooks include Rosanna Pansino’s *Nerdy Nummies* (2015), Ree Drummond’s *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime* (2015), and Kay Robertson’s *Miss Kay’s Duck Commander Kitchen* (Howard, 2014). In these books, taste becomes associated with naturalness, which creates another dualism between tasty foods and slimming foods. In this dualism, human taste is deemed more important than the social need to be slim. Many of these authors recognize the social pressure to be slim, but deny this norm in favor of satisfying their natural desire to eat foods that taste good. However, this choice does not come without guilt, which I expand on later.

In Pansino’s book, the emphasis of taste over slimness is evident as early as the book’s back cover description, which states that the book is “the perfect companion that you’ll turn to whenever you want to whip up a delicious treat and be entertained all at once” (back cover). Rather than referring to weight loss or health, as many of the other authors do, Pansino focuses solely on the taste and entertainment value of her recipes. In addition to continually calling her
recipes “tasty” and “delicious” (p. 44, 58, 210, 232; p. 72, 140), Pansino never references weight gain, weight loss or calories throughout her book. She even goes as far to say, “you can haz as many as you’d like” of her cheeseburger cupcakes (p. 210). This implies that eating to please tastes is more important than eating to achieve a more “natural” body. In this way, Pansino fully embraces the natural human desire of taste while rejecting the notion that humans need to consume “natural” food to create more “natural” bodies.

This is also evident in Ree Drummond’s *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime* (2015) when Drummond explains in the description of her Roasted Pepper Pasta, “this exceedingly excellent pasta dish is a throwback to my vegetarian days,” saying of those days, “I wore small jeans then. I don’t now” (p. 206). In this instance, Drummond recognizes that her vegetarian days are behind her and that she no longer approaches food with the “small jeans” mindset. This shows that Drummond both recognizes and rejects the cultural pressure to be skinny and eat foods that are slimming. Similarly, Kay Robertson of *Miss Kay’s Duck Commander Kitchen* (Howard, 2014) laments that one of her desserts won’t help anyone keep their “girlish figure” (p. 180). The term “girlish figure” has the connotation of slimness, which Robertson recognizes as a desirable trait. However, by including this non-slimming recipe in her book, Robertson seems to brush off the importance of being slim. In these cases, the authors acknowledge the cultural superiority of weight loss, but reject those values in favor of cooking that tastes better and is higher in fat, calories and sugar.

This approach to food recognizes that it is in some ways more “natural” to be less thin, especially in the United States. The rise of worldwide obesity is “one of today’s most blatantly visible – yet most neglected – public health problems” (WHO 2013). As of 2014, two thirds of adults in the United States were either overweight or obese (NIDDK 2017). Based on this
information, underweight and normal weight bodies are becoming less normal across the globe and are clearly not the norm in the United States. When considered alongside the cookbooks that portray slimness as natural, a clear conflict is present between foods that will give people a more “natural,” slimmer figure and foods that will satisfy the natural human desire of taste at the expense of being slim. In this way, the cookbooks are conveying mixed messages about the relationship between nature, health and weight.

Several cookbooks, including Chrissy Teigen’s *Cravings* (2016), Alton Brown’s *Everydaycook* (2016), The Thug Kitchen’s *Thug Kitchen* (2014), and Gina Homolka’s *Skinnytaste Cookbook* (2014), recognize both elements of this paradox by simultaneously demonizing and glorifying non-slimming foods. For example, this use of the word “crave” in Teigen’s *Cravings* implies a powerful and perhaps irresistible draw to tasty foods, which places tasty foods in a position of power over humans. This power dynamic is evident throughout the book, such as when Teigen labels IHOP hash browns a “trashy guilty pleasure” (p. 31). In labeling food as a “guilty pleasure” Teigan suggests that although she should be avoiding certain foods that she feels guilty about eating, like IHOP hash browns, she cannot avoid eating these foods because her natural desire to eat tasty foods is too strong. In this way, the foods that Teigan enjoys, but feels she should not be eating are portrayed as having power over Teigan’s food choices. Teigan also directly mentions this power dynamic when she says of jalapeño potato chips “they own me” (p. 227). This language explicitly paints tasty but unhealthy or non-slimming foods as a powerful natural temptation to humans.

