FOOD CONTAMINATION NARRATIVES IN UNITED STATES NEWS MEDIA

Stephanie C. Plummer

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2009

Committee:

Marilyn Motz, Advisor

Esther Clinton
Firmly rooted in personal experience and individual memory, food symbolizes multiple aspects of one’s life, identity, and community. However, food contamination events and food contamination hoaxes present challenges to this sense of identity and community. When food contamination events occur, United States news media is in a position to address their audiences’ health concerns through discourses on identity, in terms of social role, group identity, and socially constructed identity markers.

Through detailed examinations of television news transcripts, this paper attempts to locate food contamination narratives within issues of gender, class, regionalism, and nationalism. Specifically, this thesis studies food contamination discourse surrounding three events: Peter Pan and Great Value peanut butter’s contamination with salmonella in 2007, the E. coli contamination of bagged spinach in 2006 and a 2005 contamination hoax involving Wendy’s chili. An analysis of the words and phrases loaded with connotations and visual descriptions are particularly important to this thesis, because they are vital to the construction and distribution of relatable and troubling stories about food. Although “Food Contamination Narrative in US News Media” uses semiotic and content analysis to study news media, this thesis also relies on cultural and folkloristic theory to uncover social constructions of identity. This thesis suggests that food contamination narratives, as constructed through broadcast news rhetoric, may effect an individual’s perception of themselves and their relationship to the larger national body.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Marilyn Motz and Dr. Esther Clinton for their enthusiastic support and their ability to know what I mean to say. Inexpressible gratitude to my husband, Timothy, for being my favorite and most proud supporter (although your pride might be tied with my parents). Mom and Dad, the freedom to do and learn and argue was perhaps the most valuable gift you could have given me; thank you. Thanks to my family for always being entertaining and supportive, even when it is hard work. To Athena and the Ladies of Devereaux: thanks for being my inspiration, intellectually, emotionally, and artistically. Thanks to Dr. Lucy Long for helping me grasp the larger implications of food and identity. I want to especially thank Justin Philpot, Sarah Lafferty, Mike Lewis, Ora McWilliams, Sean Watkins, Brian Blitz, Ben Phillips, Manco!, and April Boggs for listening to me put in my two cents and putting in your own, and often challenging me to be better and more thoughtful. Thanks to the Department of Popular Culture for providing one of the few places children’s animation, Jeff Buckley, King Cake, and women’s underwear can be studied with seriousness. Finally, I would like to thank the Graduate College, my students, and the people I have met along the way.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. “CUPBOARD” CONTAMINATION: THE IDENTITY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLITICS OF PEANUT BUTTER</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. AS HEALTHY AS HAMBURGER:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPINACH CONTAMINATION AND THE NATION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. FAST FOOD CHILI: A CONTAMINATION HOAX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AND OTHER TABOOS</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts Cited</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly and General Works Cited</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

I am a consuming being. I eat because I am hungry, because I want to try something for the first time, because I want to be comforted, and even because I want to comfort others. However, the reasons for this consumption and the way I do it are largely influenced by my experiences and knowledge. Thirty years alive and eating, twenty years cooking and baking, five years plus some months working in commercial kitchens, 16 plus cookbooks, *CakeWrecks*, *Top Chef*, Anthony Bourdain, Thomas Keller, my father’s brisket and my husband’s spaghetti sauce, my grandmother’s King Ranch Chicken and my mother’s chicken fried steak have all combined so that my foodways today appear to be drastically different from my neighbor’s. While an individual’s relationship with food is rooted in these experiences, it is largely the positive aspects of our own food history that remains at the front of our tongue and mind.

So, what happens to the positive associations when common foods are contaminated, recalled, or are of questionable wholesomeness? Drawing from a range of news media including internet publications, local news reports, national broadcasts, and national print news, I examine the coverage of three events involving food contamination in detail to determine the potential answer to such a broad-reaching question. Chapter One examines the language and narratives which surrounded the 2007 recall of peanut butter contaminated with salmonella. Chapter Two looks at the language in news reports of spinach’s *E. coli* contamination in 2006. Finally, Chapter Three investigates the discourse surrounding the 2005 discovery of a thumb in Wendy’s chili. Ultimately, the question is: how are the narratives that provide recall and contaminant information framed so that they may be incorporated into individuals’ lives and American society in total? In this thesis I argue that local and national television news constructs food contamination narratives by implying and depicting the relationship of socially constructed
groups with the contaminated food. This analysis addresses the way in which the rhetoric, narrative elements, and language used in news reports regarding food contamination reinforce certain ideas about socioeconomic class, race, gender, nationalism, and regionalism.

In the past these questions have been addressed by folklorists, anthropologists, cultural theorists, and nutritionists. Notable contributors to the study of food have included Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Sidney Mintz, and a host of others. For the purpose of this thesis, though, I rely heavily on the work of sociologist, Gary Alan Fine. There are several reasons why his approach to food fits particularly well within my research and writing. The main reason is that his theories do not revolve exclusively around food and eating; instead, his work focuses on contemporary legend and the discourse surrounding our modern food systems. Additionally, Fine’s work with legend acknowledges the influence of mass media in the realm of food and folk narrative.

This study applies the folkloristic theories of Gary Alan Fine to media reports of food contamination. Fine’s theories on mass media and folklore mirror and support each other; however, the application of his theories to studies about mass media’s relationship with folk narrative has been limited. For example, Fine’s theories regarding the ubiquity and power of food corporations explain contemporary legends and the narrators of those folk narratives as resisting and critiquing food industries, as well as larger cultural shifts. The breadth of a food product recall logically increases doubt about the safety of national food supplies, so news reports have the potential to either add to this critique or reinforce dominant beliefs about food, people, and the nation.

My use of Fine, though, leaves room for other important cultural theorists, folklorists and anthropologists, because this study is also about constructions of identity and the other. For
foodways have informed my understanding of the ways identity interacts with media and food
industries. Because understanding formations of identity and community is one of the larger
purposes of popular culture scholarship, this work also explores importance of looking at food
and television as a way to understand people and their actions. Food, as something we all
consume and deal with daily, represents ourselves, our memories, our loved ones, and often our
fears. A food like peanut butter, as addressed in Chapter One, can symbolize childhood or evoke
memories of a grandparent making cookies. As a potent symbol, its alteration or endangerment
can illicit strong emotions like those depicted in the news reports of contaminated peanut butter.

Michel Foucault’s theories regarding discourse and power have been particularly useful
in addressing the specific language used in news reports of food contamination. Words and
phrases like “good for you” and “bad for you” guide viewers into specific responses and
viewpoints related to food and those who consume food. In Chapter Two, we see that the
mediated language that surrounds spinach contamination suggests that vegetarianism and the
consumption of ethnic cuisine are not as safe as an “American” diet of hamburgers and steak.
Additionally, as shown by Foucault, the absence of discursive elements contributes to larger
framings of cultural norms as either desired or detested. Throughout the three chapters, close
readings and content analyses of news broadcasts reveals the use of language as a narrative
device which transforms food contamination discourse and even changes the behaviors of
television viewers.

In this thesis I analyze the word choice, the structure, and the content of over two
hundred and fifty transcripts of national and local televisions news broadcasts in the context of
relevant public discourse such as advertising campaigns, essays and news articles about food
products. In some cases, semiotic analysis of visual imagery and language suggests areas of research as yet unexplored in food and media scholarship. For example, Chapter One briefly discusses the representation in peanut butter advertisements, children, ethnicity, and class. Examining the presence of Caucasian children in peanut butter advertising helps contextualize and reframe news reports of peanut butter contamination as reinforcing ideas, stereotypes, and social constructions of identity.

The three chapters vary somewhat in their specific methodologies. In all three case studies, I obtained transcripts of televisions news reports relating to the recalls of peanut butter in 2007, spinach in 2006 and to Wendy’s chili contamination in 2005. To do this I relied on the database Lexis Nexis Academic. In some cases I have referenced news reports and articles not included in the database results; however, those reports from outside Lexis Nexis were not included in my content analysis. Although my research was supplemented with other sources, my primary materials were stories from local and nationally broadcast television news programs and cable news stations. I also reviewed internet news sources, blogs, and corporate websites, my primary research data consisted of televisions news broadcasts which addressed the three food contamination events. The focus of my study is has been on television news broadcasts and not on radio programs. One reason for this is that radio lacks a visual component, although television transcripts, like radio transcripts, do not indicate what is shown on screen. Considering the way that television and radio audiences may differ, the high numbers of people reached by television versus radio, and the potential for future research, I wanted to look closely at the visual images presented during news reports. From a practical standpoint, many more television transcripts are available for review than are radio transcripts. Although this thesis is concerned with an overall discourse regarding food contamination, I decided early in the process
to disregard blog and bulletin posts. While the formation of this online discourse is grassroots, it seems more spontaneously constructed than news reports. Also, because the internet is so amorphous and its audience is somewhat anonymous, the influence of internet news on audiences would have been harder to determine than the influence of television. Ethnographic research was beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the research for this project provided a wealth of information that suggests interesting connections that could be explored in the future.

In Chapter One, I examine television news transcripts for the week following the announcement of the peanut butter recall, from February 14, 2007 to February 22, 2007. For this chapter I acquired an extensive number of transcripts for close readings and content analysis. Sources that were too brief or poorly transcribed were eliminated from my research. As a result, sixty-two transcripts remained for content analysis.

For Chapter Two I examined fifty transcripts of newscasts from September 14, September 15, and September 16, 2007 that related to the contamination and recall of bagged spinach. Due to the larger volume of news stories on this topic, I selected a few news stations based on the content of their newscasts and looked at their transcripts for several subsequent days. This generated an additional forty-nine transcripts. However, only the initial fifty transcripts were used for my content analysis while the remainder supplemented or reinforced my content analysis.

In Chapter Three a total of ninety-nine transcripts were studied. The television transcripts are between March 24, 2005, which was a few days after Ayala’s contact with Wendy’s and April 23, 2005 when she was arrested. For the content analysis of Chapter Three, I placed no numeric limits on the transcripts and instead wanted to approach the materials by simply totaling the number of phrases and word occurrences.
Because the contention of this thesis is that narrative content frames our understanding of food contamination, I performed close readings of the printed transcripts of television news reports. In some cases this was rather difficult due to poor transcriptions of the original broadcast or the lack of uniform transcription conventions. For instance, interviews can be bracketed off from reporters’ statements through symbols (“, //, or <”) or through the use of capital letters. As a result, I had to assess news content, quoted statements, and unfamiliar phrases based on their similarity to other texts within my study. Other barriers include the use of proper nouns and their variable spelling. The use of a proper noun alone sometimes required research to determine whether the name mentioned was a local restaurant, a grocery store, or a cuisine.

Although there were difficulties presented by looking closely at the language used in news reports of food, this analysis indicated larger cultural issues that would have been missed otherwise. In Chapter Three, the framing of Anna Ayala and Wendy’s employees revealed that victims and criminals were presented in terms of class and gender through phrases like “Las Vegas woman.” The subtle differences between a “Las Vegas woman” and a “woman from Las Vegas” suggest that even the newscasters’ use of prepositions can alter the television audience’s interpretation of food contamination. This example also illustrates how important the method of counting such phrases was to the overall results of this research.

In the second chapter regarding spinach I performed close readings of the content and analyzed specific word choices. However, the large number of news stories made it necessary to limit the transcripts to the first day and a half after the E. coli outbreak. Because the number of news reports regarding spinach contamination were higher than that for Wendy’s chili contamination and the peanut butter recall, I attempted to follow some of the stations’ coverage
throughout the following two weeks. Unfortunately, the results of this were sporadic, but they did offer supplementary information and in at least one case mirrored one of my contentions based on the first few days’ coverage.

While Chapter Three was based on my method of content analysis, it also incorporated Michel Foucault’s and Michel de Certeau’s theories of power. Although Ayala is negatively framed in the media, through the application of de Certeau’s and Foucault’s theories her actions suggest resistance toward larger power dynamics. Additionally, the broadcasts’ language describing Wendy’s supports Foucault’s statement that power obscures itself through discourse.

The incidents discussed in this thesis all involve the contamination of convenience foods. The first chapter discusses peanut butter contamination, while the second approaches bagged spinach, and the third reviews the contamination of a fast food item. However, the food items discussed here also could be assessed on their ability to be consumed in the home. While peanut butter and spinach are purchased for home consumption, the consumption of Wendy’s chili typically occurs in their restaurants. I mention this issue because food’s close associations with identity mean that the type of food product contaminated impacts the breadth of social concerns implied in contamination narratives.

The three case studies reveal common elements in the presentation of food contamination narratives in news media. First, all three chapters regard these narratives as not simply as food safety information presented to consumers, but also as information which guides people into particular conceptions about themselves and others. For instance, larger concerns over what it means to be an American can be seen in the representations of spinach and fast food contamination. It is not only constructions of nationality that appear in news media; additionally,
these news reports suggest an understanding of socioeconomic class and gender based on their presentation.

All three chapters are also concerned with the concept of taboo. This is most readily apparent in Chapter Three which discusses the taboos of cannibalism and contact with the dead. However, the first two chapters deal with taboos as well. In both Chapters One and Two there are concerns that food may be contaminated with fecal matter. But, because all chapters attend to concerns regarding social categories, they also address taboos against breaking community boundaries, dismissing normative gender roles, and participating in alternative food practices. Foods are often used to mark the boundary of a community, region, or nation, so the challenge that food contamination presents to these markers of community or national identity can be quite strong (Keller Brown and Mussel). So, in essence, the following chapters convey the ways in which those challenges to identity can be taboos and additionally the way news broadcasters capitalize on these taboos to create sensational news reports.

