When Roots Intertwine:  
The Language and Politics of Raw Foodism  

by

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Back when I used to teach swimming lessons, I would tell my students that the top of the water was like light like jelly, and the water further beneath the surface was heavy, like peanut butter. Pulling the jelly won’t get you very far, but if you dig deep and pull the peanut butter with every stroke, you can make it all the way to the other end of the pool.

There were numerous times throughout this project when I did not think I would be able to continue moving forward. I am deeply grateful that I had so many supportive individuals around me to encourage me to keep digging, to keep pulling the peanut butter. I could not have made it “to the end of the pool” without you.

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“Every species has a diet that they are designed to eat. There is a natural food for every creature – and the cool thing is that that food is invariably appealing to that species... When you go to the pockets of long-lived people, we see invariably that they're eating not by choice [a raw food diet], but because that's what nature imposed upon them. They tend to live in isolated areas and we find them and then see that they're eating what's imposed upon them by nature.

“What's imposed upon us by nature is eating fruits and vegetables. We can sneak up on them. They're easy to spot. They taste good and so we go back. The trees are rich with food source. You don't get hurt sneaking up on a raspberry. If you tried to corner a squirrel, he'd probably tear you to shreds. So that's how it is for every creature, it's easy to access the food.”

– **Dr. Douglas Graham**, “lifetime athlete and raw foodist since 1978”
**INTRODUCTION**

“What I realize from my own experience is that the problem people encounter is battling through **so many inconsistent viewpoints and diets. People don’t know what to do.** A lot of diets out there can help you lose weight, but it's usually at the cost of your health...Regardless of the state of your health when you start, going Raw makes you healthier. You can actually feel it.

“The Raw diet is not a fad. It's not going anywhere because A) it's where our ancestors began, several hundred thousand years ago, and B) the modern benefits are incredibly straightforward, simple, and true. What's more, they're experienced almost immediately.”

– Kristen Suzanne, “Kristen’s Raw: My Personal Story”

I was first introduced to raw foodism in the fall of 2011 by a vegan housemate who wanted to try “going raw.” That same semester, I was taking an anthropological theory course called “The Experience of Limits,” which focused on unpacking issues of taboo, transgression, and mythological, or symbolic limits. As I listened to my housemate describe the basic premise of raw foodism – that any food cooked over 117 degrees was dead, was devoid of nutrients and was therefore impure, unnatural – I began drawing parallels between raw foodists’ notions of purity and those described by several of the theorists that we were studying in my class. I became increasingly interested in looking at raw foodism in tandem with the theories of Douglas, Taussig, Bataille, Barthes, and Foucault in hopes that I might be able to better understand raw foodists’ preoccupations with establishing and maintaining a certain sense of order, of purity, and of control. I further explored this interest through a mini-ethnography that I wrote as my final paper for that class. Using only one in-person interview and several blog forums as my primary sources, I claimed that raw foodism is a means through which individuals create and perpetuate certain ideas of food and in doing so, actually denature their foods, which they often paradoxically refer to as “natural.” My assertion, however, was sorely lacking in any relevant historical context and had
failed to recognize many of the emotions, preoccupations, and desires that lay at the root of raw foodism. Rather than exploring the forces propelling this highly unique movement, I essentially reduced raw foodism to a mythological system that lacked depth, purpose. It was not until I started conducting more intensive interviews that I became acutely aware of the somewhat religious power of raw foodism: its ability to provide its followers with a sense of stability, a sense of groundedness.

“Why Raw?”

Before delving into the emotional effects of raw foodism, I will first outline the terminology that I use throughout this work, as well as several of the essential beliefs that undergird the raw foodist narratives that are represented in the following chapters. Raw foodism is the lifestyle choice, the system of beliefs that centers on, but is not solely constituted by the raw food diet. Though there are many individuals that go on the raw food diet as a “cleanse” for anywhere from three days to several months, my discussions of those who follow raw foodism primarily refer to those individuals who have gone or are going through the process of becoming raw foodists. Most of the individuals that I interviewed are dedicated to living the raw food lifestyle – a way of life that not only involves devotion to the raw food diet, but that also entails a belief in the healing powers of “nature.”