Alongside this power dynamic, Teigen continually mentions nutrition, focusing especially on carbohydrates as the perpetrators of non-slim bodies. A model by trade, Teigen continually mentions that she can only have carbs sometimes, no matter how delicious they may
be, in order to have a successful career, stating “How can I make this lower carb and more delicious? is what I ask when starting lots of my recipes,” and “until my scantily clad days are long behind me, I’ll try to stick to the low-carb blessing” that is her zucchini lasagna (p. 20; p. 197). Both of these statements indicate that carbohydrates are bad, and the latter statement clarifies that they are bad because they make Teigan appear worse when “scantily clad” (p. 197).

Later on, Teigan connects her appearance to carbs again, explaining that when she sees risotto on a menu she “must have it,” and going on to say, “that, my friends is the story of how I never booked a New York Fashion Week show” (p.179). In this instance, Teigan is criticizing risotto for preventing her from booking a show at New York Fashion Week. Knowing that Teigan is a model, the reader assumes that Teigan is criticizing risotto because its nutritional content makes her gain weight. When considered alongside her characterization of tasty foods as naturally tempting to humans, this rhetoric portrays food as both desirable and as creating a socially unacceptable appearance.

Although Teigen’s rhetoric is the most evidently polarized of the cookbooks, many other books mention both the cultural pressure to be slim and their desire to eat tasty foods. For example, Alton Brown of Everydaycook says of his “Mr. Crunchy” sandwich, “My. Crunchy is packed with fat, so the way I figure it, you’d better make all those calories count by constructing this sandwich as painstakingly perfectly as possible” (2016, p. 27). In this instance, Brown is arguing that foods that are high in calories need to be particularly worthy of consumption. Similarly, in Thug Kitchen (2014) the authors say of vegetables, “not only are they delicious when cooked right, but they have you back as soon as you chew their asses up,” continuing, “vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, fiber, and a whole lot of other tricks are packed into these miracle foods without a bunch of calories clogging your shit up” (p.xiii). In this case, the Thug
Kitchen argues for both eating foods that taste good, while also paying attention to calories, perhaps to achieve a more “natural” body.

Similarly, Ree Drummond and Gina Homolka counter their language of temptation with references to nutrition and even say that eating healthy foods makes them feel less guilty (2015; 2014). For example, in Ree Drummond’s *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime* (2015), she claims that her salads will make readers “feel less guilty about dessert” (p. 35). This implies that although salads are less desirable than desserts, they have the power to undo any damage done by the allure of a non-slimming dessert. The theme of reducing guilt associated with eating unhealthy or non-slimming foods is also present in Gina Homolka’s *SkinnyTaste Cookbook* (2014), which contains a recipe called “Less-Guilt Zesty Mango Guacamole” (p. 118). Homolka also mentions guilt in several recipe introductions, which state, “the bananas taste decadent with zero guilt,” “I developed a lighter cheese sauce to ease the calorie guilt,” and “it’s made with fat-free Greek yogurt instead of mayo, so there’s no guilt” (p. 299; p. 257; p. 132).

In associating guilt with high-sugar, high-fat and high-calorie foods, Homolka suggests that people who cannot resist the temptation of these foods should feel guilty about their food choices. Because each of these nutritional excesses is commonly associated with weight gain, Homolka in turn implies that those who are overweight should feel guilty for their inability to gain control over their foods’ nutritional contents. Her continual references to guilt advance the power dynamic between humans and food by suggesting that humans must gain control over their foods’ nutritional content in order to avoid the non-slimming affect of these foods and the guilt or social shame associated with heaviness.

This power dynamic portrays humans’ relationship with food nature as a continual struggle to withstand the natural temptation of tasty foods. In this struggle, humans feel
compelled to eat the foods that taste good to them, but are unable to because of their fear of weight gain or bad health. The extreme focus on this tension certainly does not reflect the complex pastoral relationship for which Thompson argued, which would consider all the intricacies of human interactions with food nature (2010). Rather, it reflects a simple relationship, almost solely defined by the conflict between humans’ need to be thin and humans’ desire to eat more food.