At the beginning of this introduction I asked what happens to the positive associations when common foods are contaminated or recalled and how narratives about food contamination are framed so that they may be incorporated into individuals’ lives and American society in total. While I have far from a comprehensive answer, some serious responses to these questions developed from my research. In some ways the positive associations one has with food never go away without a seriously negative event to influence one’s opinion. The people who were at Wendy’s when Anna Ayala claimed that there was a finger in her chili will likely have difficulty consuming chili again. And the family of those who died from E. coli infection may decide spinach is off-limits. However, it is unlikely that televisions audiences would alter their food habits in the long-term. Certainly, the immediate danger of food borne illness eliminates certain
foods from people’s diets, but once it is apparently safe to consume spinach or peanut butter again most people go back to their typical foodways.

My research shows that food contamination narratives do not necessarily alter opinions about food (although they can). Instead, because food contamination narratives often involve placing blame on individuals or groups, these events and reports may change the way people view ethnic groups, children, immigrants, vegetarians, or people from outside their respective communities. Furthermore, narratives of food contamination change the way individuals approach their own social roles. Extrapolating from close readings of my primary texts on peanut butter and spinach contamination, parents seem the most likely to alter their behaviors based on the narratives. This is particularly true due to the high number of news outlets reporting on sick children. Caretakers (nurses, retirement home or hospice care staff, children of aged adults, day care workers) may be most affected by news reports of contamination since they may be responsible for the health of another individual. This suggests an answer to my second question regarding the ways people incorporate this information into their understanding of national or individual identity. That the research presented here suggests through exposure to food contamination narratives in the media, individuals may be more likely to change their opinions of social groups or their own social roles than to change their opinions about particular food items.
“CUPBOARD” CONTAMINATION: THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF PEANUT BUTTER

For many, many years my parents have selected Peter Pan peanut butter for family consumption. At the warehouse grocery store, Sam’s Club, the peanut butter came in bulk cardboard tubs that could accommodate a family of six. Looking for value in their purchases, my parents also were frequent shoppers at Wal-Mart, the corporate sibling of Sam’s Club. So, when Peter Pan was not in the house, Great Value, Wal-Mart’s store brand, was. In 2007, while visiting my parents one weekend, I noticed a jar of peanut butter in their cupboard. Printed on the top of the jar was 2114; this was one of the batch numbers associated with the national recall of Peter Pan and Great Value peanut butter. After I told my father about the peanut butter’s potential contamination from salmonella, he shrugged and said that the jar was half empty and no one was sick. Contrasted with the national media’s concern, my father’s approach to the peanut butter took his recent consumption of the food into account. Additionally, his confidence in his own immune system superseded any national worry about food safety. In total, though, this interaction reflects the ways in which individuals negotiate food contamination and the narratives told in association with food safety.

Although the recall of peanut butter products began in February 2007, the buildup to such an extensive recall started in November of 2006. A network of healthcare professionals consisting of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and state health departments saw a considerable increase in cases of salmonellosis nationwide in October and November of 2006.\(^1\) Prior to this, cases of Salmonella Tennessee were in the range of one to five occurrences a month, but in October the number jumped to thirty reported cases. While multiple types of salmonella are consistently active and induce varying rates of illness, it was the increase in this

\(^1\) This network is called PulseNet and investigates food borne illness through the use of molecular biology. PulseNet “genetically fingerprints” bacteria to determine the specific strain of bacteria and to link a single case of food borne illness to possible nationwide outbreaks.
particular strain of salmonella which caught the attention of doctors reporting to the Centers for Disease Control (Centers for Disease Control 33).

In January of 2007, surveys were given to affected individuals and it was found that the common link was peanut butter. Eighty-five percent of the 26 people surveyed consumed peanut butter in the week prior to illness. This then led to a larger survey of 65 people which produced similar results. But in this survey two specific brands of peanut butter, Great Value and Peter Pan, appeared more frequently in respondents’ surveys (Centers for Disease Control 33-34). Ultimately, Peter Pan and Great Value provided samples of their peanut butter, which proved to be contaminated and to match samples taken from the homes of sickened individuals. On February 13, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) received the CDC’s report spurring them to notify the public of the risk to public health and to dispatch investigators to the peanut butter manufacturing plant (U.S. Food and Drug Administration). After the recall and public health warning, reports of illness dropped dramatically and continued to fall until they reached levels similar to those prior to the first increases in salmonellosis. In the end, though, 628 individuals were diagnosed with salmonellosis (Centers for Disease Control 34).

According to the FDA, the contaminated peanut butter was produced by ConAgra foods in Georgia (Centers for Disease Control 34). Although news media speculation regarding the source of contamination ranged from dirty jars and equipment to fecal matter, I could locate no report from the FDA or USDA that concluded that those were in fact the origins of contamination. In fact, there were no updates that named any specific cause of the contamination. Despite the lack of official confirmation, MSNBC.com did publish an Associated Press (AP) report on April 5, 2007 that stated the salmonella contamination resulted from a leaky roof and a faulty sprinkler system. More specific details were left out of the report
and I was unable to locate a television news transcript that corresponded to the information on MSNBC’s website (Associated Press). Perhaps the absence of this information in television news reports reflects in the apprehension about its source. In the associated press report a ConAgra spokesperson explains that the moisture from the roof and sprinklers likely mixed with peanut dust which then contaminated the peanut butter. This explanation is mirrored in a ConAgra press release also dated April 5, 2007. It is unclear, though, whether the AP report appeared before the press release or after.

Although the broader purpose of this study of mass media coverage of the 2007 recall is to explore the relationship between narrative components, identity, and social constructions of gender and class, the above description is meant to shows the multiple parts of the event and the distance between government agencies and television viewers. Gary Alan Fine’s folkloristic work details the relationship between national networks like the FDA or CDC and local communities: “Communities are increasingly connected to a nation-wide organizational network as a result of governmental intervention, industrialization, and national mass media. Community institutions have been displaced by national institutions” (121). While Fine acknowledges mass media’s role in the life of small communities and their well-being, I believe he places industry, government, and media too close to one another in terms of influence and importance. Usurped or voluntarily given up by the government, the job of reporting food contamination has fallen on privately funded news agencies. Thus individuals rely not on factual information as confirmed by government agencies, but instead on internet, television, and print news for information about food recalls. The necessity of reporting relevant yet sensational stories effectively changes food contamination information from factual warnings about food safety into a narrative genre that reconfirms normative behaviors and cultural myths. News reporting of the 2007 peanut butter
recall reveals how the framing of food contamination events can buttress dominant beliefs about the place of women and children within US society. Additionally, coverage of the 2007 peanut butter recall reveals a power structure which values the middle and upper class as authorities in health and nutrition, while devaluing the ability of working class families to understand and address food borne illness.

To illustrate the ways in which peanut butter contamination could reinforce or alter gender norms, social roles, and class division, it is important to see how peanut butter is framed through advertising and common usage. Commercials for peanut butter are likely to depict two concepts aside from an image of peanut butter: an expression of love between family members and a moral lesson. In one recent commercial for Jif peanut butter, two boys are vying for the last slice of bread with peanut butter on it. The mother in this commercial allows one of the boys, Jake, to slice the bread in half to which he exclaims, “Nice!” However, she then allows the other child, Cody, to select his slice first, to which he also responds even more emphatically, “Nice!” As a result, both boys learn a valuable lesson about sharing as a result of eating their afternoon snack (PeterPansLostboys). This is not the sole peanut butter commercial which includes teaching moments between family members; it is only the most recognizable of the commercials.

Not only does this particular commercial indicate who the consumers of peanut butter may be (children and families), it also shows the type of home and lifestyle a family of Jif peanut butter eaters would have. First, the children split one piece of bread, which subtly depicts a frugal, though not cheap, household. Cody, Jake, and their mother are all at home during the day, as indicated by the amount of light. One could assume that because they are not eating a full peanut butter sandwich the time of day is mid-afternoon, well before the dayshift of a full-
time working mother would be done. Both children and their mother wear clothing that is not extravagant, but does appear neat and well cared for. In addition, the family’s home is simple and the most costly item visible may be the countertop on which they prepare their snack. Bright orange chairs sit around a kitchen table in the background, while the foreground reveals a simple white plate and butter knife. While the accessories and the minutiae of this commercial seem inconsequential, they reveal the perception of peanut butter manufacturers and advertisers: their customers are middle-class or working-class families who abstain from extravagant spending.

Similar to television commercials, still images in print ads make use of the relationship between young children and parental figures. Peter Pan peanut butter largely exploits the idea of “the child at heart,” but the main page of its website shows a mother and daughter both laughing as they share a piece of apple with peanut butter (ConAgra Foods). Peter Pan’s competitor, Jif, also uses visual representations of mother-child relationships to sell its product. Jif’s main page at first glance does not seem to play on these ideas; however, other pages within the site clearly indicate the importance of motherhood in their advertising campaign. The heading “Mom Advisor” leads to multiple areas with the apparent purpose of advising mothers on nutrition, peanut butter, and parenting (The J.M. Smucker Company). By creating ad campaigns specifically addressing mothers, Jif and Peter Pan metaphorically speak the words, “You, as a mother, should provide sustenance.”

“Choosy moms choose Jif,” or so says Jif’s slogan. In this single line, Jif creates a community of women who already select Jif peanut butter. The slogan also suggests that women who would select an alternate brand of peanut butter are not choosy. In this way, working-class mothers who purchase store brands appear less discriminating or knowledgeable about nutrition. This slogan, though, indicates an even broader group of mothers who purchase peanut butter,
regardless of brand. By naming a community and their particular behaviors, Jif and other peanut butter producers give consumers an outward marker of identity. Additionally, this slogan illustrates the appropriate way to be a mother: make wholesome and nutritious consumer decisions which help nurture and protect children. While the associations with parenting are present in image, marketing slogans, and product information, other aspects of marketing campaigns focus on a nostalgia of childhood and a Rockwellesque vision of America.

Nostalgia appears in a variety of ad campaigns as a marketing strategy for numerous industries. For instance, Jif’s main page offers a link to jack-o-lantern themed cookies and other recipes (The J.M. Smucker Company). The association of Halloween, childhood, and nostalgia clearly emerges in the images used by peanut butter producers to sell their products. Although recipes are often used by the food industry to illustrate ways to use their products and create a perceived need for their product, these recipes also capitalize on holidays and happy memories. Furthermore, Peter Pan’s mascot is the Disney icon, Tinkerbell, who not only connotes the magic of childhood, but also the historically conservative ideologies of the Disney company. After all, Peter Pan is the story of a child who does not want to grow up. The narrative embodies nostalgia, particularly nostalgia for childhood, but also for a past era in America in which children were still “innocent.”

Peanut butter advertisements, in both print and television, use popular imagery representative of innocence to convey nostalgia to consumers. Using Caucasian children, a common element in peanut butter advertisements, and particularly girls, connotes a vision of nostalgic innocence based on deeply ingrained ideologies of race and gender (Giroux 277). Representations of innocence like these rely on the idea of an untroubled, homogenous national body; as Henry Jenkins notes, “The innocent child is caught somewhere over the rainbow-
between nostalgia and utopian optimism, between the past and the future” (5). Innocent in its associations with childhood and with the past, peanut butter is positioned in advertisements as a wholesome, nostalgic food for simple, traditional people. Thus, peanut butter marketing relies on this nostalgic, hegemonic, and problematic view of childhood to represent the product’s wholesomeness and desirability.

Great Value and Peter Pan peanut butter are seen as wholesome; however, these particular brands of peanut butter are less expensive than many brands. While peanut butter is an inexpensive food most associated with middle and working-class families, it is not necessarily precluded from consumption by the wealthy. However, like many other products, there are some brands more associated with wealthy classes and other brands associated with working classes. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, advertising campaigns eschew cosmopolitanism completely in favor of a “down-homey” representation of peanut butter consumers. The brands sold at organic food stores are perhaps more indicative of upper economic and social classes than Peter Pan is. Great Value, in its role as a store brand, already connotes working class and low income families. Additionally, it is sold at Wal-Mart stores which market themselves in terms of savings and families, targeting a population that values thrift and economic practicality. Thus, the contamination of these two brands of peanut butter is already positioned in terms of economic class.

Peter Pan and Great Value, the peanut butter brands recalled in 2007, are sold in many grocery stores throughout the country. Searches for stores carrying Peter Pan peanut butter in the Omaha-metro area reveal a wide variety of grocery stores; however, none of the stores listed on their site specialize in organic, specialty, or ethnic foods. Noticeably absent from the list is Whole Foods, a grocery store chain whose prices are high enough to incur the nickname Whole

2 This search can be performed on Peter Pan’s website.
Paycheck (Maloney). Although regional grocery stores such as Baker’s appear on the list, Wal-Mart stands out amongst the other stores. One reason that Wal-Mart’s place on this list is noticeable is that it also carries Great Value brand peanut butter.

The name Great Value is a store or “value” brand carried by Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is often derided for its business and political practices, but also for the lack of quality perceived in Wal-Mart’s clothing and other products. Regardless of its popular perceptions, Wal-Mart’s advertising campaign is one focused on the affordability of its store’s merchandise. So, Wal-Mart cultivates a market share it sees as not only appreciating value, in other words low cost, but demanding it. Gourmet brands of peanut butter, such as P.B. Loco and Peanut Butter & Co. retail online for five dollars or more for a small container (P.B. Loco Holdings, Inc.; Peanut Butter & Co.). This is in contrast to a large, forty ounce jar of Great Value brand peanut butter which retails for $3.98 at my local Wal-Mart Supercenter. In addition to the different prices, P.B. Loco is very different from Great Value and Peter Pan in the variety of flavors offered. P.B. Loco comes in flavors tailored to an upscale and urban market familiar with sophisticated gourmet flavor combinations and international cuisines. One variety, Peanut Butter with Asian Curry Spice can be a ready component in main dishes calling for chicken or seafood, challenging the common idea that peanut butter is a sandwich and snack food best paired with bread and fruit. In doing this, companies like P.B. Loco appeal to a group of American consumers familiar with Thai, Indian, and even African cuisines who comfortably incorporate those foods into their own meal cycles.