The basic premise of the raw food diet is that we should only consume food and beverages that have not been heated over 117 degrees – the point at which the food begins to cook, its enzymes die, and its nutrients are lost. Though most raw foodists seem to agree that the ideal raw food diet is a vegan, plant-based diet, there is some contention to this claim because it is socially, economically, and practically difficult to maintain. In many cases, the restrictiveness of the raw vegan diet
produces anxieties and stresses that actually counterbalance its nutritional benefits. Consequently, many variations on the raw food diet have developed – the raw vegetarian diet (allows raw milk), the raw carnivore diet (allows raw meats and seafood), and the fruitarian diet (limited to juiced, blended, and whole fruits), to name a few. However, no matter the variation, the underlying belief of every form of the raw food diet is that food is its purest, most alive, and most nutrient-and-enzyme-rich when it is in its uncooked state. The consumption of mostly raw food products will presumably provide individuals with a higher degree of energy and nutrition. In an interview with NPR, one raw foodist explained the effects of a 100% raw diet: “When you start eating raw protein and whatnot, you actually can feel it within minutes or hours. It's that quick. Energetically, your body feels clean. You don't feel challenged or bogged down, you don't get tired.”

According to the “Raw Food Artist,” raw foods do not only make one’s body feel better in the present, but also reverse damage from the past:

It’s like choosing to heal and restore your body with every bite. And by restoring I mean you can actually detoxify and reverse many diseases just by changing your diet. Raw foods create an alkaline environment in which disease cannot thrive. Countless people repeat their success stories of reversing diabetes, cancer, depression, high-blood pressure, fibromyalgia, multiple-sclerosis etc., with a proper raw food diet.

In both of these statements, raw food is believed to have healing, detoxifying, and energizing powers. Raw food is, in this sense, enchanted, alive, able to heal and transfer its energy and its nutrients to the human body.

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Unfortunately, there is hardly any literature on raw foodism and what has been written is contentious, to say the least. While some nutritionists are in support of the raw food diet, many have protested that it does not provide its followers with a sufficient (or efficient) source of protein, calories, or Vitamin B12. To further complicate the “truthfulness” of the information available on raw foodism, most of the texts that analyze, promote, and explain the raw food diet were written by raw foodists and are therefore not impartial descriptions, but rather are personal narratives. These texts are most often written in the form of blogs, or personal webpages, but there are also books and cookbooks that serve to provide curious dieters with information. The authors of the raw food blogs and books often begin their responses to the commonly asked question, “why raw?” with a story of their own “personal journeys.” They explain the paths that they took to get to raw foodism and then usually provide their readers with some encouragement or incentive to go raw. One particularly enthusiastic blogger provided me with a personalized note of inspiration in her newsletter:

Nothing is for certain except that we are all worthy of an exciting and precious life, and we all deserve to be ignited and following our most precious calling!! Are you up for some changes in your life Samantha?! If that's YOU, my dear, this is me cheering you on: “Do it! Do it! Do it!”

Her words addressed me, spoke to me, encouraged me to reach for the “exciting and precious life” that I deserve. She answered “why raw?” by telling me not only what she did to improve her life, but also what I needed to do to better mine.

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3 Eva Rawposa, Uncooking101 Newsletter, 10/03/2012.
In addition to responding to “why raw?” with personal (or personalized) narratives and goals, raw foodist authors also often assert that raw foodism is based purely on logic and reason. They explain that the raw food diet is not new, that it is the diet of our ancestors; we have only lost sight of it because we have gotten caught up in the conveniences of modern technology. In making this connection between the “then” and “now,” the raw foodist authors create and perpetuate a dichotomy between the past and present, the pure and impure, nature and the modern man, the raw and the cooked. Additionally, raw foodist authors further polarize distinctions between these opposing forces by contrasting present and ancient dietary practices. For example, according to one raw foodist blogger:

…Many people and cultures have indulged in mostly live food diets, including the ancient Greek Pelegasians, whom Herodotus (known as the ‘father of history’) wrote about. He made the claim that they lived to be an average of 200 years. Pythagoras learned about the virtues of raw food while studying with the ancient Jewish sect of Essenes. They also enjoyed substantial longevity, to approximately 120 years. He learned of their preference for and understanding of live foods, and took this knowledge back to Greece where he shared it with Plato and Socrates. Here Pythagoras founded a philosophical and religious school whose inner circle were ‘required’ to be vegetarians. Pythagoras and one of his students, Hippocrates who is considered the father of modern medicine, are believed to have eaten primarily raw vegan foods.4

In this brief historical account of raw foodism, it is clear that the author invokes (and emphasizes) figures from the past in an attempt to legitimize raw foodism. He places the raw food diet in a larger historical context and in doing so, shows that raw foodism is not just a fad, but is a well-founded belief that has been successful – “substantial longevity, to approximately 120 years” – since antiquity. Therefore, the

raw food diet, unlike the standard American diet, has credibility. In addition to invoking figures or knowledge from the past, published raw food advocates also frequently use their knowledge of science to explicate the nutritional benefits of the raw food diet. For example, one author claims that,