The centrality of weight loss throughout these cookbooks demonstrates the dominant U.S. culture’s obsession with the impact of food on weight. Because most food in these cookbooks originated in the natural world and are thus food nature, this obsession contributes to our shared social construction of nature. Firstly, it socially constructs nature by suggesting that food nature that promotes weight loss is superior to food nature that does not. This suggestion establishes a hierarchy in the natural world based solely on the possible human benefits of nature. As a result, this contributes to a social construction of the world in which nature must benefit humans in order to be deemed good. Secondly, these cookbooks’ obsession with weight socially constructs nature by suggesting that thin human bodies are superior to non-thin human bodies. This constitutes social construction of nature because as animals, humans and the human body in particular are undoubtedly part of the natural world. Because humans are part of nature, and these cookbooks suggest that the ideal human body is slim, they contribute to the shared social construct of the ideal human body.

Relegating Women to the Domestic Sphere

Through nostalgic depictions of the cooking woman and portrayals of modern women as the primary household chefs, these cookbooks represent and encourage gendered relationships
with food and, by extension, with nature. This issue can be interpreted as a reflection of the centuries old Edenic Narrative, in which men used the story of the Garden of Eden to justify subordinating both women and nature (Merchant, 2003). This narrative still rings true for the female cookbook authors and their female audiences who feel stressed when dealing with food and food nature in the kitchen because they are expected to prepare healthy, delicious and quick meals. The current patriarchal society of the U.S. is taking the role that white men had in Edenic Narrative by expecting all women to be content dealing with food nature. This society also expects the food these women make to comply with slimming “health” standards and to be cooked quickly and served to these women’s families. These expectations contribute to the shared inferior positions of both women and food because they reinforce the traditional association of women and nature and subdue both these forces. Thus, cookbooks continue to support the exploitation of food nature and the oppression of women through the continued relegation of women to the domestic sphere.

The cookbooks’ advancement of gendered relationships with food and food nature occurs primarily through direct references to the positive nostalgia associated with cooking women. This nostalgia not only encourages nostalgic views of women, but also of nature. The positive and nostalgic characterization of women cooking is most evident in Ina Garten’s *Cooking for Jeffrey* (2016) and Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi’s *Jerusalem* (2013). This nostalgia is socially detrimental because it does not acknowledge the historically rooted social discomfort that many women experience in the kitchen. Rather than acknowledging and clearly rejecting the history of forced female domestic work, these cookbooks recall this work nostalgically and positively. This contributes to the continued social expectation that women will cook homemade and delicious meals for their families.
Perhaps the most obvious example of positive associations between women and food is Ina Garten’s *Cooking for Jeffrey*, in which Garten continually recalls memories of making meals for her husband (2016). The title of the cookbook refers to Garten cooking for her husband, Jeffrey, which suggests that Garten cooks primarily to please her husband rather than herself. This trend continues in the dedication of her book, where Garten says, “for Jeffery who makes everything possible” (p. 7). As a business owner and multi-time author, Garten’s claim that her husband “makes everything possible” is questionable because Garten has clearly had a major role in her own success. Additionally, Garten’s “team” of helpers in making her cookbook consists of two women who are pictured and thanked in Garten’s book (p. 11). This suggests that Garten’s team of female professionals in the cookbook industry have also helped “make everything possible.” Through her recognition of Jeffery in the book’s title and dedication page, and her lesser recognition of her female staff, Garten establishes a non-empowering relationship between females, males and food. Namely, Garten suggests that females should interact with food nature to serve their husbands, who are praise-worthy and deserving of great meals.

This position continues when Garten begins to tell the story of her childhood experiences with cooking, claiming that she “always wanted to cook but was never allowed in the kitchen” because her mother “considered the kitchen her personal space” (p. 13). Garten’s characterization of the kitchen as her mother’s space establishes cooking as a female task from the start. Garten then shifts the focus to her husband Jeffery, explaining, “the minute I married Jeffery, I bought Craig Claiborne’s *The New York Times Cookbook*,” which allowed her to finally get in the kitchen like her mother (p. 13). This recollection establishes women as primarily household caregivers who are eager to serve the needs of their spouses through food. This not only situates women as subordinate to men, but also suggests that food nature itself
exists for the purpose of pleasing men. Garten recalls the early years of their relationship, saying, “I made things Jeffrey loved” (p. 11). She clarifies her position on this matter in saying “I found mastering a difficult recipe and the creative part of cooking incredibly satisfying” continuing, “just as important to me, though, was that Jeffery loved everything I cooked” (p. 14). This characterizes food nature as existing for two purposes: to satisfy female creativity and to serve men.