In other circumstances, I would say that P.B. Loco is simply offering immigrant communities and lovers of international foods a product missing from store shelves. However, P.B. Loco is available only through a few distributors, a handful of P.B. Loco restaurants, and

---

3 This price point is based on visits to a Findlay, Ohio Wal-Mart during March of 2009.
online. Restaurants are located in Wisconsin, New York, Colorado, Arizona, and Minnesota and sell peanut butter styled café and coffeehouse food. Ultimately, the ability to purchase Peanut Butter with Asian Curry Spice is limited to those with internet access or those near the few P.B. Loco restaurants. As a result, P.B. Loco aligns itself with middle or upper-class consumers while Great Value and Peter Pan cater to working-class consumers.

Commercials and advertising, such as those for Jif and Peter Pan, present peanut butter as not just a household foodstuff, but also a symbol of the knowledge, care, and love that a guardian passes on to a child. This symbolism is not purely the invention of advertisers; instead these commercials reflect the ubiquity of such a food as peanut butter and its transformation into an integral part of any household. As Juliann Sivulka points out, “household objects embody both the relationships and routines of private daily life and the social relationships of production and distribution” (16). Because peanut butter is considered an appropriate food for snacks, breakfast, lunch, and in some instances even dinner, it becomes part of familial interactions. For instance, the preparation and consumption of school lunches containing peanut butter sandwiches is a routine part of many parents’ and children’s days. So, the relationship between a stay-at-home or working mother and her child can be symbolically expressed and strengthened through the act of eating a sack lunch containing peanut butter. This is not to say that mass media images of caring parents and adoring children do not affect household relations, but that foodstuffs such as peanut butter can also become an important part of the lived daily experiences of a household.

Overall, peanut butter is an important foodstuff to understand when discussing the performance of motherhood and parenthood. Practices commonly associated with good parenting, such as proper hygiene, nutritional care, emotional support, encouragement, and mentoring can be manifest through parental performance, particularly the performance of
motherhood, which may involve peanut butter. Peanut butter is nutritious, containing magnesium, fiber, and protein, and so provides parents with an opportunity to perform what is thought to be appropriate nutritive care. Emotional care is also associated with peanut butter: due to its slight sweetness and natural oiliness it is a frequent ingredient in childhood treats and comfort food. Additionally, peanut butter is one of the first foods children learn how to consume without the aid of a parent. A spoon, a utensil which needs no particular supervision, is all that is needed to enjoy peanut butter. When parents instruct children how to carefully use a butter knife, one of the first things prepared with said knife is a peanut butter sandwich. In this way parents can guide their children through hallmarks of emotional and mental growth, while teaching children important skills.

Peanut butter, aside from being nutritious, is also a low cost and quickly prepared food, making peanut butter is an obvious food to purchase when managing family budgets, schedules and waistlines. Since peanut butter is so inexpensive to produce, it is widely distributed to people in famine-ridden countries (The Economist). It requires little to no preparation for consumption and thus is an easy choice for busy and low income households. Peanut butter’s wholesome associations are increased through the lack of preparation time and its closeness with actual peanuts; it does not need to be disguised by other foods to be appealing, it smells of peanuts, it is the same color as peanuts and therefore seems more natural, safe, and healthful, and moral (Raspa 193). According to the author of *Manufacturing Tales*, sociologist Gary Alan Fine, “People have numerous behavioral options, but most options are disregarded because of real or imagined costs, or because making that choice never seems to be an option” (6). The real or imagined costs of peanut butter are generally low in comparison with the food’s perceived
benefits of nutrition, tastiness, and affordability, and in its symbolic form, morality and parental love.

These associations of parenting and peanut butter mean that media reports of peanut butter contamination carry particular resonance for audiences when they are narratives about children. However, stories involving children and presumably vulnerable groups like pregnant women or the elderly can take several other forms that also appeal to the protective feelings of audiences. Although salmonella causes severe food poisoning in adults, it rarely results in death; however, it can be fatal for those with weakened immunity or developing immune systems. As a result, children and the elderly are more severely affected than other age groups. As a result, stories of their illnesses may be more graphic or may involve more intense symptoms. Thus, stories involving children and the elderly are easily sensationalized and provide intense emotional connections between viewers and subject matter. In fact, in a sample of sixty-two news transcripts from February 15 through February 16 of 2007, thirty-two discuss the effect of the recall or disease on children, or the consumption of peanut butter by children, in their news reports.

These news reports use several different techniques to illustrate the vulnerability of the children affected by food contamination. Most frequently reporters talk directly with children and combine their words with information from the reporters. In one particular example, a child says about having salmonellosis: "I threwed up” (“CBS Health Watch”). This particular language, with its childlike and colloquial nature, conveys a sense of the child’s innocence and naiveté about how he was sickened. In another exchange, a young girl introduced as six-year-old Aubrey told a reporter she liked peanut butter and bananas together. When the reporter asked, “How good is that?” Aubrey’s response was “really good” (News2 Daybreak). The simplicity
and matter-of-factness of this response, while likely edited to fit time constraints and the desired tone of the report, again convey a childhood replete with simple pleasures like peanut butter, interrupted by the adult world and its dangers.

Besides talking directly to children, reporters and anchors talk to parents of affected children, having them discuss how they realized their children were sick with salmonella poisoning. Often, parents realized that their children were ill, but believed the sickness to be the result of a “stomach flu.” However, some stories were more dramatic. One particular story involved a toddler who was ill and was no longer urinating, a sign of dehydration (News 10). In either case, the mild presentation of symptoms or the prospect of hospitalization, the narrative moves beyond the feeling that illness is a part of life and creates the impression that any illness has the potential to be spectacularly dangerous.

In interviews with people who identified the disease as the flu, it becomes apparent that parents may treat food poisoning differently than other types of diseases. One mother thought her entire family had a virus until she read about the recalled peanut butter on the internet. This approach combines the folk knowledge of disease that is an active part of a traditional mothering role with the use of modern tools to protect the family from disease and to solve other problems.

Other narratives involve public school systems and how they addressed the peanut butter recall. Some statements simply are about the number of calls schools received from concerned parents, parents who sent their children off with peanut butter sandwiches and other parents who want to know the type of peanut butter provided by schools (News2 Daybreak). Notably, these narratives reveal time gaps between the issuing of a recall notice and the transmission of that information to parents and schools. Additionally, these stories show how the traditional responsibilities of parents, providing protection and nourishment, have been institutionalized
through school systems and food industries and co-opted from parents. While this may be apparent to cultural critics and libertarians, the revelation of this fact during a food recall may challenge the assumptions of many consumers, in particular those who define themselves as good parents.

Moreover, people participate in the consumption and preparation of certain foods because of their ability to mark a social role, not just a relationship. As foodways scholars point out, “Foodways provide a whole area of performance in which statements of identity can be made- in preparing, eating, serving, forbidding, and talking about food” (Kalčík 54). Because peanut butter symbolizes the nurturing parent through advertising and because of its integration into performances of this identity, the contamination of peanut butter and its subsequent effect on the health of family members has the ability to threaten one’s sense of identity. Even those individuals whose families are unharmed during widespread food contamination are subject to a sense of unease caused by depictions of the vulnerability of consumers, especially children.

This sense of unease can strengthen the compensatory effort of parents to secure the health and safety of their children. Turning to identifiable methods for controlling imperceptible biological contaminants is presented as a viable choice in news reports. This response is apparent in new stories that depict parents who now refuse to feed their children peanut butter of any kind. In one news report a parent, Susanna Cox, told reporters how she lay with her children while they were ill and would no longer give them peanut butter (“Peanut Butter Dangers”). Even without directly interviewing parents, reporters indicate through their language that parents control the border between the home and the outside world: “As for Ron Baker his family is staying away from peanut butter for a while” (Late News). The reporter does not actually indicate that Ron Baker has forbidden peanut butter in his home, only that his family is not going
to consume it for a period of time. Furthermore, although the specific reason for not consuming peanut butter is not explained, the impression conveyed by the reporter is that a father can protect his family by controlling their food purchases. Another interviewee explained: “when you think there could be a sickening item in my house, it's pretty scary” (Eyewitness News).

Reports which combine the sickening details of food poisoning, depictions of traumatized parents, and attempts to prevent illness through food purchases relate a story in which contaminated peanut butter invades the “safe” space of the home. Furthermore, framing food contamination narratives to include the refusal of food products enhances the sense that there is a border between public and private and that this delineation should be maintained for the safety of the family.

Changes in the way households negotiate this border and perceive the home as private and secure are also included in food contamination narratives. The sickness of a child, usually dealt with in a private context, requires a more public approach when the cause of illness is food borne. Doctors are generally urged or required to report cases of food borne illness; depending on the scope of a food borne illness outbreak, investigators may need to perform lengthy interviews with family members and search cupboards and refrigerators for the offending food. A definitive diagnosis of salmonella poisoning requires identifying the bacteria in stool samples, but investigators would also gather detailed information on food habits, bowel movements, and hygiene, not to mention descriptions of symptomatic fevers and vomiting. Thus, what is already a private event, psychologically, emotionally, and physically, has to be shared with outsiders to the family and community. Whether or not this compounds the trauma is difficult to say; however, it is certain that during occurrences of food borne illness, household members’ perception of the home as a private, safe space is challenged.
In many news reports of the recall, anchors and reporters mentioned the pantry or cupboard. It is hard to imagine a more enclosed interior space than a pantry or a space more taken at its functional and face value. Although these small spaces are not considered private in the same way a bedroom is, it is considered snooping and invasive to look through someone’s pantries and cupboards. Cupboards are located in the less public areas of the home, in kitchen and bathrooms. Unlike the entryway, living room or dining room, kitchens are generally less formal, more casual and farther away from front doorways. Kitchens are more likely to be the place where everyday eating occurs, in contrast to the dining room reserved for special occasions. So, the proclamation that “the peanut butter in your cupboard could make you sick” is a strong way of drawing viewers into a news story and challenging the way they look at the privacy and safety of their home and environment (*KOMO First News*). While such phrases certainly reflect the prevalence and popularity of peanut butter, they also connote dangers hidden in seemingly safe places, enforcing a sense of urgency and fear.

Although divisions between the private home and the outside world are readily apparent, concepts of public and private are also reflected in the way news reports localize food contamination and food recalls. Instead of perceiving the public and private as divided by an invisible barrier, individuals measure food contamination threats along a continuum of memory and experience of similar threats, as well as its actual geographic proximity to one’s home. Anchors, producers, and reporters capitalize on this by relating national product recalls and food contamination to local areas and agencies and asking local people to give their perspective on the news.

News stations across the country localized the peanut butter recall by including information from viewers who contacted the station and encouraging other viewers to do the
same (FOX 9). One station reported: “We have been swamped with calls here all day today with folks from all over the viewing area” (6:00pm-6:30pm News). Another station stressed the local impact: “We received numerous calls and e-mails from people saying they got sick from it. KHNL News 8's Leland Kim talked to some of these people and joins us live with more” (NBC HI NEWS). Such stories showed viewers that peanut butter contamination was a problem occurring within their own figurative backyard. So, the public nature of food recalls show that the relative safety and privacy of one’s community is at risk from problems in the food supply.

Further increasing the proximity of food recalls, local institutions expressed their perspectives and provided specific instances of the food recall’s effect on their operations. Food banks, schools and hospitals all were discussed in newscasts as being affected by the contaminated food. Other groups like county and state health departments were quoted as experts or called upon to attest to the effects of salmonella and the potential reasons for contamination further reinforcing the local dimension of the food recall. When a Houston news outlet described how the principal of West University Elementary School in Houston replaced students’ peanut butter sandwiches with peanut butter sandwiches made in the school cafeteria, this story was picked up by other news agencies in various cities (News2 Daybreak). This narrative about a protective principal who helped students allowed viewers to feel connected with their community during a difficult time. However, when the story was picked up by news agencies like WYOU in Pennsylvania or National Public Radio, the community surrounding West University Elementary School may have felt their privacy diminished by such public exposure (“CDC Tracks”; M-F Morning News).

Several local television stations interviewed affected individuals, while others picked up the interviews shown on national news. In some cases interviewees are identified by name but
not location. Because specifics are not included in the news reports, viewers can contextualize these people’s stories within the local community. This is particularly the case when a few images and names become linked with a particular food recall like the 2007 Peter Pan and Great Value recall. The Gilbert family of Oklahoma appeared in newscasts in North Carolina, Nevada, Chicago, New Mexico, and on the nationally televised CBS Morning News. Although their location is said to be Oklahoma, their hometown is named only in CBS’s national broadcast (“CBS Health Watch”). This allowed the Gilbert family’s stories to be recontextualized within any number of local communities. Some news reports give an interviewee’s location, like a local high school senior concerned about the peanut butter cookies she made for her high school class (5pm-6pm News). Often the person’s county is given or the word “local” is used to explain an interviewee’s relationship to the viewer’s community. In all of these cases, the news media capitalizes on concepts of community to sensationalize food contamination reports and news recalls while assisting the viewership in uniting to face a difficult situation.

While news reports localized the effects of food contamination, the actual flaw in the food system was generally identified as removed from the locality. Roughly seventeen transcripts out of sixty-two described the problem as coming from a plant in Georgia. Although this processing plant was the location of contamination, the problems with this specific site are emphasized over the hazards inherent in a large food system like that in the United States. The massive number of peanut butter consumers and producers relative to the small number of food inspectors means that there are likely to be gaps in inspection. Additionally, because peanut butter is kept at room temperature and then shipped long distances, like many modern food products, it offers a nurturing environment for salmonella. However, the broad issues involved in producing and shipping large quantities of foods are not addressed in local, or even national,
broadcast news. Instead, the modern food industry and its inherent flaws are ignored when contamination is pinpointed to a specific place.