Our parents didn't know the best way to feed us. Neither do most doctors, nor does — shamefully — the FDA. But thanks to the tireless efforts of hundreds of researchers always pushing the envelope and questioning the status quo, there is now newer, better information. Mounting evidence has shown that heat destroys many of the vitamins, phytonutrients, and enzymes found in raw, living food, rendering it harder to digest and nutritionally diminished.\(^5\)

However, in part because nutritional science is constantly changing, there are few to no scientific studies that prove these effects. As a result, most modern medical professionals do not accept the “mounting evidence” that this author refers to as truthful.\(^6\)

Despite the fact that the oft-cited effects of a raw food lifestyle – i.e. increased energy, improved attention span, decreased need for sleep, bettered cardiovascular and brain function– have not actually been scientifically proven, they were undeniably apparent in the attitudes and actions of my interviewees. The raw foodists with whom I spoke relayed their logic to me and repeatedly assured me that the positive effects on mood to which most raw foodist texts attest are real. Though I cannot support their claims with any scientific evidence, or “proof” of any kind for that matter, I believed (and continue to believe) that they do feel such effects. Many hugged me when I walked in the door, leapt up from their seats to help customers,

\(^6\) This is not to say that they are not “truthful.” I just wish to point out that the health benefits of raw foodism are a point of disagreement between the scientific and raw foodist communities.
and generally seemed very enthusiastic. Nevertheless, I was unsure as to whether my interviewees felt these effects purely as a direct result of the foods they were eating, or if they were, moreover, feeling the consequences of their improved relationships with food and with those around them. The raw foodists who exhibited these energy-enhanced, positive-attitude symptoms had not only changed their diets, but had also found something they truly cared about, something that made them feel stable both physically and emotionally.

A Reflexive Stance

“The modern ideal of disengagement requires a reflective stance. We have to turn inward and become aware of our own activity and of the processes which form us. We had to be trained (and bullied) into making it, not only of course through imbibing doctrines, but much more through all the disciplines which have been inseparable from our modern way of life, the disciplines of self-control, in the economic, moral, and sexual fields...”

Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation

When I noticed myself comparing my emotional and physical states to theirs, when I began to consider converting to raw foodism, I grew concerned that I might not be able to complete this project. As one who has always established my sense of identity and my sense of stability through food, I was easily persuaded to edit the food-bible to which I clung. I feared that the fact that these thoughts even occurred to me made me a bad amateur anthropologist – too willing to convert, too eager to cross the line between “ethnographer” and “subject”: that fine distinction that both enables and limits the relationship between the anthropologist and her objects of study. I was thenceforth wrought with anxiety about whether or not my analyses could possibly be fair. It had become clear to me that I was simultaneously similar to, and yet extremely different from my own subjects. My view of them was therefore jaded, altered
by the points of convergence and divergence at which our backgrounds intersected and parted. I could not define any logical or objective equation that made sense of these similarities and differences, and as a result, I felt trapped behind my own eyes. I could not, I would never be able to see or understand my interviewees’ perspectives without my own glazed, distorted view of food, of diet, of myself.

Yet what I have come to realize and accept is that in any study of human nature, all work done offers merely one perspective, one particular view. All theoretical statements are made in moments that are chained to millions of other moments, past and present; though they appear irresolute, they are never definite, never solid, never concretized, never truly truthful. Every individual’s singular view of human nature is contingent on the rules of his discipline, his personal background, and, or the ways in which he has been trained to see and perceive the world around him. The quote by Pile and Thrift and at the beginning of this section stresses that we are all bound to unique socially, historically, and disciplinarily defined systems of knowledge. However, the contingent quality of works on human nature does not render such works meaningless. Pile and Thrift underscore that a self-awareness of “the processes which form us,” of the factors that shape our perspectives is essential to providing a truer account. That is to say, self-recognition in a text allows the author to actively recognize and represent the role that he plays in his own work. The assertions that the reflexive author makes within his work are therefore not falsely represented as objectively true. Thus when approached with a “reflexive stance,” the works of social and cultural studies provide a self-aware, unique perspective and interpretation of that which they study.
In this particular study, I will present my analyses not as objective facts, but as my own personal, well-informed interpretations of raw foodism. I will avoid generalizations and attempt to show that the world of raw foodism is constituted by a diverse group of individuals that share certain common interests, but have undeniably different backgrounds. The factors that motivated and sustained their interests in raw foodism are not all the same, but rather depend on each individual’s particular situation and reaction to certain social, cultural, or environmental issues. Furthermore, in an attempt to preserve the uniqueness of each narrative, I will present the majority of my interview excerpts within the context in which they were said. In addition, I will often interject as an active subject in the narratives and analyses, in order to reinforce that this project is a reflexive work. I am not merely representing an “object of study”; rather I am actively engaged in representing my own perspectives, my own views through those contained within the narratives that I study. My gaze not only affects the ways in which I represent these narratives, but is also affected by the narratives (the language used, their narrators’ intonations, etc.) themselves.