Toward the end of her book, Garten mentions once more that she enjoys cooking for Jeffrey, saying “what I loved to do most was cook for Jeffrey and host dinner parties for our friends,” and explaining that sharing meals with people you love is “what creates a community of people who care about and take care of each other” (p. 189; p. 190). Although this is a touching sentiment, Garten never mentions that not all women are happy in the domestic sphere. This ties women to the food procurement aspects of nature in a way that many women might not be comfortable with. Additionally, this suggests that food nature exists for the purpose of pleasing humans, without recognizing the intrinsic value of food nature. Thus, Garten contributes to the subordination of women and nature through her solely positive recollection of serving food nature to others and her suggestion that food nature exists for human pleasure.

Nostalgic reflections of cooking women are also prevalent in Jerusalem by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, who are both males. The book focuses on the cultural mosaic of Jerusalem and the deeply rooted food traditions that have resulted from the city’s intricate history. Throughout their overview of the city’s foods, Ottolenghi and Tamimi continually and warmly reference foods made by mothers and grandmothers without recognizing the oppressions related to the history of women cooking. Tamimi recalls the “delectable” figs of Jerusalem nostalgically, saying, “summer months are always tinted with the smell of wild herbs and ripe
figs” (p. 26). He goes on to tell the story of stealing dried figs from a mother in his neighborhood who used to dry the fruits on her roof, recalling that he and his neighborhood friend “never wasted time and used to sneak up on her roof regularly, stealing her figs at their peak and causing havoc” (p. 26). The childish mischief of this flashback gives the story a light tone, suggesting an unproblematic relationship between all parties, including the woman and her food.

He later remembers a woman called “auntie” who “went around to all of the houses in the neighborhood toward the end of Ramadan helping housewives make the cookies,” continuing “they had to make a lot of cookies, enough for many guests that come and go during this time, and some for the poor…” (p. 288). Again, the obligation of “housewives” to cook for their families and communities is mentioned within the framework of a positive childhood memory of eating cookies. In this scenario, both the elements of nature required to make those cookies and the women making the cookies are portrayed as hardworking parties happily serving their families and communities. However, that the women “had” to make cookies suggests a forced relationship between women and the food-based elements of the natural world. This indicates a slight discomfort among the cookie-baking women, but does not expand on possible social impacts this forced relationship.

Less extensive associations between women and nature occur when both authors recall peasant women selling herbs in mass quantities to housewives (p. 251) or when they continually mention their mothers’ variations on traditional recipes (p. 129; p. 142; p. 246). Each of these references is paired with language of positive or neutral nostalgia, and the feelings of the women in those situations are never discussed. Thus, these references portray a historically harmonious relationship between women and the domestic sphere of nature in Jerusalem. Although these recollections accurately convey the culture of food in Jerusalem as the authors’ experienced
during their childhood, they do not acknowledge the discomfort or oppression women in Jerusalem may have felt in being the primary neighborhood or household chefs. Rather, they seem to accept the role of women in the kitchen as natural. Readers don’t get an accurate representation of the culture of the cooking woman in Jerusalem because the authors skirt around the possible discontentedness that accompanied those women. They continually mention the cooking women of their past without recalling those women’s feelings about cooking, leaving this part of Jerusalem’s food culture the elephant in the room.

Gwyneth Paltrow’s *It’s All Easy* (2016), Rosana Pansino’s *Nerdy Nummies* (2015) and Chrissy Teigen’s *Cravings* (2016) also contain less extensive nostalgic references to historical relationship between women and the food elements of the natural world. For example, Gwyneth Paltrow of *It’s All Easy* claims “we yearn for that lost aspect of life, before smartphones hijacked picnics and walks on the beach,” and offers her book as “a way back to something” and “a warm wash of simplicity” (2016, p. ix). In saying that her cooking book is “a way back,” Paltrow implies that past relationships between humans and food nature were superior to relations with food nature today. This assertion is uncannily similar to the proposals of Wendall Berry and Michael Pollen, who have both expressed disillusionment with the distance of much U.S. food from its origins in the natural world (1990; 2006). However, for much of history, women have been forced into relationships with nature focused almost solely on food production. Paltrow’s calls for history and “simplicity” do not recognize this flawed relationship between women and nature. Similarly, Rosana Pansino of *Nerdy Nummies* says that her grandma taught her to infuse everything she bakes with love (2015, p. 8), while Chrissy Teigen of *Cravings* says “I spent my childhood in the kitchen following around Thai Mom” (2016, p. 9) and the Thug Kitchen claims “even your grandma would approve” of its old-school Southwestern Tortilla Soup (*The Thug*
Each of these small references to the positive nostalgia of cooking women occurs without references to the necessary oppressions of women who were confined to this socially constructed relationship with nature.