News reports of food contamination suggest that it is not the working class who determines the appropriate way to combat food borne illness or food recalls. Newscasts frequently rely on the authority of doctors, nutritionists, and medical correspondents to explain the symptoms of and treatment for food borne illness and the related product recalls. Furthermore, when folk knowledge and interpretations of disease are presented in these newscasts, they are diminished by the perceived authority of mass media and government officials. Additionally, the very act of disseminating food contamination and health information reveals a power structure in which the middle and upper class take responsibility for the general health of the working class.

In some news broadcasts, the stories involve food banks that must remove the contaminated peanut butter from their shelves before it reaches the hands of their clients. One person interviewed in the broadcast explained how the poor have such limited funds that the medical cost related to salmonellosis would add to their burden. Other reporters relate the frantic pace at which workers and organizers had to contact other agencies and consumers: “Second Harvest food bank has none of the peanut butter in the current supply. More than 300 agencies get food there. They got e-mails today, warning them to get rid of Peter Pan or Great Value peanut butter if they have it” (News 10). These stories reflect the difficulty of being poor and affected by illness; however, they also emphasize the challenges middle-class facilitators of food banks have during food recalls. While the management of nonprofit organizations can be challenging, this emphasis on the middle class reinforces the notion that the middle class is ultimately responsible for the working class. Additionally, this notion emphasizes the
organization of food banks and management of food crises as heroic, while implying that food bank clients are ignorant of larger national issues and events.

The credibility and transmission of food contamination narratives depend on the reliability of news outlets. Anchors who appear on morning news shows are familiar to viewers. On NBC the peanut butter story was reported on *The Today Show* by Ann Curry, Meredith Vieira, and Matt Lauer. The recent ad campaign for *The Today Show* shows the anchors talking to one another in a friendly matter, smiling at the camera, and crowding together for what seems to be a photo. This treatment of news anchors as a family lends them credibility in the sense that they too participate in family (albeit a work family) and thus are capable of caring. The long-term position of these anchors at particular desks also means that individuals who habitually watch the show become used to seeing and hearing the anchors and depending on them to complete their morning ritual.

It is important to note that regular anchors function as nodes of mass media. Gary Alan Fine states: “Media—especially the truly mass media, such as television, radio, and mass circulation magazines—can be conceived as the nodes, or central actors, of an enormous network” (14). In the same way that traditional communities had nodes through which information passed from person to person, mass media and today's online social networking sites function in a similar way. An individual hears about the contamination (whether it is framed as fact or narrative) through a trustworthy, mass broadcast node, such as *The Today Show* or the local news. Due to the national presence of network morning news programs like *The Today Show*, one individual node can be responsible for multiple tendrils expanding away from its original source.
In turn, each of the individuals exposed to these narratives and events then functions as a node within their own social networks, retelling the story and perhaps adding their own individual perspectives. For instance, the peanut butter recall was so widespread that for the narrative to adapt to a new social network or setting, details related to the storyteller’s own experience had to be included. So, this new node of information could include details about locating a recalled jar of peanut butter in the cupboard, becoming ill previous to the recall, or explaining the feelings associated with watching a particular report of food borne illness. These retellings allow one to become an authority within a social circle, thus serving a vital function of identity.

The social construction of identity through discourses of gender, race, parenting, subculture and community appears through news media coverage of food contamination and product recalls. In the 2007 recall of Peter Pan and Great Value peanut butter, the news media constructed reports to emphasize their figurative and literal “local” content. By depicting local individuals, organizations, and corporations, news media created a sense of relevance for small communities. However, emphasizing the local impact of salmonellosis and distancing communities from the origins of contamination obscures the problems inherent in America’s food industrial complex.

In addition to expressing food contamination narratives in terms of community, news broadcasts often showed how the peanut butter recall disturbed the home and family. Emphasizing the cupboard as a place where contaminated food hides, broadcasters described salmonella contamination invading and hiding in the home. Through these reports the boundary which separates the private home from the rest of the world appears vulnerable. Depictions of sickened children and worried parents present in coverage of the 2007 peanut butter recall also
strengthened the sense that American families were in danger. Ultimately, framing food contamination narratives with children and families reinforces dominant ideas of what a good parent is.

News reporting of the 2007 peanut butter recall reveals how the framing of food contamination events can buttress dominant beliefs about the place of women and children within US society. Additionally, coverage of the 2007 peanut butter recall reveals a power structure which values the middle and upper class as authorities in health and nutrition, while devaluing the ability of working class families to understand and address food borne illness. The broader purpose of this study into mass media coverage of the 2007 recall is to explore the relationship between narrative components and the social construction of gender, class, and identity; however, some issues presented in this chapter require the future work of other scholars so that the effect of food contamination and mass media can be fully explored.
AS HEALTHY AS HAMBURGER: SPINACH CONTAMINATION AND THE NATION

As a very young and unusual child, I remember enjoying canned spinach. My mother would serve it hot in a small bowl. She would take a small, clear, diamond-patterned bottle, remove the stopper and pour a small amount of white vinegar onto the spinach. I am not sure when I stopped liking spinach, but at some point it disappeared from our dinner table. When it re-presented itself to me, I was not even aware of it. Hiding in a Wendy’s salad, it was consumed alongside oranges, almonds, iceberg lettuce, and chicken pieces. I suspect that this is the experience of many American who disliked or did not consume spinach during the elementary school years, and then redeveloped a taste for the food in adulthood. Strongly flavored, yet culinarily flexible, spinach is adaptable to varied diets and cuisines. However, when spinach was found to be the root of an *E. coli* outbreak in 2006, television network coverage of the contamination illustrated that spinach consumption is associated with class, gender, race, and even alternative lifestyles such as vegetarian, vegan, or counterculture. The complexity of these various power structures in relation to food contamination makes them difficult to pin down. However, news reports of spinach contamination suggest links to non-Caucasian ethnicity, as well as to elite and effete lifestyles.

Hailing from Persia, spinach reached Europe by way of China and Sicily (Kiple). From this route one can trace the vegetable’s appearance in multiple cuisines. Spanakopita from Greece, Italian pasta, and several dishes of Indian origin all use spinach. Since spinach is a delicate salad green it was for a long time only available in frozen or canned form. For a brief period during the year it could be found at the grocery store or farmer’s stand and even then was likely to have come from a relatively nearby location. Since the late 1970s, though, fresh spinach has become a mainstay of a healthful diet throughout the year, while canned spinach
consumption has lagged behind frozen and fresh spinach during the same time period (USDA). Fresh spinach is widely available in family style restaurants across the country, appearing in both salad bars and prepared salads, in addition to other menu offerings like Italian-style sandwiches.

Monetary considerations are important to any decision related to food. Not only do foodways reflect the backgrounds of consumers, but also the very real considerations of cost versus nutrition. According to sociologist, Gary Alan Fine, “People have numerous behavioral options, but most options are disregarded because of real or imagined costs, or because making that choice never seems to be an option” (6). So, purchasing organic, loose-leaf spinach may not be an option when compared to the similar nutritional value and lower cost of frozen spinach. Alternatively, someone familiar with food processing and organic farming may decide that the higher cost of organic produce outweighs the real cost to the environment. Furthermore, the total cost of canned spinach (monetarily, nutritionally, and environmentally) may appear extremely low, particularly for those who do not have knowledge of the nutritional differences between canned, frozen, and fresh spinach. In this case, numerous brands of fresh, bagged spinach were recalled for *E. coli* contamination.

As in the case of the peanut butter recall, local news reports emphasized the local impact of spinach contamination. Local health departments and doctors were brought in to discuss the effect of *E. coli* on the human body. News reports often referenced local grocery stores, with some reporters standing in front of the stores to interview customers as they left the store. Others simply indicated the efforts of grocers to remove the contaminated food from shelves. And, like the peanut butter recall, sickened individuals were interviewed and their stories presented to television news audiences.
However, the localizing in these reports varies in a few key ways from the peanut butter recall coverage. First, instead of county health departments, state health departments are mentioned more frequently. Additionally, there is more frequent mention of national health departments and the FDA. While this may indicate the seriousness of *E. coli*, whose symptoms are far more severe than those of salmonella, it also suggests that the widespread effect of contaminated spinach became a rallying point for nationalism.

Although viewers are not told whether some of the restaurants are owned by Americans or feature American food, it is enough to mention a name that seems foreign. For instance, in one news story, the reporter actually mocks the concerns of the restaurant with the phrase “at Le bus, the spinach is now le gone from the menu” (*NBC 10*). While this Philadelphia restaurant features American food such as buffalo wings and hamburgers, the name sounds vaguely French. Another restaurant is discussed in terms of the recall’s effect on business. At Mykonos Café, viewers are told, a large portion of their menu contains spinach (*News 10 Live*). While Mykonos Café is treated more respectfully than LeBus, news coverage still links ideas of the foreign, in this case French and Greek, with spinach and its contamination. This strengthens the idea that food contamination is a national concern only because its threat is its foreignness.

On September 18, a few days after their initial report on September 15, newscasters on WCAU of Philadelphia indicate that one Philadelphian has been affected by the disease. The news reporter then states, “But that person did not get the illness in Philadelphia.” This statement effectively exonerates any local grocery stores or restaurants, but also reinforces a community boundary through the threat of outside dangers. Furthermore, while this phrase may

---

1 Le Bus’ menu can be found at lebusmanayunk.com.
calm the nerves of people in Philadelphia, it ultimately makes the spread of contamination seem the result of outside forces.\(^2\)

At other stations, spinach was approached in a manner reminiscent of wartime rhetoric. At Minneapolis’ KSTP, a newscast uses language closely associated with the 9/11 terrorist attacks: “This is the enemy, fresh spinach.” Echoing the sentiments of KSTP, another broadcast, this time national, called the then-unknown point of contamination “Ground Zero”, thus framing its viewership in opposition to spinach and by doing so associating spinach with any person, group, or value that is seen as threatening (“Spinach E-coli”). Enacting a boundary between us and them draws on the traditional themes which already exist in common folk narratives. In fact, ethnic groups have been implicated in food contamination folklore throughout both US and European history (Fine 127-128). While immigrant status and national origin seem difficult to identify in the United States, the national community is presented as homogenous through media characterization, the discourse of “family values,” and government regulation. Thus the rhetoric of contamination relies on the prevailing notions of “Americanness.” Drawing this line recontextualizes an already existing sense of difference into the seemingly factual yet fearful presentation of food contamination. Because these newscasts were seen by large numbers of people, spinach contamination was widely seen as a threat perpetrated by outsiders.

Mary Douglas, in *Risk and Blame*, discusses the various ways in which communities allocate blame. One method of allocating blame is blaming outsiders. Douglas explains that “to be successful an accusation must be directed against victims hated by the populace” (87). Certainly there has been no group more hated than terrorists. Through legislation and common discourse, foreignness has become synonymous in many ways with terrorism. So, through an

\(^2\) Philadelphia station KYW does essentially the same thing
association between terrorism and food contamination, spinach and \textit{E. coli} infection became a source of nationalist fervor and anxiety towards migrant workers and restaurant workers.

The efficacy of this rhetorical technique relies a great deal on the framing of \textit{E. coli} and contaminated spinach as malevolently sentient beings. One newscast’s introduction explains that the upcoming program will help parents protect their children from bullies, “plus, from spinach in a bag” (\textit{News 10:00}). Apparently, spinach poses the same kind of threat as do bullies: personally intrusive, psychologically damaging, and purposefully torturous. Nationally broadcast news is not exempt from this sort of framing. On ABC’s \textit{Nightline}, graphics read “Killer in the Spinach,” which indicates the contamination of the actual spinach leaf (“Deadly Outbreak”). Additionally, it elicits the mental image of an actual person, a killer, hiding in fields of spinach. Other news reports refer to spinach as a “culprit” (“\textit{E. coli} outbreak”; \textit{KEYE News}).

The presentation of spinach as a killer or bully grants the plant a dangerous agency, one that involves a threat to average American consumers.

Along with spinach, \textit{E. coli} is also characterized as sentient. Frequently \textit{E. coli} is called a “bug” and while bugs are conceptually far from humans or other animals, this term grants \textit{E. coli} an awareness of being that is not generally assigned to bacteria. Calling \textit{E. coli} “an aggressive bacterium” or “a virulent organism” creates the impression that \textit{E. coli} affects people in a targeted, specific, and active way (\textit{NEWS 11} and \textit{9 Eyewitness}, respectively). On \textit{Good Morning America}, Diane Sawyer depicts the bacteria not only as sentient but as an assassin or criminal: “The FDA issuing a nationwide warning about deadly bacteria possibly lurking in bagged spinach” (“Dangerous \textit{E. coli}”). This presents \textit{E. coli} not as originating from the biological processes inherent in vegetables coming from the earth, but as connected with a purposeful invasion by an enemy of the state.
Responses linking the recall with concerns about tampering reinforced associations of wartime, foreignness, and danger. ABC’s *Inside the Newsroom* indicated in their newscast of September 18 that the government has “ruled out tampering as a cause” (“Spinach E-coli”). Although few news sources relayed this message, the FDA and the USDA did make clear during hearings related to the spinach recall of 2006 that regulations allow them to confiscate produce under a Bioterrorism Act (United States Senate 40). The willingness of the United States government and the news media to approach food contamination on terms similar to terrorism reveals the way in which cleanliness and food contamination become linked with nationalism and xenophobia.

For frightened consumers, though, it is not necessary to suppose whether this threat is accidental or purposeful because the concept of otherness associated with food often involves cleanliness as well. Constructions of race and ethnicity were reflected in hygiene and soap advertisements of the late 19th and early 20th century. Advertisements that advocated clean and bright skin equated virtue and civility with white, middle-class people (Sivulka 100). As a result of this framing, ethnicity is frequently linked to a lack of cleanliness. Food borne illness is often connected with animal and human feces, and this is especially true of *E. coli*, which has been linked repeatedly to the digestive tract of beef cattle. Those who perceive foreign individuals to be less civil or clean may also believe that foreign-born workers caused food contamination.