**Guiding Questions and Objectives**

Before introducing the chapters that follow, I want to first address the issue of gendered pronouns. In my discussions of theory (i.e. the first chapter, which expands on the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Barthes, etc.), I often use the pronoun “he.” I want to clarify that this usage of “he” is not intended to be read as a commentary on the gender of the individuals being discussed; I simply wish to keep my language continuous with that of the theorists that I employ. Throughout the rest of my (less theory-centric) work, when referring to the unspecific “individual,” I alternate
between “he” and “she” in an attempt to show that raw foodism is not specific to either gender.

In the first chapter, “The Care of the Self,” I use the work of Foucault, Campbell, Bourdieu, Barthes, and Johnston and Baumann to trace several of the ways in which Western concerns for what Foucault has called the “care of the self” have been constructed and articulated. The cultural and historic contextualization work that these texts do helps situate us temporally and allows us to see how and where certain notions of the “care of the self” developed. Though the theories proffered in this section certainly do not provide a complete history of the care of the self, they show key developments that have contributed to Western modern concerns with the body, its meanings, and its representations. After having established this context, it should be clear that the notions concerning how individuals “should” create and shape their individual selves through the care of the body are deeply rooted in certain attitudes, concerns, and practices and are therefore constantly in flux. As social, cultural, and political structures continue to shift, so do ideas of the care of the self.

In the second chapter, “Going Raw,” I engage with the personal stories of several raw foodists in order to highlight certain commonalities in the structures of raw foodist narratives. The personal stories that my raw foodist interviewees told were obviously varied in that each individual had a unique encounter with, and reaction to raw foodism. Nevertheless, almost all of the narratives to which I listened were structured in a similar way. The majority of my interviewees described their experiences with raw foodism as a move from a state of unhealthiness and dissatisfaction to a state of both physical and emotional health. I argue that the ways in which they narrated their shifts from broken and lost, to fixed and saved were
similar in form to the (religious) conversion narrative. To support this claim, I place excerpts from the raw foodists’ personal narratives in conversation with several strands of conversion narrative theory. I then draw out the particularities of the narratives in which raw foodists’ ideas of their “selves” are articulated.

After having unpacked several of the ways in which becoming a raw foodist is expressed, I ask the question that haunts the third chapter, “The Natural Self and Its Others”: what type of self is the process of “going raw” meant to enable, or construct? Upon looking at the interviews, it will quickly become apparent that the majority of the “selves” that my raw foodist interviewees construct through their narratives are deeply tied to certain ideas of nature. Thus I ask, how exactly is the “natural self” discussed and presented in raw foodists’ narratives, and what is involved (i.e. personal background, social concerns, or cultural paradigms) in the construction of their “natural” selves? I then attempt to show how raw foodism provides its followers with a means through which they can “find distinction.” Finding this distinction, and developing this deep relationship with food gives raw food the power of physically and emotionally “grounding” the individual. It should become clear that the stability, the groundedness found through raw foodism stems both from the establishment and maintenance of specific food rules, and from the fixed relationship it has with nature. In this third and final chapter, the manifold implications of the idea of “groundedness” – what it means and from where it derives – will be unpacked with the help of Douglas, Foucault, and Bordo.
A Dialogue about a Dialogue

What is most true is poetic because it is not stopped-stoppable. All that is stopped, grasped, all that is subjugated, easily transmitted, easily picked up, all that comes under the world concept, which is to say all that is taken, caged, is less true. Has lost what is life itself, which is always in the process of seething, of emitting, of transmitting itself. Each object is in reality a small virtual volcano. There is a continuity in the living; whereas theory entails a discontinuity, a cut, which is altogether the opposite of life... [Theory] is indispensible at times to make progress, but alone it is false.