Ottolenghi, Tamimi and the other authors mentioned above might have failed to mention the feelings of cooking women, but many of the modern female cookbook authors in my sample make their feelings about cooking very clear. Namely, these women express feeling obligated to make delicious, crowd pleasing meals that will contribute to slim families in short amounts of time. This theme is very present in Ree Drummond’s *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime* (2015). The cookbook opens with Drummond explaining that dinnertime “happens to be the one time of day that home cooks struggle with the most,” adding, “when it comes to churning out dinner several nights a week, I’ve learned through the years that I can’t just fake it till I make it” (p. vii). These comments suggest an anxiety, uncertainty or pressure surrounding the need to prepare meals.

This pressure seems to originate from the expectation that women will work in the domestic sphere of nature to feed their families. Drummond continues, “I’ve determined that as a wife, mother, woman and citizen of this planet, all I really want and need on a daily basis is something to make for dinner tonight” (p. viii). Although Drummond is exaggerating her need for a dinner plan, she still communicates a sense of slight desperation among women in particular to transform food nature into delicious meals on a daily basis. Drummond goes on to describe her children pestering her about what she will make for dinner (p. 28), her time spent trying to create meals that her children will enjoy (p. 86), and her sense of relief when she has a freezer full of ready-to-eat meals (p. 99). These references to the stress she feels when cooking certainly outweigh her singular mention to the joy she feels when serving her family.
Other female cookbook authors also express feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of cooking. Gwyneth Paltrow of *It’s All Easy* (2016) describes her struggles to get breakfast on the table, saying “as a busy mom trying to make healthy choices, though, [breakfast] is often the meal I struggle with the most” (p. 1). She then praises her breakfast recipes, saying they “help my kids concentrate at school and keep me from passing out in my morning cardio class” (p. 1). Paltrow’s statements encompass the pressure placed on women, and on moms in particular, to cook hearty, healthy and tasty meals while also caring for their children and maintaining a thin appearance. Angela Liddon of *Oh She Glows Every Day* (2016) also comments on this struggle, remarking that after having a baby she needed to find ways to “save time on preparation and execution of her favorite recipes” (p. ix). The fact that cookbook authors who are moms continually express this pressure demonstrates that society expects women to interact with the natural world in ways that are not realistic. In particular, these women feel the societal pressure to interact with the food elements of nature multiple times per day to feed their families.

These women and more all express stress surrounding their relegation to the domestic sphere of nature and present their cookbooks as survival guides to navigating this pressure. Again, these feelings of anxiety surrounding food nature certainly don’t represent the complex pastoral relationship with nature that Thompson suggested (2010). Rather than reflecting the conflicts inherent in the relationship between humans and nature and the manifestations of these conflicts surrounding food, they reflect external conflicts of a society that places too much pressure on women to be primary caretakers and make delicious, fast and slimming meals. This issue distracts from the basic issues humans need to consider in order to have a healthy relationship with food, such as the need to eat food without compromising our surrounding
material environment. Instead of focusing on the complexities of this issue, these women are forced to focus on juggling their overload of responsibilities.

Some authors have adapted to this pressure by simply agreeing with it and portraying modern women as happy homemakers. The authors who take this approach suggest that women should be responsible for household cooking and baking. Kay Robertson’s *Miss Kay’s Duck Commander Kitchen* provides the best example of this (Howard & Robertson, 2014). Throughout Robertson’s book, she emphasizes and celebrates the role of women as the primary household cooks. For example, she praises two of her sons’ wives, Missy and Jessica, for turning into great cooks after getting married and mentions that her third son’s wife, Korie, cooks less than her other daughters-in-law (“Dedication”). Although she doesn’t scold Korie for not cooking, the simple mention of these women’s cooking skills implies that she expects and delights in wives who cook for their families.