In his examination of food contamination rumors, Gary Alan Fine found that informants claimed the reasons for contamination were either “deliberate sabotage” or “unintentional carelessness due to unsanitary conditions.” While these explanations refer specifically to a common urban legend describing a fried rat served at a fast food restaurant, Fine goes on to say that the originating story held none of these details (128). The argument could be made that
intentional or unintentional carelessness is a ready explanation for any concern of food contamination. In either explanation, though, the fault lies with workers associated with the food, and in the case of *E. coli*-contaminated food those workers could become associated with incidental or purposeful contamination.

For this reason, news reports that discuss workers or the handling of the spinach are of interest. On Chicago’s WGN, newscasters reveal that contamination may be associated with the bagged spinach because of mishandling. Specifically, they point to unwashed hands as the potential source of *E. coli* contamination. The next few sentences in their newscast explain that the FDA has not pinpointed the source of contamination. However, this explanation is equal in length with the speculation mentioned regarding handwashing, so the viewership may give little thought to the potential points of contamination and instead focus on unclean hands (*WGN News*). Newscasts infrequently mention farm and restaurant workers as a source of contamination. However, as Michel Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*, discourse does not rely only on what is said, but also on what is not said. Specifically, he states: “Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies (27).” So, the absence of accusatory language toward migrant farm workers or restaurant workers is not surprising and instead is a part of a larger of discourse surrounding immigration and farm work. This discourse, in the broadest sense, incorporates a sense of California as the nation’s “Salad Bowl,” American farms so vast and corporatized that efficiency requires low-wage immigrant labor, and the
governmental and NGO structures of California which simultaneously nurture farm production and address the immigration concerns of natives and non-natives alike.

However, in an Associated Press article titled “Authorities work to pinpoint source of deadly *E. coli* contamination in spinach,” farm workers are named as a possible source of contamination. While many television newscasts report on the potential of contamination from farm workers in very unspecific terms save for the aforementioned newscast, this article paints the contamination in a particularly troubling manner. The report states that the contamination may be the result of workers relieving themselves in the field (Munoz). Because of the strong conceptual associations between the idea of farm workers and the idea of immigration, this news report suggests that spinach contamination is a foreign threat. Although the Associated Press article is not in the same medium as the television reports discussed here, television and print work alongside one another in the formation of a discourse of immigration and food contamination.

For those experiencing a crisis event, the need for credibility decreases while the desire for news increases. Fine quotes Tamotsu Shibutani’s *Improvised News* in relation to rumor and legend: “In disasters one of the first things that men seek, after saving themselves, is news. Sometimes they become so desperate for such information that they get careless about its source.” Fine goes on to say: “Such emotional conditions predispose persons and groups to accept whatever information fits their expectations” (18). In this way, the *E. coli* contamination of 2006 encouraged individuals to equate varied sources of news as equivalent, regardless of the level of accuracy or credibility.

This is reflected in frequent mentions of California, which produces large crops of spinach. Like news coverage of the salmonella-contaminated peanut butter that originated at a
manufacturing plant in Georgia, California is mentioned in several news reports. Specifically, twenty-eight out of fifty reports mention California as the potential origin of the pathogen. While reports of salmonella contamination mentioned Georgia twenty-four out of fifty times, in reports of *E. coli* contamination specific areas of California are pinpointed more frequently. It is interesting then that during the peanut butter recall investigators were aware of its specific origination, while they were unable initially to pinpoint the exact farm which produced the contaminated spinach. Through this comparison, one can see that California is viewed differently from Georgia in national discourse, and that this view is likely one of distrust and apprehension.

Rumors of food contamination often question the United States’ food industry and its respective corporations through the specific naming of individual companies, restaurants, and grocery stores (Fine 125). Admittedly, rumors and news reports can be separated by levels of believability, context, and journalistic indoctrination. However, rumors and news reports work in numerous parallel ways to inform community members, to reinforce dominant and normative behaviors, and increasingly to entertain. The similarity between rumor and news then means that news reports of food contamination are an additional source of criticism towards large food producers (Fine 14). According to this theory, the numerous mentions of California within news broadcasts and the more specific mention of particular Californian farming communities means that these news reports contain an implied criticism of California. This critique could be based on California’s domination of national discourses on immigration, the balance between nature and culture, and “family values.” Additionally, California is regularly criticized for laws, regulations, and modes of behavior related to ethnicity and immigration, alternative lifestyles and leftist leanings. In this way, the word “California” becomes a proxy for the words “foreign,”
“migrant worker,” or more specific (and derogatory) names like Hippy, Tree-Hugger, or illegal alien.

As a result, many news reports of spinach contamination diminish spinach’s status as a food with significant health benefits and instead associate the food with non-normative ways of eating. So, the recall works as a tool which tears down vegetarianism, organics, and health-foods as diets on par with the unhealthfulness of a meat-laden diet. The health food, organic, and seasonal movements have come to be associated with California, again indicating that the word “California” is coded as non-normative. This is done in a variety of ways: by discussing the recalls’ effect on vegan and vegetarian restaurants, by equating the *E. coli* found in spinach with that found in beef, and by relaying illness stories of vegetarians and health food consumers. Additionally, news reports often include some variation on the phrase “what is thought to be good for you can actually kill you.” These methods make lifestyles associated with health food or vegetarians seem ignorant, outside of normative American behavior, and deeply flawed.

One example of this framing is the story of Marion Graff, who died as a result of being infected with *E. coli*. On a national broadcast her son is interviewed: “She was always careful what she ate, and you look in her refrigerator there's always fresh produce” (“FDA Warning”). Again the framing of this illness in terms of vegetable consumption places more cultural importance on the consumption of meat. Another infected individual is named as a vegetarian in WKRN’s nightly broadcast. The reporter mentioned that a woman hospitalized with *E. coli* is a vegetarian. Reporter Scott Fralick continued, “but her doctor tells me that does not increase her likelihood of being sick” (*News 10:00*). While this statement indicates in a literal way that vegetarianism may not increase the likelihood of illness, it does suggest to viewers that there is little health benefit to not consuming meat. This reporter’s statement does not necessarily
indicate agreement by the viewing audience. Many people may come away from this broadcast believing that common sense says if you eat more spinach, you are more likely to contract an *E. coli* infection.

In *Risk and Blame*, Mary Douglas applies the theories of anthropologists to understand occurrences of leprosy in European history. She argues that European doctors and Jerusalemite doctors saw infection as the result of different processes. Its association with sin in countries like England meant that individuals thought to have leprosy were likely to be from marginalized social groups. However, in Jerusalem this was not the case and additionally, “there was no theory of the king’s body implicating the body politic” (98). Although this may seem disconnected initially from the purview of this chapter, the idea that a single person could be representative of the social, political, and national health of a country resonates with reports of individuals affected by *E. coli*.

While America turns to an elected president as its official leader, conceptually and mythically America likes to see its individual citizens as equal. Though concerns over the health of the president in some ways has been connected to debates over the nation’s welfare (John McCain’s campaign can be contextualized in this way), this concern over national health is more often embodied in individual narratives of common people. This is a common rhetorical strategy in congressional debates and political speeches as national concerns such as AIDS become associated with individuals like Ryan White, Magic Johnson, or Arthur Ashe. Another example can be found in the interlocking of discourse about euthanasia with the individual narrative of Terri Schiavo or Dr. Jack Kevorkian. The conception that individual citizens reflect the national welfare means that the woman mentioned above, Marion Graff, can be seen not as a victim of *E.
coli, but instead as the victim of a host of social concerns, everything from immigrant labor to the organic movement.

The idea that narratives of food contamination are linked to national concerns about social and cultural change is not particularly new. However, examinations of these links have previously been focused on issues related to folklore and legend. Gary Alan Fine argues that associations between rumor and social change indicate that “value shifts have unexpected effects, as members of a society cannot alter their basic mores without some ambivalence. This ambivalence, often not talked about openly, is expressed indirectly through folklore, which disguises the threat through the projection of the fear of a ‘real’ occurrence” (124). Among other social issues discussed in these chapters, one cultural shift is the changing conception of Americanness from Caucasian and English-speaking to multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. Based on Fine’s interpretation of folklore, then, food contamination narratives detail the fear of a ‘real’ threat to health while indirectly speaking about immigration and, as will be discussed later on, challenges to past associations between diet, the free market economy, and modern farming techniques. So, social change and food contamination have been contextualized within mass media news coverage instead of folklore, but the narrative still projects apprehension toward social change through the reports of food-borne illness.

Not only is this apprehension directed toward changes in the demographic make-up of the United States, it is also directed toward changes in the understanding of what defines an appropriate diet and for whom. In his 2005 address to the American Folklore Society, Michael Owen Jones noted the traditional association of masculinity with meat consumption “rather than with ‘sissy’ or ‘wimpy’ foods” (Jones 141). In contrast, health food, organic, and vegetarian proponents advocate higher consumption of vegetables than has been advocated by other
Americans in the past, most recently Dr. Robert Atkins. Additionally, the types of vegetables becoming more popular eschew the farming techniques of the last fifty or so years and instead reflect a desire for less processed foods and a reduction in chemical pesticides. This trend challenges advocates of scientific farming, as well as American capitalism expressed through the food industrial complex.

The discussion of this outbreak’s actual origins threatens the image of culture as represented by the tidy, consumer-ready bags of spinach. The inroads of nature into culture can be seen in specific news reports detailing the removal of bagged spinach from grocery store shelves. As the food is removed from shelves it becomes representative of the failing barriers placed between society and the natural processes of infection and death. This threat can also be seen in the number of references to cattle manure and contaminated fertilizer in reports of the *E. coli* outbreak. Five out of fifty news reports, both nationally and locally broadcast, made reference in some way to the contamination of spinach through animal waste. The introduction of animal feces into the farming process is a ready reminder of the lack of control culture has over nature. Simultaneously, the indication that fertilizer was contaminated with animal feces reinforces the fear of nature, which is vital to buttressing and maintaining divisions between nature and culture.

Further increasing the links between *E. coli* and vegetarian or alternative lifestyles is the practice of equating spinach with beef in terms of health. A segment on *Good Morning America* is an example of the way connections between beef and spinach increase the blame placed on vegans and vegetarians. “But these new cases involve one of the virulent strains of *E. coli*. The same type as the 1993 outbreak at Jack in the Box restaurants in Washington State, where 700 people got sick and four people died from contaminated meat” (“Dangerous E. coli”). In a report
from WCAU in Philadelphia comparisons are made between beef products and spinach when the reporter indicates that steak and burgers are available, but spinach is absent (NBC 10). WHEC in Rochester, New York makes similar links when the newscaster states, “E. coli is a bacterial infection that is caused by eating undercooked meat.” Yet another station, one in Washington, DC, compares contaminated spinach with contaminated hamburger (News 4). Here, it is clear that in terms of health it matters not whether one eats meat or spinach, thus making those diets built on legumes and vegetables seem abnormal in comparison with an omnivorous diet.

Even when statements are made indicating the healthfulness of spinach and vegetables, they are counteracted by statements made by reporters or “health experts.” For instance, on ABC’s Nightline consumers are interviewed regarding spinach. When one man states that he never lost confidence in spinach and that green vegetables are healthy, the voiceover from reporter Brian Rooney follows up with “But it’s certain that there will be other outbreaks” (“Deadly Outbreak”). Furthermore, of the fifty transcripts examined, fourteen included some expression of the statement, “what is supposed to make you strong will make you sick.” This statement encourages skepticism toward spinach in general and further skepticism towards those who consume or advocate vegetables as a staple in healthy diets, including vegetarians, health food proponents, and ethnic minorities.

Ultimately, this treatment of vegetable consumption leads viewers to believe that vegetable consumption in general is not only misguided, but foolish. This sentiment is echoed in lines such as “smart shoppers here say they are concerned and they're going to have to live without fresh bagged spinach for a while” (CHANNEL 4). The implication is that only shoppers who are unintelligent would buy bagged spinach. Interviews with other consumers reiterate this point. On ABC’s Nightline, a female consumer is asked at a Venice, California restaurant why
she decided to eat a spinach salad and her response is that she just loves spinach and could not pass it up ("Deadly Outbreak"). This acceptance of spinach regardless of the recall is contrasted against the reporter’s statement, “public confidence may need rebuilding.” And with this the report reaffirms the idea that vegetarianism is a misguided belief and practice. Again, the association between vegetarianism, disease, and California creates the impression that California is essentially foreign, a land of outsiders, connected to the United States only through legality and proximity.

In the same way that ethnic restaurants are discussed in news reports of the contamination, vegetarian restaurants, health food stores, and farmer’s markets also become associated with continued sales of spinach after the recall and are thus seen as dangerous forces in America. Although the spinach contamination was pinpointed shortly after the initial reports, news coverage often focused on those first to restock spinach. An example is this report from a Washington, DC station on September 27: “not all Giant stores have spinach on the shelves. Whole Foods will be the next to follow with Solveway and Food Lion not saying yet when spinach will be in their produce departments” (ABC 7). Closely looking at this quote, it appears that Giant and Whole Foods are on equal footing here. However, Whole Foods, associated with health foods, vegetarianism, and the organics movement, is the only store in the above list that is not associated with prudence. Neither Food Lion nor Solveway (which I believe was transcribed incorrectly from the word Safeway) have placed spinach on the shelves. Not even Giant has completely stocked spinach. As a result, the audience is left with the feeling that Whole Foods will soon and without caution open its doors to contaminated spinach. Thus, the health food movement as represented by Whole Foods can be contextualized by audience members as dangerously cavalier when it comes to food safety.
In another report, a vegan restaurant in New York, Candle 79, is favorably discussed in association with the recall. Viewers are told that Candle 79 is taking precautions to protect consumers. It is also linked with Whole Foods in a discussion of healthful eating. While this news report on CBS’ *Evening News* seems to show that healthy eating is still possible, it ultimately illustrates that the spinach recall and thus the spinach contamination is linked with deviating from the “typical” American diet of meat and starch (“FDA warns”). This is achieved through the absence of other types of restaurants and grocery stores within this report. While Whole Foods was reportedly throwing out potentially dangerous spinach, other stores such as Kroger’s were not mentioned, although they were likely doing the same thing. Additionally, this news report does not mention the hundreds of other restaurants who must substitute ingredients. As was the case with restaurants serving ethnic cuisine, vegan restaurants and health food groceries become representative of the spinach recall and its contamination, thus creating a negative association between advocates of health food and vegetarianism and the threatening appearance of outsiders.