– Hélène Cixous, Rootprints

As Cixous eloquently points out, all acts of narration are, in truth, acts of translation; they are “taken, caged” and thus are “less true” – they have “lost what is life itself.” They can never be assessed as objective or factual because they are enduring glimpses of temporally situated, ephemeral moments, feelings, and thoughts. Both the narratives that I am analyzing and those that I provide through my analyses are – and should be read as – interpretations rather than objective truths. I must reiterate that my intent in this work is not to categorize, label, and critique raw foodists; rather, it is to better understand the ways in which raw foodists discuss themselves and their relationships to food. I draw out some possible meanings and interpretations of the raw foodists’ personal narratives by contextualizing them and by employing theory to see with greater depth, and more perspective. This work – a series of discussions in which I engage various theorists, raw foodist interviewees, and countless observations – is, and should be read as my own personal, analytical narrative. I encourage you to participate in my analysis – to weave your own narrative within and through mine by reading, translating, and interpreting the work presented in the following chapters.
I. THE CARE OF THE SELF

We eat and drink to maintain our health, but a seductive satisfaction tags along with the act, and sometimes tries to slip ahead of it, so that the pleasure I claim or wish to be using for my health I am actually using for its own sake. It is hard to find the proper match between them, since what is enough for health is too little for pleasure, and it is often hard to distinguish my health needing nourishment from my gluttony demanding submission. My soul in its weakness takes advantage of this ambiguity, making a cover of it, happy not to know what health truly demands, making health a mere excuse for stealthy dealings with delight.

– St. Augustine, Confessions

Since antiquity, the individual body has been understood as a sign-producing, sign-wearing object that communicates certain things about the individual’s soul; however, the ways in which these signs are produced and read have and continue to shift. While the individual’s body continuously responds to the individual’s desires and to the world around him, the society to which he belongs reads and interprets those responses as indications of the state of one’s soul, or of one’s character. Those indications, or signs are then understood within the context of the society’s systems of knowledge. Each society’s means of interpreting bodily signs both affect and are affected by the individual members of the society. Thus there exists a dialectical relationship between the individual’s society, his body, and his soul (or character). The individual’s understanding of himself shapes and is shaped by society, and in turn, the individual’s body affects and is affected by his idea of himself. That is to say, society plays an essential role in the development of both one’s idea (and treatment) of his body and his idea (and treatment) of his self. The hand of society, the authoritative forces of the media, government, and technology, is inextricable

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7 Character is, in this work, understood and discussed as the modern equivalent of what Foucault refers to as the “soul.”
from the individual’s conception of his body, of his character, and of how he does and should consume.

In this chapter, I attempt to flesh out the development of the relationship between the body, the soul, and its society by first examining the some of the historical, social, technological (media-related), and political forces undergirding it. Using Foucault’s *The Care of the Self*, I outline several of the shifts that initially motivated individuals to construct and focus on their selves as agents. It should become evident that ancient western cultures formulated and perpetuated ideologies that imbued diet with moral significance and in doing so, tied the physical body to the moral soul. As a result, the “self” was understood not as either the individual’s physical appearance (body), or the nature of his soul, but as both: a body-soul duality. Individuals came to understand that they had a degree of control over the construction and presentation of their selves, and that the selves that they constructed both affected and were affected by their roles within the state, the *polis*.

After having uncovered some of the forces at the root of the body-soul relationship (which, I should reiterate, is translated to the “body-character” relationship in modernity), I argue that the choice of, and pressure placed on “eating well”\(^8\) – on following a diet that improves you both physically and emotionally – is unique in this modern era because consumption practices are now represented in commodified forms. Using Campbell, Bourdieu, Barthes, and Johnston and Baumann, I explore how and why the care of the modern self has become a symbolic, meaning-imbued, meaning-producing, commodifiable project. It will become clear that

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consumption practices can be read as indications of our knowledge (cultural, academic, social, etc.) and character (virtues, values, qualities of the soul). The ways in which these consumption practices are read, however, are contingent on the social and cultural context in which they are practiced. Thus the individual’s self and the society’s idea of his self are not static, but rather, are always being transformed, refashioned, and reconfigured as the personal, social, cultural, and political forces acting upon the individual and his society continue to change.

Once a theoretical groundwork has been established, I will draw on several excerpts from my conversations with raw foodists in order to further delineate how and why the modern, raw-foodist self is understood as a site of self-construction. It will be shown that, like the modern body-character-society of the “modern subject,” the relationships between raw foodists’ bodies, societies, and characters shape and are shaped by a number of personal, cultural and social factors. I will unpack some of the types of factors that influence raw foodists’ body-character-society relationships, and it will become clear that raw foodism is, in many ways, a reaction to – and thus part and parcel of – modern consumer culture.

Foucault: The Care of the Self

In this section, I highlight the importance of Foucault’s The Care of the Self because it helps foreground modern ideas of the self as fixable, constructible, and perfectible. In this volume of The History of Sexuality, Foucault argues that concerns for the “individual self,” which he understands as the body-soul duality, became increasingly common in Roman and Hellenic societies with the decline of city-states – and the subsequent shift of attention from the polis, or the state, to the oikos, or the home – and with dramatic alterations in class structures. As the importance of
personal relationships intensified and as the extent to which the individual was defined by the state simultaneously decreased, individuals began to alter their perceptions of their selves, and started to pay more attention to the effects of “the care of the self” on their social interactions. Greater austerity with regards to the care of the self became increasingly more complicated and valuable as the nature of the individual’s relationships with both his state and his family changed.