Further, in the description of a recipe written by one of Robertson’s daughters-in-law, Lisa, she says she has “gathered recipes from Miss Kay and many other mentor moms” throughout her life (p. 55), and in Robertson’s section titled “When the Grandkids Come Over” there is a photo of Robertson in the kitchen frosting cupcakes with seven little girls (p. 66). To justify the continual connection between women and baking, Robertson claims of her grandsons “they’re not as interested in cooking as the little girls are” (p. 65). In saying that he grandsons are less interested in cooking than her granddaughters, Robertson attempts to brush off the presence of women in her cookbook as a matter of gender difference. Despite this, Robertson goes on to instruct the reader “gather up your girls and teach them how to cook,” which suggests that cooking is not a matter of choice for the women in Robertson’s family (p. 66). Thus, although
Robertson tries to justify her continual references to women as simply matters of personal choice, a closer look at Robertson’s text proves this justification false.

Other cookbooks similarly celebrate women as the primary household chefs in slightly more subtle ways. For example, numerous authors appear to assume their readers are women because they use female pronouns or frequently appeal to their status as moms. As soon as the second sentence of *Oh She Glows Every Day* (2016), Angela Liddon explains, “when *The Oh She Glows Cookbook* came out in March 2014, I was a few months pregnant with our first baby, and my husband, Eric, and I were going through a move and major house renovation all at once” (p. ix). This sentence is most relatable to straight mothers with enough money to complete a home renovation. Liddon continues to appeal to this demographic in saying “rest assured that these are recipes your whole family will devour,” which again assumes that the reader is cooking for their family (p. 155). Gina Homolka of *SkinnyTaste: Fast and Slow* adds to this sentiment, saying “I understand the stress of having to come up with healthy meals the whole family will enjoy” (2016, p. 6). Similar to Liddon, Homolka assumes that her readers are responsible for feeding their families.

Ree Drummond also mentions being a mother in her introduction of *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime* as well as in many of her recipe introductions. In her introduction she says:

Before long, and I literally mean here in about two hours, my family members are going to be banging their forks on the table and looking at me with longing (read: ravenous) eyes, and the only way I’m going to be able to get them out of my hair (and okay, spend some quality time with the cuties), will be to whip up something simple, scrumptious and absolutely satisfying. (p. viii)
Drummond’s exaggerated humor about the demands of her family is meant to appeal to stressed and desperate mothers looking for quick and easy ways to fulfill their socially prescribed role as the party in charge of the domestic sphere of nature. Adding to the plethora of references to females and the life of moms, women authored 65% of books, and coauthored 15% of books in the sample. This results in a whopping 85% of books being authored wholly or partially by women. This representation portrays women as the primary handlers of food and associates women directly with the domestic sphere of nature. Additionally, because these mom-centric cookbooks are best sellers, this suggests that women are the primary purchasers of cookbooks. The female-centricity of these books portrays the domestic use of nature as both expected from and reserved for female homemakers.

However, exceptions to this trend are evident in several cookbooks. The cover photograph for the “Wild Game Hunting” portion of Chris Howard and Kay Robertson’s Miss Kay’s Duck Commander Kitchen (2014) features four big-bearded men dressed in all camouflage, equipped with guns, duck calls and stone cold faces (p. 187). Men from Robertson’s family also write several of the recipe introductions in this portion of the cookbook. The presence of men in the hunting portion of the cookbook is a stark contrast to the rest of Robertson’s book and to the rest of the books in the sample. The obvious rugged masculinity in this image portrays the killing of food nature for meat as strictly male territory. The presence of men is also notable in Ree Drummond’s The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Dinnertime (2015). This book contains numerous photographs of the men in Drummond’s family working on their ranch and herding their cattle (p. 9; p. 14; p. 20; p. 27; p. 85), but only occasionally pictures women doing the same (p. xi; p. 25). One can assume that the cattle on Drummond’s ranch are destined
for slaughter, so the prevalence of men in these photos further communicates animal death as a male-gendered element of nature.