The spinach recall of 2006 also illustrates the complex interpretation and framing of class preferences. While the particular brands of peanut butter contaminated with salmonella are largely associated with discount stores and lower socioeconomic classes, bagged spinach is less apt to be described as lower class. However, the variance between organic and non-organic spinach may reveal some class-based associations and cost calculations. What is clear is that bagged spinach is a convenience food, triple washed in chlorinated water. These steps save large amounts of time for the home cook (as someone who has triple washed spinach at home, it is rather tedious). For a modern American household, prewashed produce is an efficient way of obtaining a nutritious vegetable. However, there are a few reasons individuals may not choose
this particular convenience food. First is its association with industrialized farming and food production. Those individuals who prefer loose leaf, bundled spinach may see dirt on the leaves as evidence of its natural origins and then find appeal in the process of removing sand and other matter to make the spinach consumable. The second reason bagged spinach may be eschewed in favor of loose bulk or bundled spinach is that some families and individuals may rely on personal chefs to prepare their meals. As a result these individuals may feel more free to assert a preference for less processed foods than if they had to prepare the vegetable themselves. In the news coverage of the spinach recall in 2006, though, framings of class reflect the complex relationship Americans have with ideas of wealth and cultural capital. Specifically, news reports associate the spinach contamination with modern convenience foods. Additionally and conversely, upper classes are associated with the spinach recall through restaurants and grocery stores associated with high cuisine.

Convenience foods have become the mainstay of most American diets. Ready to eat cookies, canned meats, and bagged vegetables are available in every grocery store. Often convenience foods are associated with lower classes; however, these associations typically describe “junk food” and not bagged fresh vegetables. These associations complicate the definition of “convenience foods”; however, news reports which detail spinach contamination reaffirm that convenience products are inherently unhealthy. Four reports from the initial fifty transcripts explicitly say that bagged spinach is popular due to its convenience. Another national broadcast questions why bagged spinach in particular is contaminated while loose leaf spinach is not (“Dangerous E. coli”). While this does not seem an unreasonable line of questioning, these inquiries seem to suggest that the contamination comes not from a problem in processing or farming. Instead, this question implies that the bag is the root of the problem and thus that
convenience foods are inherently unhealthy. A Scranton, Pennsylvania station makes this connection more apparent when it literally asks if bagged vegetables are more at risk for contamination (*M-F Evening News*). In one news report, a consumer states, “Spinach is not that expensive and even though I love it and hate to throw it away, I would rather be cautious (*NBC 10*).” Through this statement viewers can see that spinach is a food associated with value, not only because it “is not that expensive,” but also because it saves time for the home cook. Although this statement does not explicitly link socioeconomic class and spinach contamination, it does suggest that an attempt to save time or money through convenience foods may be a dangerous endeavor.

Intertwining with these elements, though, are the numerous mentions of Whole Foods grocery store. As mentioned previously, Whole Foods is associated with vegetarianism and the organic foods movement, but it is also frequently associated with the upper socioeconomic classes. This is because of the higher cost of some items, but also due to large number of specialty and haute foods sold there. Alongside bagged spinach, one can find imported cheese, handmade chocolates, and exotic ingredients not necessarily in the repertoire of every home cook. The mention of Whole Foods in these newscasts is not the only indication that food contamination narratives critique the cultural capital associated with wealth. Restaurants like Bistro 215, Pulse, and Good Earth are all named as restaurants struggling with the spinach recall while trying to offer creative food (*Local News; 5:01 PM NBC; 4 News*). The names themselves, in their unfamiliarity, indicate that they are not the chain restaurants, fast food joints, or even the popularized fare shown on the Food Network that working and middle-class people consume. Instead, their unfamiliarity illustrates that only individuals with a particular kind of cultural capital know of them. While one could argue that the restaurants depicted in these news
broadcasts are associated with uncleanliness in the same way that the ethnic restaurants were during the spinach recall, the names of these restaurants do not connote ethnicities or languages outside the United States. Instead, they imply trendy American food for those who have expendable income.

However, as a convenience food, triple-washed and bagged spinach does not necessarily fit into the standard canon of class markers. Throughout news reporting, suggestions about the danger of convenience foods create the sense that those most concerned with saving time and money are taking risks with their health. That being said, some of the restaurants presented in these texts could be contextualized as upper class.

News reports on the spinach recall suggest that issues of social class form the basis of food contamination narratives and frameworks. In newscasts, reporters and other “authorities” contradict statements of consumers. Doctors, news reporters, and health workers do not necessarily inhabit the upper echelons of wealth; however, their specialized training and position of authority places them in a social class above much of United States’ citizenry.

Ultimately, reports of spinach contamination suggest that those who participate in foodways considered non-normative are responsible for their own illness at the least or are the source of contamination at the worst. Through news broadcasts which depicted restaurants serving international or vegan cuisine, spinach contamination became linked with concepts of otherness. Because of associations between California and alternative lifestyles and foodways, the word “California” is coded in these broadcasts as foreign. Additionally, news broadcasts equate the dangers of consuming spinach with eating beef products. This framing adds to conceptions that vegetarians or the organic movement, which is heavily associated with California, participate in a way of life that leads to danger. In total, framing spinach
contamination narratives in this way creates problematic links between conceptions of the US and ideas of purity.
FAST FOOD CHILI: A CONTAMINATION HOAX AND OTHER TABOOS

Wendy’s is well known for the friendly face of Dave Thomas, its owner, who died a few years ago. While other fast food restaurants relied on actors, cartoonish mascots, and talking animals, Thomas spoke directly to the camera in a matter-of-fact manner most people want in a restauranteur, or any businessman for that matter. What makes Wendy’s ad campaign memorable though is not the seeming simplicity of Thomas’ approach; instead, it was the constancy of his spokesmanship. Instead of fast food guru, Thomas was someone who showed up in our homes, day after day. Admittedly, I am no fast food fan; but, I can appreciate a place that offers up baked potatoes in lieu of fries and chili in addition to cheeseburgers. Additionally, I understand the necessity of eating inexpensively and on the go. But, regardless of one’s feelings towards Wendy’s food, Thomas’ regular appearance on television sets creates positive associations between the restaurant and its food. Perhaps it is this fact that added to the surprise of consumers who heard a finger was found in Wendy’s chili.

On Tuesday, March 22, 2005, Anna Ayala was sitting down to a meal at a Wendy’s restaurant in San Jose, a town in Northern California near San Francisco. This meal was to have a lasting effect on Ayala’s life and temporary (although lost revenue cannot really be regained) effect on Wendy’s. During her meal, Ayala reported that she bit down on something “hard” and “crunchy,” “something she has never tasted before.” Appearing on Good Morning America, Ayala and her attorney explained that the “something” had been a human finger (“Fast Food Fright”). Although news reporting at the onset of this event is less overwhelming in numbers compared to the spinach recall detailed in the last chapter, there were still newscasts centered around this event. And one month later news coverage seemed to have expanded when police
arrested Ayala for Grand Larceny, essentially a charge that attempts to address the lost revenue of the Wendy’s restaurant chain.

Throughout the news reports which detail Ayala’s arrest, it is apparent that many stations used footage from a single station. Repeatedly, from news station as varied as Lake Charles, Louisiana and Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania reporter Stephanie Stanton presents the story to viewers (Local News 5:00; M-F Evening). In this way, Wendy’s food contamination story and its media presentation deviated greatly from the peanut butter recall of 2007 and the spinach recall of 2006. Those events revealed that national occurrences of food contamination are typically localized through narratives related to local individuals, businesses, and government agencies. However, the effect on Wendy’s business nationwide mirrors the drop in revenue experienced by spinach and peanut butter producers (Insana). As a result of the similarities in narrative presentation, viewers from cities across the country would have seen similar, if not the very same, narrative presentations of food contamination.

The most noticeable aspect of the news reports regarding this incident is the introduction of this story by newscasters. The use of a prepared segment filmed outside of the studio requires a local news anchor’s introduction. At the beginning of twenty-four of the ninety-nine news transcripts reporters identify the suspect as “a Las Vegas woman.” Although this was technically correct, since Anna Ayala did reside in Las Vegas, this wording is vastly different in connotation from the phrase “a woman from Las Vegas.” The phrase “Las Vegas woman” creates the sense that she is one of the anonymous residents negatively influenced by life in large American cities, is symbolic of Las Vegas and represents a sinful female character type. Many stories, both the folk and Hollywood variety, which are set in Las Vegas, the town nicknamed “Sin City,” reflect
the tension between consumption and production and the concepts of sin and virtue presented through news reports of Wendy’s contaminated chili.

Contemporary legends, like the folktales of antiquity, present moral lessons to their recipients. Legends involving Las Vegas in particular focus on the role of prostitution and sexuality in this town and its effects on unwary out-of-towners, many of whom are male. While the parallels between these narratives and the story of Wendy’s chili and Anna Ayala do not seem obvious, the contemporary legends and news reports both illustrate the framing of food contamination in terms of gender.

One of the best known Las Vegas women appears in an urban legend in which a man awakens to find himself submerged in a tub of ice with a note explaining that his kidney has been removed. Frequently Las Vegas appears as the setting of this narrative. In the story a women, often framed as a prostitute, propositions a man at a bar, buys him a drink, and slips him a powerful sedative. Often the permutations of said legend involve a complex ring of black-market organ dealers and mention that a kidney’s monetary worth is high (Mikkelson). The implications of this story reflect a variety of concerns with large cities, female sexuality, and lust; however, the theft of a kidney allows listeners of the story to see a “Las Vegas woman” as a sort of sociopath, surreptitiously stealing human body parts for personal, monetary gain.

Conceptually, the Las Vegas woman could also be understood as a showgirl, the arm-candy of a 1950s mobster or alternately as a social-climber, gold-digger, or a sexually traumatized young woman. In most of these examples, though, the Las Vegas woman participates in criminal activity as the perpetrator or the co-dependent accomplice. Numerous mass media representations, from Elisabeth Shue’s saddened and world weary prostitute in *Leaving Las Vegas* to any number of guest stars on CBS’s *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, all
illustrate the association of crime, women, and Las Vegas. This construction of a “Las Vegas woman” then is commonly understood in terms of urban legend and media image. Therefore naming Ayala a “Las Vegas woman” is also a way of connoting her questionable integrity, dangerous morals, and possible criminal status.

While the concept of a Las Vegas woman largely reflects the construction of femininity in terms of crime and dubious virtue, Las Vegas alone connotes crime and deviance. Furthermore, Las Vegas, a town premised on gambling, an activity which allows one to gain money without work, carries with it the connotation that Las Vegans feed off those individuals who “work for a living.” In a larger sense this conception of Las Vegas is one of a town distinguished by its lack of production and its abundance of consumption. Again, this lack of balance between consumption and production is reflected in the contemporary legend of kidney theft. The prostitute and her accomplices do not produce anything of value, but instead consume one of the most valuable objects possible, the human body. So by contextualizing Anna Ayala within the frame of Las Vegas, her narrative is already positioned as being one in which her actions eschew a normative work ethic.

America’s understanding of itself entails this mythic work ethic: that hard work and labor are their own reward and that those who work the hardest are those who succeed in multiple areas of life. In an examination of the hygiene industry, Juliann Sivulka established the links between cleanliness and American myth, social class, and ethnicity by stating, “Thus, cleanliness became linked to the material success myth. In America, cleanliness combined with hard work, thrift, and diligence would lead to good fortune for the virtuous individual” (Sivulka 63). The connection between morality and cleanliness has implications for Anna Ayala’s mediated representation and for viewers’ understanding of food contamination. In general, Ayala’s role in
this food contamination narrative is villainess, which allows viewers to perceive her actions as the result of moral and literal “dirtiness.”

In a sense, the story of Wendy’s contaminated chili could be seen as an allegory for the effects of gambling on traditional American business and corporate structure. Ayala, defined by her geographic habitation, stands in for the city itself, its population, and its economic base. The development of gambling in a variety of cities across America, as well as America’s rising service industry, refracts into Ayala’s story. Veronique Campion-Vincent argues: “Legends and rumors thrive on the degree and intensity of belief. Even though these stories are so bizarre as to strain credulity, they play on fears and concerns that are so intense that they seem plausible” (7). Although this sentence is in reference to “white slavery” rumors, the veracity of contemporary legend and in this case ostension (the enactment of urban legend) relies on prevalent fears and tensions. Because food contamination narratives reflect tensions based on cultural change, the contamination of chili by a Las Vegan represents the discomfort that comes from a change in America’s economy from production and manufacturing to consumption and service.

This consideration of moral virtue is further increased during newscasts which replay a clip from the initial report of the finger’s discovery. Ayala’s initial appearance on morning news does not have the same connotations as the later reports which reveal her arrest; however, the initial segment replayed in conjunction with news of her arrest is used as proof of her deviousness. “Just knowing that there was a human remain in my mouth, you know. Something in my mouth. It's disgusting” (CHANNEL 2). While the amount of disgust Ayala displays appears as the normal response to accidental consumption of human flesh, the use of this quote later on indicates her willingness to break one of the strongest cultural taboos, cannibalism, to achieve a monetary goal.
Scholarly debates regarding the taboo of cannibalism have argued about its origins, purposes, and meanings. Regardless of who is right in this discussion, Americans generally see cannibalism as an act of desperation, an act of psychological depravity (as with Jeffrey Daumer), or a significantly othered practice. Because it is discovered that Ayala’s role in the contaminated chili is not one of innocent victim but potentially entails the partial consumption of a human body part, all three framings of cannibalism (desperate, depraved, and othered) apply to depictions of Ayala to varying degrees.