With these shifts in mind, Foucault reasons that a new ideology formed – the individual was no longer valued solely for his physical strength; he was also an arbiter of moral values. In turn, moral standards were elevated and individuals began attending to the ways in which their souls and bodies could “signify” and be read. Foucault explains:

… What stands out in the texts of the first centuries… is the insistence on the attention that should be brought to bear on oneself; it is the modality, scope, constancy, and exactitude of such vigilance; it is the anxiety concerning all the disturbances of the body and the mind, which must be prevented by means of an austere regimen…

Thus he notes that the increasing concern for the care of the self was part and parcel of the “intensification of the relation to oneself by which one constituted oneself as the subject of one’s acts.” In other words, individuals – particularly male, privileged, duty-bound citizens – came to believe that the ways in which they conducted and presented themselves – their “regimens” – would not only affect their own personal well-beings and personal lives, but would also impact their positions within society, the manifestations of their religiosity, the success of their families, etc.

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10 Ibid., 41.
The care of the self thus “came to constitute a social practice.”\textsuperscript{11} The connection between the soul, the body, and its society was strengthened, solidified, and deeply bound up with the structure of the state.

With greater concern for the self’s role in society came increased concerns for the physical manifestations of the individual’s care of his self: the appearance of his body. Under the watchful eye of society, Foucault argues, the relationship between the body and soul was both complicated and intensified. He claims that in antiquity, “The bad habits of the soul can entail physical miseries, while the excesses of the body manifest and maintain the failings of the soul.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus he posits a mutually dependent relationship between the two constitutive components of the self: the physical body and the inner soul. The state of the individual’s soul was presumably visible to all those who beheld him. Illness was understood not only as a sickness of the body, but also as a sickness of the soul. In response to these transformed relationships, the ancients expressed a newfound “fear of excess, economy of regimen, being on the alert for disturbances, detailed attention given to dysfunction, the taking into account of all the factors (season, climate, diet, mode of living) that can disturb the body and, through it, the soul.”\textsuperscript{13} The physical body, therefore, came to be recognized as a sign-wearing indicator that could inform others of the vices and virtues of the soul. It was valued, agonized over, and cared for not only because of its physical ability, but also because it reflected the virtuousness of the soul.

Furthermore, Foucault explicates that as the body-soul relationship intensified, the soul came to take on the role of manipulating the ways in which the individual

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 57.
body could be perceived. He writes, “The reasonable soul thus has a dual role to play: it needs to assign a regimen for the body that is actually determined by the latter’s nature, its tensions, the condition and circumstances in which it finds itself.” Thus because the individual was valued not only by (and for) the individual himself, but also by (and for) his peers, his state, and his society, he was forced to keep his virtues in check in case they might make their failings present on his physical body.

Philosophers and medical practitioners of the ancient Greek and Hellenic empires reinforced and popularized this understanding of the self. It was therefore not exclusive to intellectual circles, but was spread throughout society as it became integrated in the ideologies of the state.

Foucault follows his historical trajectory from antiquity through the Early Middle Ages and argues that as Christianity developed and gained popularity, the emphasis on one’s need for moderation and on his control over his body intensified. The Christian belief that the individual should not indulge, but rather should limit external distractions in order to focus on and cultivate the soul, became widespread and extended far beyond the realm of Christianity, into the realm of the everyday. Foucault makes it clear that this gradually intensifying Christian fear of excess derives from the obsession with control that was present in the Greek and Hellenic empires. He notes several of the threads that linked the Greek and Hellenic “regimens” to the Christian valuation of moderation and essentialism:

The principle of a strict economy aiming at scarcity; a dread of individual misfortunes or collective ills that can be caused by disorderly sexual behavior; the need for a rigorous mastery of desires, for a struggle against images and a disallowance of pleasure as the goal of sexual intercourse.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Ibid., 133.
¹⁵ Ibid., 143.
Moderation was thus valued because it indicated to the society that the individual was focused on cultivating a well-functioning, productive body and soul rather than on finding pleasure. As societies and religions – like the Greek, Hellenic, and Christian empires – developed ideologies that perpetuated certain ideas about how the body should look and be maintained, individuals became increasingly concerned with how the practices in which they engaged in private could affect the ways in which they were perceived in public. If the individual paid little attention to his appearance, he was thought to be careless with regards to his physical well-being, and more importantly, was apparently ignorant of the state of his soul. Likewise, if the individual allowed his soul to perish, his physical appearance would reflect that and make his moral failings apparent to all those around him. The establishment of and attention to rules of personal care and self-discipline – the evidence of which was presumably manifest on his physical body – indicated the functioning of his moral compass.