This relationship shows that the Edenic narrative still rings true with respect to women and nature. While women are expected to prepare food nature for their husbands and children, men are expected to kill nature to be prepared by their wives. Having the responsibility of killing nature, men directly assert their dominance over the natural world. Women are expected to prepare nature, but are not expected to kill it or rule over to the same extent as men. In this way, women and nature are associated with one another through their shared role of serving, who feel that they are cultivating a Garden of Eden on Earth. Thus, the presence of men in these cookbooks reinforces traditional gendered relationships with the natural world. In this relationship, men are expected to rule directly over the natural world and women are expected to serve men using this nature.

Alternatively, one could interpret the overwhelming presence of women in these books as women taking back the domestic sphere of nature as a space of empowerment and ownership. After all, these women were able to achieve great success through cooking and baking and are now bestselling cookbook authors. However, similar to findings by Kelting (2016) and Rodney et al. (2017), none of these women explicitly mention the history of female subordination and relegation to the domestic realm. Rather, they veil their frustrations with claims that their cookbooks contain the secrets to navigating this aspect of nature by cooking slimming meals happily, quickly and easily. This ignores the societal root of the problem and pushes the blame of stressful and difficult cooking on women themselves. In other words, by implying that their cookbooks will make cooking and baking easier, these female cookbook authors suggest that simply changing females’ cooking and baking strategies can solve the tensions surrounding
females and the natural world. In reality, this problem is deeply rooted in our society and cannot be fixed through surface level baking hacks. Reversing the suppression of women and nature can only be accomplished through discussing and learning from the past injustices against both these groups.

**Conclusions**

The *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks in this sample reflect and advance the dualistic characterization of nature, the representation of thin bodies and slimming foods as natural, and the characterization of women as the natural handlers of domestic food nature. The authors characterize “natural” foods as those that reflect simple pastoral ideals of food production, and “processed” foods as those that do not. This dualism is also advanced through the use of terms like “real” or “whole” as substitutes for the term “natural” and through pictures of idyllic natural landscapes. The dichotomy between natural and processed foods, combined with the unrealistic characterization of natural foods, distances humans from our food by ignoring the necessary death, destruction of landscapes and environmental degradation that accompany food procurement and production and the societal progress that food processing has enabled.

This dualistic thinking also encourages the use of associated dualisms, such as slimming foods versus tasty foods and masculine tasks versus feminine tasks. In the slimming foods versus tasty foods dualism, natural foods are portrayed as a means to slim bodies, while processed foods are portrayed as fulfilling the natural human sense of taste. This places consumers in a conflict between the pressure to be thin and the desire to eat foods that taste good. In effect, foods that taste good become both an ally that will bring people pleasure and a villain that needs to be held
back by modern nutritional science. In the masculine versus feminine value dualism, females are portrayed as the natural preparers of food through nostalgic depictions of women cooking and portrayals of modern women as the primary household chefs. In this way, the cookbooks represent and encourage gendered relationships with food and, by extension, with nature.

Through these themes, the cookbooks advance harmful social trends, such as the distancing of humans from our food, the stigma against non-slim people and the oppression of women. If humans become more distanced from their food, they will not understand the processes involved in food growth and procurement. A lack of understanding and respect for food nature may make people less likely to care for the natural world, upon which we are extremely dependent. Similarly, if our society continues to stigmatize weight gain and promote foods based solely on their ability to lead to weight loss, people might choose which foods to eat based on which foods will help them lose weight rather than which foods are best for human and environmental health. This will also decrease the amount of consideration people have for food nature. The relegation of women to the domestic sphere could also contribute to our disregard for the natural world by forcing primary food providers to channel their energy toward changing the unjust social expectations placed on them rather than toward seeking out foods that benefit both human health and environmental health. Taken together, the cookbooks in this sample portray a human-centric relationship with food nature that is not sustainable. Rather than getting lost in the social stigmas and illogical norms at play in these cookbooks, we need to acknowledge and move beyond these social problems to create a more holistic and mutually beneficial relationship with food and its origins in the natural world.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to North Central College and the College Scholars Honors Program for giving me the opportunity to pursue individual research, and to Dr. Erin Condit-Bergren, Dr. Martha Bohrer and Librarian John Small for their continuous guidance and support.
Works Cited

BBC. (August 2018). Suspended councilor said gay people 'unnatural and wrong'. *BBC News.*


Counterpoint Press.


York: Norton.

politics,* 22-40.


Collins.


Fisher, H. (2012). The power of food images to communicate important information to


doi:10.1080/15528014.2016.1178549