Depicting Ayala as psychologically depraved relies on speculation and rumor. Psychological damage and murder are frequently tied together in media coverage of crime, particularly in cases of serial criminals. Numerous reports contain an interview with Sergeant Nick Nuyo from the San Jose Police Department in which murder is linked to Ayala and the investigation. In this clip the police officer questions where the fingertip came from since Wendy’s had not located its origin. “Once you determine that it’s a human finger, which we have, then the issue becomes one of, is it an industrial accident. Is it an unreported homicide? Where’s the rest of the body or where’s the owner of this finger? So that’s what we’re trying to find out” (Eyewitness News 10:00). This statement, when presented alongside Ayala’s quote regarding human remains, not only implies that the finger found by Ayala could be the result of a murder or assault, but in a macabre way links the phrase “the rest of the body” with cannibalistic activity.

The appearance that Ayala broke the taboo regarding consuming human flesh is echoed by another taboo presented in news reports. Some news reports speculate on the possibility that the fingertip was taken from one of Ayala’s deceased relatives (News 10 at 10:00). Other newscasts simply state that there are rumors that the finger came from a dead aunt (Ten 10:00).
Still others explore whether coroners could link the DNA of the finger with Ayala or her other family members (CNN 8). Although Ayala states that her aunts are alive and well, the macabre rumor is strengthened by reports that police are also interested in learning about Ayala’s deceased relatives. When a search warrant was served many reporters mentioned that a blue cooler was being sought. This particular image conjures up the idea that other body parts have been taken from Ayala’s aunt and may be put to horrific uses like contaminating food.

In this way, Ayala is again linked with contemporary legends dealing with Las Vegas. The theft of a kidney from an unsuspecting traveler and the theft of a finger from a deceased relative both illustrate strong taboos regarding the human body and profit. Additionally, Ayala’s association with a dead body echoes another legend set in Las Vegas. In this legend a dead body is discovered beneath the mattress of a visiting tourist. Often the body is said to be that of a prostitute, decaying for many days before its discovery (Brunvand 131-133). This is yet another instance when Las Vegas is associated with negative experiences, stories, and concepts.

According to Michel de Certeau, “the dying man falls outside the thinkable. Along with the lazy man, and more than he, the dying man is the immoral man: the former, a subject that does not work; the latter, an object that no longer even makes itself available to be worked on by others” (190). Seen through the work of de Certeau, Ayala’s close relationship with bodily decay and death also associate her with removal from productive society and a refusal to submit to larger societal norms and behaviors. In this case, Ayala’s depiction as a “Las Vegas Woman” also places her close to concepts of death, decay, and immorality.

While the strongest language regarding Ayala comes after her arrest, at the outset of the narrative phrases are used to question her authenticity. The phrase “Las Vegas woman” does appear before suspicions are high. However, an important aspect of news reporting is in the
word choice used to describe Ayala’s initial discovery of the finger. It is beneficial to look at the larger narrative for information regarding the construction of gender and class in association with food contamination, but one cannot overlook the frequency of a particular word. In this case words that indicate skepticism toward Ayala’s report are of interest. The phrase “Anna Ayala says she found” occurred in forty-five out of ninety-nine transcripts and conveys the sense that her report of contaminated chili is not factual. Instead, this discussion of the news story indicates that it is hearsay at best and a lie at worst. Frequently in present or past tense Ayala is said “to claim” that she found a finger in her chili. Even less provocative language like the word “reported” still indicate that the story presented by Ayala did not occur.

The ability to show that Ayala is not the victim comes from the reported effects of the chili’s contamination. While many of the newscasts reported a drop in Wendy’s sales, they also discussed the specific effect this event had on individual employees. Already depicted in media as economically vulnerable, fast food workers in this instance were reported to have lost hours or even jobs as a result of lost customers and diminished revenue. In fact, police state in an interview that “the truest victims here are the employees and owner operators of Wendy’s” (News at 5:00). Although reviewing transcripts of these newscasts limits my ability to see images which correspond to the narrative, there is little doubt that the Wendy’s employees on screen create a sympathetic visual image. Increasing the sense that it is not a corporation but a small locally run restaurant is the owner operator’s appearance in the reports pleading with customers to return, “Please come back to Wendy’s” (“Anna Ayala”).

The personalization of Wendy’s in this instance obscures the fact that Wendy’s, a multi-national corporation, is essentially holding all the cards. According to Michel Foucault, in History of Sexuality, “power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of
itself” (86). So, bolstered by the appearance of individual employees and specific owner-operators, these news reports mask the workings of America’s food industrial complex. In more instances than one, the news reports about Wendy’s chili allow the company to advertise its products to a local and national television audience. Phrases like “safest chili around.” “wonderful hamburgers.” “giveaways.” “free…frosties.” remove the feeling that Wendy’s is a large transnational food company and suggest it is instead a local restaurant ready to give out free, homestyle food (“Anna Ayala”; News at 5:00). Although this urging seems to combat the negative associations that develop from Ayala’s discovery, these newscasts reflect the favored perspective of food industries and those with positions of power in the fast food industry.

It is no mistake that this perspective seems stronger and more credible, particularly when compared with the narrative treatment of Ayala. My argument is not that Ayala is unfairly accused; certainly, she committed a crime. However, lower socioeconomic classes are characterized negatively though the person of Ayala. As mentioned previously newscasters and reporters frequently introduce Ayala as a “Las Vegas woman”; this is in addition to other methods of framing Ayala as “low class.” Throughout news reports her behavior, speech, and history all serve as notes to the audience about how she should be understood and how her story should be interpreted.

For example, one news report indicates that in her past Ayala was evicted from a mobile home park. Mobile home parks are frequently associated in media with lower socioeconomic classes and what is popularly called “trailer trash.” Even in media texts in which the protagonists are themselves residents of mobile homes they are often depicted as uncultured and uneducated. Television shows such as My Name is Earl and movies like Drop Dead Gorgeous depict even main characters in this way. Standup comedians use mobile homes as fodder for
jokes, while other popular media report on the prevalence of tornadoes near these residences (Mencia). The statement regarding Ayala’s eviction from her mobile home presents a particular message; one which states that members of the lower socioeconomic class inhabit a world of criminality.

Other presentations of Ayala show her heated response to reporters. Although objectively anger seems the appropriate response to accusations of dishonesty, Ayala’s verbalized responses are placed in a context that makes them appear unreasonable and emotionally volatile. Las Vegas station KLAS presented Ayala saying: “Where would I get a damn finger for God’s sake?!” (Eyewitness at 4). The use of profanity by a woman has long been linked with immorality and low social class. In Susan E. Hughes article “Expletives of Lower Working-Class Women” she examines the purposes of profane language among a group of working-class women. In this essay she clearly draws the historical links between gendered and classed understandings of curse words (292). “Avoidance of swearing and of ‘coarse’ words is held up to many females as ‘correct’” and this correctness comes from middle-class preoccupations with social status (294).

Overall, the use of vulgar language is associated with the body, and the body is something to be disavowed by middle-class ideals. In the book White, Richard Dyer explains the characteristic associations with white ethnicity: “What is absent from white is any thing; in other words, material reality. Cleanliness is the absence of filth, spirituality the absence of flesh, virtue the absence of sin, chastity the absence of sex.” His book discusses various representations of whiteness and social constructions of white ethnicity. Additionally, Dyer points out that the absence of nameable ruling-class characteristics, or ex-nomination, normalizes and favors whiteness. In this section he specifies the way groups are characterized based on their
whiteness. In other words, working-class individuals are frequently associated with the body, due to literal connections between physical labor and the dirt that may come from such work and the metaphorical associations between filth and lack of virtue (Dyer 76-79). This framing of Ayala’s language as vulgar in association with food contamination reinforces the notion that lower economic classes are unclean, literally and metaphorically.

Although broadcast presentations of Ayala’s ethnicity are not apparent in the transcripts, reports do indicate that she lies outside the abstract conception of whiteness. Many of the characters and people who embody our national myths are male and Caucasian, from Abraham Lincoln to Lou Gehrig. In America’s history, “Cleanliness became an indicator that some individuals were morally superior, of better character, or more civilized than others” (Sivulka 18). Because national heroes often represent this confluence of national identity markers, cleanliness and morality, framing individuals in opposition to these virtues creates the sense that they do not represent the stereotyped image of an American. As mentioned previously, the abstract concept of whiteness connotes cleanliness. So, because reporters question Ayala’s virtue, she is positioned as the opposite of the mythic, virtuous, and clean hero of American myth. By saving a finger for the purpose of dropping it into chili and then possibly touching the finger to her lips, Ayala is shown as unclean and thus morally inferior. Her status as taboo-breaker, combined with her framing as low-class and unclean, combine in news reports, casting her as the villain and reinforcing the public’s conception of a criminal.

In the same newscast from KLAS, Ayala responds to a reporter who asks whether the fingertip came from a deceased aunt: “They’re lying, they’re lying, they’re lying. All my aunts are alive and kicking” (Eyewitness at 4). Although these sentences do not have the same tenor as the previous statement, they do contain several clues regarding Ayala’s personification. The first
phrase, “They’re lying,” is repeated three times in a manner reminiscent of media depictions of
children. It is difficult to say from the written transcript whether this phrasing is with or without
pauses, but the repetition alone frames Ayala as someone with a limited vocabulary. According
to Susan E. Hughes, “The use of profanity by members of the WC [working class] is sometimes
judged as due to their being uneducated, that lack of education results in their having an
inadequate vocabulary with which to handle their situation, thus utilize the language they know”
(291). While Ayala’s response does not contain clear markers of class, the absence of
sophisticated language achieves the same effect.

Whether this is a highly edited portrayal or is simply replayed from the original tape,
Ayala appears to the viewer as lacking the language skills associated with middle and upper-
class Americans. This may not be a conscious act on the part of media producers. In “The
Rediscovery of ‘Ideology,” Stuart Hall argues that “just as the myth-teller may be unaware of the
basic elements out of which his particular version of the myth is generated, so broadcasters may
not be aware of the fact that the frameworks and classifications they were drawing on reproduced
the ideological inventories of their society” (Hall 139). Thus, the profanity and repetition in
Ayala’s statements may not have been intentionally used to represent someone as working class.
Instead, this framing likely resulted from the reporters’ understanding of how to create a story,
convey information in small segments of time, and refer to dominant cultural norms.

While the positioning of Ayala as dangerously different from the respectability of the
middle class and particularly middle-class women effects the perception of food contamination
among televisions viewers, this status assists in a critical reading of her actions. According to
Gary Alan Fine’s work with contemporary legend (often called urban legend), these legends are
a way of critiquing large, faceless corporate entities and negotiating the discomfort that comes
from relying on someone or something outside of the immediate community. Because of the uneven power structure between fast food corporations and consumers of limited income, Ayala’s actions reveal the ways in which contemporary legend assists individuals in dealing with this power imbalance and the impersonal interaction between corporation and consumer.

The event itself, placing a finger in a ready to eat food, builds on already existing, modern narratives about food contamination. Any number of contemporary legends are reflected in this event: cooked rats in buckets of fried chicken, dead mice in cans of soda, spider eggs in bubble gum (Fine). Additionally, the act of contaminating the food product works within Fine’s concept of the Goliath effect, but with some key differences. Fine contends that large corporations tend to be the focus of rumors and legends because of the discomfort that such an impersonal power structure creates. Thus contemporary legends, particularly the sort that address food contamination, critique this relationship. Largely, the difference is that instead of criticizing dominant corporate food entities through folk legend, the act takes this criticism one step further and attempts to use the company’s facelessness for personal benefit. In “Redemption Rumors and the Power of Ostension,” Gary Alan Fine describes actual practices based on contemporary legends. Building on the work of Degh and Vazsonyi, he defines ostension as “the process by which people act out themes or events found within folk narratives” (179). So, in this case Ayala is engaging in ostension; she enacts a theme prevalent in contemporary legend and thus negotiates the space between consumer and food industry. Furthermore, if the ability to form, understand, and participate in contemporary folk narratives is generally useful in negotiating the relationship with corporations who hold wealth, then it is important that Ayala is characterized as lower class.
While the food industrial complex provides innumerable options, it does, as mentioned previously, withhold personal recognition and interaction. In concordance with Ayala’s effort to take advantage of this, viewers and other consumers also work with the awareness that food corporations are impersonal organizations and modern food products are indecipherable in their makeup. The reports that the contaminated chili resulted from an industrial accident were not beyond the reasoning of television viewers, although food contamination is a consistent theme in legend. For several reasons, contemporary news audiences are skeptical of manufactured food and fast food products. Accepting that a food’s makeup may not be wholesome presupposes that food served at restaurants like Wendy’s is more likely to be contaminated than to be pure. Fine notes that the “questioning of the ingredients of the ‘mess’ (i.e., foodstuffs which cannot be easily identified by sight or taste) is a common topic for those whose food is institutionally prepared--e.g., servicemen, schoolchildren, or summer campers” (125). Fine also argues that Americans “have become separated from the production of our food, unsure of its preparation, and consequently are willing to believe almost anything about it” (129). Because of the distance between the processes of growing and eating, Americans do not necessarily have an accurate picture of food industrial processes; without a visual and gastronomic pairing, individuals are likely to be skeptical towards food purity.