It is this notion – the notion that the care of the physical body is bound up with the care of the inner (moral or immoral, unified or disjointed, content or discontent) soul – that is also at the root of most conceptions of the body and the self today. Although there have been social, religious, and political shifts that have obviously altered the nature of the body-soul duality, the basic idea that the self is valuable to and for both society and the individual is apparent today as it was in antiquity. With this in mind, I shift to the modern era.
**Romantic Notions of the Self**

*One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

The perception of the self has been, and continues to be affected by the consumer culture that developed in the mid-20th century. Modern consumerism, in turn, influences and has been influenced by advances in technology, changes in the perception of the self, increased scientific knowledge, and numerous shifts in the Western social and political structures. The modern consumer culture in which we live – defined by its reliance on technology and by a detachment of an object and its mythologized counterpart – has been rapidly advancing and changing since its very conception. While many argue that the initial spark for the formation of modern consumer culture was the Industrial Revolution, it has also been argued that the ideologies that foregrounded and validated the expansion of modern consumerism were in the making long before then.

In his article, “Romanticism and The Consumer Ethic: Intimations of a Weber-Style Thesis,” Colin Campbell asserts that the late 18th century romantic idea of the self-perfecting individual helped to shape and legitimize the consumer culture that developed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. That is to say, though the Industrial Revolution provided the means – the increased material productivity – that allowed the Consumer Revolution to occur, the notions of self-perfection were already in place, instilled as an ideology that, though superficially against the Industrial Revolution and what it stood for, actually complimented and catalyzed the consumer movement. Campbell describes the paradigmatic shift in spirit that accompanied romanticism as a move to an “immanentist doctrine”:

This emphasis upon the uniqueness of personality becomes a new and powerful doctrine and is today enthroned in the taken-for-granted
assumptions underlying a vast array of cultural and social institutions… This is a radically different doctrine of the person, who is no longer conceived of as a ‘character’ constructed painfully out of the uncompromising raw material of original sin, but as a ‘self’ liberated through experiences and strong feelings from the inhibiting constraints of social convention. The romantics conceived of man as an infinite reservoir of possibilities, possibilities which would ‘naturally’ be realized if only the oppressive order of society could be removed.\(^\text{16}\)

This immanentist doctrine can thus be characterized as a new ideology that valued feelings, experiences, and experimentation over quantifiable knowledge. In other words, for romantics, the “truth” was not found in science or logic; rather, it was discovered through the individual exploration of emotions and limits. In the eyes of the romantics, instead of being constituted by her actions or hard-work, the individual was valued for her ability to “invent” herself by feeling, living, becoming something outside the cookie-cutter mold into which society placed her. It was this “self-constructive” notion and this immanentist doctrine – aptly summarized by Campbell and illustrated by Virginia Woolf (quoted at the beginning of this section) – that undergirded the practices of modern consumerism.

Like the romantic, the modern consumer constitutes herself by the choices she makes, her tastes, and her desires rather than by her knowledge or quantifiable “success.” Moreover, it is important to note that in the consumer era, the idea of self-perfection is consistently imagined in commodified forms. What we purchase and what we consume (which might be certain practices, memberships, or goods) presumably defines us. It allows us to construct our selves, to establish our individual identities, and to demonstrate our tastes to others. Thus participating in the spirit of

modern consumerism serves two purposes, the first of which is personal and the second of which is social. It allows us to “create” ourselves, to establish our individual identities, and it also provides us with a means of differentiating ourselves from others, to others.