Not only does distance between food and table allow individuals to construct foods as unclean, but the distance also allows contamination to be conceptualized in terms of purposeful adulteration. The separation of social groups and the modern divisions of labor have favored technical expertise over general competence and as a result people have limited understanding of the processes involved in food production (Fine 121; Belasco 9). Our understanding that those who have technical expertise are responsible for food production allows individuals to see food
contamination as the fault of those technicians. This in turn allows a single individual to become the focal point of an instance of food contamination. In this instance, Ayala certainly is framed as the sole party responsible for Wendy’s drop in sales.

This impersonalization of industry and sustenance, though, allows Ayala to patronize Wendy’s and attempt to undo their control. I admit, her actions are not overtly meant to overturn capitalist America; this is only a potential side effect of contaminating fast food products. Although he is talking about the use of language, Michel de Certeau claims that “in the case of consumption, one could almost say that production furnishes the capital and that users, like renters, acquire the right to operate on and with this fund without knowing it” (33). In this instance America’s food industrial complex provides consumers with capital or knowledge that fast food corporations have large sums of money and employees at their disposal. Capital could also be understood in this context as the promises made by food industries that their product is wholesome and untainted. Additionally, this capital is also, as has already been mentioned, the consumer’s anonymity. The “right to operate on” this capital is inherent in the capital itself and one needs only to understand this relationship to be able to use it to an advantage, regardless of a deeper understanding of its ramifications (de Certeau 34).

In terms of de Certeau’s theory, Ayala’s actions can be seen as a form of critique aimed at the broader structures of American food industries. As a fast food consumer, a role that is often associated with the working class, Ayala is positioned to participate in the use of food industrial complex capital. Furthermore, because fast food corporations are an aspect of America’s ruling class, Ayala’s actions can be constructed theoretically as an attempt to acknowledge and disrupt the privilege of wealth. This is supported through Fine’s theory, the Goliath Effect. As previously stated, contemporary legends critique larger corporations,
although participants in narrative-sharing may not see their stories in such a broad social context. Following this line of thought, it may be possible to understand food contamination hoaxes as a broader social critique, regardless of an individual’s motivation. Of course, this diminishes in importance the consequences of Ayala’s actions and her personal motivations for contaminating food. While contextualizing her actions as resistance may trivialize the criminal acts, my contention is that through the work of Fine and de Certeau we can see Ayala’s actions as a reflection and criticism of national food industries and their structure.

Fast food restaurants, from Taco Bell to Kentucky Fried Chicken, often appear in legends regarding contaminated food. When Anna Ayala placed a human fingertip into a bowl of Wendy’s Chili, she enacted a theme of contemporary legends. The sensational and disgusting aspects of this story meant it was ready-made for broadcast. Although Wendy’s did see a drop in profits, the larger effect of this narrative’s media presentation was one in which Ayala was cast as a villain. By implying the possible taboos committed by Ayala in the process of contaminating food, news broadcasts cast Ayala as a cannibal, grave robber, or murderer. This diminished her onscreen presence as an individual with agency and instead presented the image of a depraved individual. Determining the degree to which news broadcasts were edited is not necessary, though, since the image presented on screen is ultimately what is conveyed to audiences.

Newscasts reporting on the event offered clips of Ayala’s heated responses to reporters and information on her background. Showing Ayala using profanity framed her within a lower socioeconomic class and additionally emphasized the differences between her behavior and that expected of mainstream Americans. Furthermore, discussing her residence and eviction from a mobile home connotes low economic class. When combined with descriptions of her crime,
potentially taboo behavior, and the food contamination, this framing suggests that individuals of lower economic classes are not clean in the moral or literal sense.

Descriptions of Ayala as a “Las Vegas Woman” cast her in a negative light. The connotations of Las Vegas as associated with crime and prostitution imply that Ayala is not trustworthy. Additionally, contemporary legends and mass media set in Las Vegas illustrate the discomfort that comes from America’s ongoing change from a production-based economy to a service-based economy. In particular, folk narratives about human kidney thieves combine the dangers of femininity, Las Vegas, and consumption-based economies. So, by contextualizing Ayala as a “Las Vegas woman,” news reports show audiences that she does not produce, but instead consumes recklessly. In other words, Ayala in this food contamination narrative is positioned as the villainess, the gold digging Las Vegan, who feeds off of those who uphold national ideals of virtue, cleanliness, and hard work.

Although this food contamination narrative revolves around a hoax, the framing of Ayala and Wendy’s reveals the way that power structures and social categories are represented in media to achieve particular ideas about the subject matter. Ultimately, news reports in this case describe Ayala’s actions as criminal while simultaneously associating her actions with lower socioeconomic class and Las Vegas. Additionally, the reporting obscures problems within the United States’ food systems and the power large corporations like Wendy’s have, while emphasizing the role of one social group or individual in food contamination narratives.
CONCLUSION

Modern living requires some dependency on massive food industries. In such a complex chain of food production from farm to processor to grocery store, it is logical that food contamination could occur. This thesis studies three specific cases of mediated food contamination narrative: the 2007 recall of Peter Pan and Great Value peanut butter, the 2006 *E. coli* outbreak caused by contaminated bagged spinach, and the addition of a fingertip to Wendy’s chili by a consumer in 2005. The contaminant and/or recall information presented in news reports detailing these events was certainly meant to inform consumers of dangers to their health. However, in mass media, or for that matter any type of speech, rhetoric is used to draw in viewers and create a sense of relevance. This rhetoric, when combined with the symbolic meanings of food, creates narratives which imply, propose, or display connections between food contamination and a host of other social issues. This thesis has investigated those connections, the ideas they suggest, and the potential ways they can be understood by audiences.

These three chapters are linked through their obvious concern with food contamination and the discursive elements presented in television news reports of the three events. They also illustrate the way non-normative behaviors and cleanliness may become negatively associated with groups of people or lifestyles. By illustrating these links, the three chapters also explore the way social categories are constructed. Furthermore, all three chapters address taboos, not just those associated with disgust, decay, and death, but also taboos that involve the breach of normative behavior and community boundaries.

Using semiotic and content analysis, this thesis examined the three food contamination events and their news coverage. In total, though, the three chapters are concerned with the way food contamination narratives entail larger issues of social identity. Socially constructed
categories of age, gender, class, nationality, and ethnicity appear in the context of these narratives to varying degrees. Because food is ubiquitous in people’s daily lives and personal histories and is, as a result, deeply symbolic, food contamination narratives may challenge, alter, or reinforce personal identity. The research presented in this thesis suggests that food contamination narratives may alter the ways in which individuals approach their own social roles or may alter understandings of social categories. To confirm this an interdisciplinary, multi-pronged, and lengthy study would be required, a study beyond the scope of this thesis.

However, the information and research presented in this thesis provide much information regarding the way discourse is formed. In Chapter One, for instance, peanut butter contamination is presented as a threat to household and community safety. In particular, the high number of reports involving children and food borne illness imply that childhood is a fragile concept subject to intrusions from a dangerous adult world. This has resonance with even broader concepts such as privacy, safety, and agency. In a broader sense, the news reports in Chapter Two also reveal national concerns with safety. This is illustrated by the presence of language indicating the level of danger in contaminated spinach and linking said contaminated spinach with terrorism and war. Thus, these narratives assist in the formation of discourses surrounding childhood, parenting, and community boundaries.

Chapter One also discusses the advertising campaigns which surround peanut butter because of its influence in the discourse of childhood. Unlike advertisements for other children’s food products (sugar coated cereal, candy, fruit snacks, etc.), ads for peanut butter play on an ideal and nostalgic version of family relationships. This area of research could be investigated and expanded upon. However, studying peanut butter advertising shows the general perceptions of and about peanut butter consumers, thus giving context to concerns over peanut butter’s
contamination. As a result of examining the positive framing at the outset of this thesis, readers can see the similarities and differences between positive and negative depictions of food.

Chapter Two, in its discussion of spinach contamination, illustrates the ways in which food contamination often involves groups considered in relation to conceptions of “the mainstream” and American nationality. The existence of immigration discourse within this particular food contamination narrative is not particularly surprising since American farm industries are thought to rely on migrant labor and a Latino/a workforce. What may surprise readers is the ways in which this discourse is addressed in the spinach contamination narrative, in particular, the lack of direct blame placed on immigrants in television news and its presence in a report from an agency thought to be impartial, the Associated Press. In total, though, this discourse works in conjunction with the framing of other groups who participate in “alternative” food practices such as vegetarians and ethnic minorities. And in this chapter the ways in which a single word such as “California” can connote difference and otherness are discussed. Overall, it seems that the 2006 news of spinach contamination depicts the relationship between national myth and concepts of the other. This chapter also expands on information presented in Chapter One: that the use of a single individual (in the case of spinach contamination this was Marion Graff) in news broadcasts causes that person to become symbolic of either the danger or folly of food contamination. This is something that is even more apparent in Chapter Three.

In contrast to Chapter One and Chapter Two, the third chapter focuses on a food contamination hoax. News reports that Anna Ayala found a fingertip in Wendy’s chili eventually changed to address her report with suspicion and finally contempt when it was found that she planted the fingertip there. This focus on one individual meant that larger food contamination issues were deemphasized in favor of reports focusing on Ayala’s personal
history, behavior, and motivations. For instance, the uneven power structure between fast food
corporations and consumers is recontextualized in this instance to frame fast food companies as
local and personal. However, this imbalance is tempered by Ayala’s criminal actions. Although
she certainly committed a crime, her creation of a contamination event can be interpreted in a
symbolic way. Through Fine’s theory the Goliath effect, theories on ostension, and de Certeau’s
theory on consumer capital, I address Ayala’s actions in terms of their ability to critique the
larger food system we are all a part of.

Because of Ayala’s associations with taboos such as cannibalism and grave robbing, her
actions are reframed as the result of psychological problems. Additionally, reports place her
actions in a low socioeconomic class, linking criminality and cleanliness with class. Also within
this chapter, Las Vegas is presented in association with Ayala’s criminality. This illustrates
conceptions of US cities as dangerous and also reflects the apprehension towards changes in
America’s economic base. Throughout this chapter contemporary legends are used to illustrate
similarities with the language and implications used in the television’s news broadcasts.

At a fundamental level this thesis regards these news reports as comparable to
contemporary and historical folk narratives. This thesis combines Gary Alan Fine’s theories on
folk narratives with mass media texts. Specifically, his discussion of the way that contemporary
legends critique large corporations and his work with food contamination have influenced this
thesis. In illustrating the ways that mass media works on a narrative scale, I broadened the ways
in which his work may be used. And although my methodology does not rely on folkloristic
principles, I believe my research advocates closer links between folkloristic approaches to
narrative and cultural studies’ approach to mass media. That being said, this thesis may be
useful to those who are interested in the way discourse combines traditional understandings of
the world with media representations of that same world to create identities and behaviors.

Although at the outset of this research project I was interested in food contamination
narratives’ potential to change opinions about food, I found that food contamination narratives
noticeably address audiences’ understandings of people and groups. Because America’s food
industry is so complex, like a spider’s web with multiple points of intersection, food
contamination is unlikely to disappear altogether. As a matter of fact, while I was writing this
thesis America has experienced another recall of peanut butter contaminated with Salmonella.
The regularity of food contamination events presented in mass media means that the narratives
that surround food recalls and contamination may have great potential to shape social and
cultural boundaries. With that, I suggest that food contamination narratives also may change the
ways individuals see themselves and their relationship to the rest of society.
“Anna Ayala, the woman who claimed she found a finger in her bowl of Wendy's chili, is arrested.” Saturday Today. 23 Apr. 2005. Transcript.


“Dangerous E Coli Outbreak; FDA Spinach Warning.” ABC Good Morning America 7:02 AM EST ABC. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.


“E. coli outbreak from spinach prompts FDA to urge public to get rid of it.” CBS Evening News 6:30 PM EST CBS. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.

Eyewitness at 4 4:00 PM NBC. 8 KLAS, Las Vegas. 8 Apr. 2005. Transcript.
Eyewitness News 5:00pm ABC. WKBW 7, Buffalo. 19 Feb. 2007. Transcript.

Eyewitness News 10:00 PM IND. 14 KUPN, Las Vegas. 7 Apr. 2005. Transcript.


“FDA warning consumers not to eat fresh spinach or spinach products after E. coli outbreak.”


FOX 9 News at 9 9:00 PM FOX. 9 KMSP, Minneapolis. 15 Feb. 2007. Transcript.

KEYE News at 10pm 10:00 PM CBS. 42 KEYE, Austin. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.


Late News 9:00 PM FOX. 23 KBSI, Paducah-Cape Girardeau-Harrisburg, Mt. Vernon, KT. 15 Feb 2007. Transcript.

Local News 5:00 PM CBS. 8 WVLT, Knoxville. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.

Local News 5:00 PM NBC. 7 KPLC, Lake Charles, LA. 22 Apr. 2005. Transcript.

Local News 10:00 PM NBC. 4 WSMV, Nashville. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.


NBC 10 News at 11:00 PM NBC. 10 WCAU, Philadelphia. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.

NBC HI NEWS 8 AT 5 5:00 PM NBC. 8 KHNL, Honolulu. 16 Feb. 2007. Transcript.


News 10 at 11 11:00 PM NBC. 10 WSLS, Roanoke-Lynchburg. 16 Feb. 2007. Transcript.


NEWS 11 5:30 PM CBS. 11 KTVT, Dallas. 15 Sep. 2006. Transcript.

News2 Daybreak 5:00 AM NBC. 02 KPRC, Houston. 16 Feb. 2007. Transcript.

News at 5:00 5:00 PM NBC. 3 WLBT, Jackson. 2 Apr. 2005. Transcript.

News at 10 10:00 PM NBC. 6 KWQC, Quad Cities. 8 Apr. 2005. Transcript.

“Peanut butter being recalled because it may contain salmonella.” Today. NBC, 15 Feb. 2007. Transcript.


Ten 10:00 PM CBS. 7 KOSA, Midland. 8 Apr. 2005. Transcript.

SCHOLARLY AND GENERAL WORKS CITED