Theorizations of the Modern Subject

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu exposes several means through which individuals symbolically differentiate themselves through their consumption practices. He argues that one’s preferences supposedly inform others of his social class, his cultural-know how, and various other facets of his personal background. In particular, Bourdieu focuses on how the consumption of cultural commodities is a practice of both personal and social betterment for the dominant social classes. Though his critique extends far beyond the consumption of food, into the consumption of all cultural forms (i.e. art, music, education, etc.), I focus primarily on his section, “Taste of Freedom vs. Taste of Necessity,” which expressly discusses food-related consumption practices. In this section, he asserts that the bourgeois individual exerts a high degree of control over the food that he eats and the form of his body. The bourgeois man’s desire to, and more importantly, his ability to control his consumption indicate a higher level of knowledge and an elevated social status that are implicitly linked to a “moral fixation.” As Foucault argued with regards to antiquity, the moral fixation that is demonstrated through food practices is deeply tied to the “virtuous” practices of moderation and control. Though Bourdieu’s theory lies in the same vein, he argues that in modern consumer culture, “moral fixation” is demonstrated not only through the individual’s practices of moderation, but also through his preferences and
stylization of life. That is to say, the choices that the individual makes with regards to what he does and does not consume allow him to differentiate himself, to flaunt his cultural and academic knowledge. According to Bourdieu, the bourgeoisie defines itself in opposition to “the masses” by rejecting excess rather than by indulging. Concerns with health, with thinness, with the avoidance of excess demonstrate not only a concern for “the self,” and the maintenance of a particular image of “the self,” but also reinforce an association with a particular class and educational status – an elevated position from which the individual can selectively reject or accept what he so chooses. Furthermore, Bourdieu also points out that members of the bourgeoisie also display their higher social status through the “luxurious” foods that they consume. That is to say, it is not only their rejection of excess quantities of food, but also their rejection of the foods associated with “popular” taste that distinguishes and elevates them in the French social hierarchy.

Bourdieu henceforth differentiates between the taste of freedom and the taste of necessity. He asserts that the ability to choose what one wants to eat, to reject the popular taste, to eat what is “light” and “healthy” rather than what is “filling” and “hearty,” is a luxury. Concerns about food and health are a privilege because they indicate that the individual is in a place where he can afford to think beyond his instincts and immediate needs. Bourdieu explains the fundamental distinction between the “taste of luxury” and the “taste of necessity” as:

…Two antagonistic approaches to the treatment of food and the act of eating. In one case, food is claimed as a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and gives strength (hence the emphasis on heavy, fatty, strong foods, of which the paradigm is pork – fatty and salty –

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the antithesis of fish – light, lean and bland); in the other, the priority given to form (the shape of the body, for example) and social form, formality, puts the pursuit of strength and substance in the background and identifies true freedom with the elective asceticism of a self-imposed rule.\textsuperscript{18}

The first case described by Bourdieu is clearly that of “taste of necessity,” while the latter is that of a “taste of luxury,” a taste shared by those richest in economic capital (industrialists, the new rich), those richest in cultural capital (intellectuals, artists), and those with both (professionals). The desire for what is healthy is marked as a desire for what is culturally and socially “superior.” Thus according to Bourdieu’s analyses, the care of the self is no longer simply demonstrated through basic practices of moderation, rather it has become an act of selective, stylized consumption.

Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that these preferences, these distinguished tastes are legitimated and reinforced by the “idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty.”\textsuperscript{19} The working classes, he claims, are more attentive to their strength than their shape. Instead of being concerned with cleansing or toning, they are preoccupied with the practical functions and physical strength of their bodies. The working classes thus produce a “‘natural’ body,” which “is seen [by the bourgeoisie] as an index of laissez-aller (‘letting oneself go’), a culpable surrender to facility.”\textsuperscript{20} Once again, it is clear that according to Bourdieu, the “taste of necessity” is defined and marked by preferences for foods that are practical and cost-effective. Those who consume moderately stand in opposition to the taste of necessity by systematically denying themselves what they could easily have in favor of “refined” foods, activities, and practices. Bourdieu

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 197.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 190.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 193.
summarizes this as “a way of denying the meaning and primary function of consumption, which are essentially common, by making the meal a social ceremony, an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement.”21 Thus the way in which the individual relates to, imagines, and communicates with his body is dependent on his habitus – his “structured and structuring dispositions,” the orientations internalized under social conditions, and the source of practices that tend to reproduce those conditions.22 Consumption practices, therefore, are not only rational choices – made based on nutritional or economic information – but are also symbolic, meaningful indications of taste which are, in Bourdieu’s understanding, primarily defined by social class. While those who do not have the economic means to consume foods besides those of “the taste of necessity” are unable to present themselves in any which way that they desire, those who have the economic means to indulge in “the taste of luxury” are able to define their identities, to form and fashion their bodies, and to establish meaningful connections with social groups. In this sense, the ability to consume in a distinctive way is, in fact, a privilege.

Johnston and Baumann’s Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in a Gourmet Foodscape, further explores the idea that “the taste of luxury,” the ability and choice to distinguish oneself by consuming in a particular way also provides the individual with a certain sense of belonging. The individual is able to forge her own identity and define herself through her consumption choices because these choices involve the discovery and reaffirmation of what she personally likes. Furthermore, the consumption practices of the individual act as signifiers to those around her. That is

21 Ibid., 196.
22 Ibid., 52.
to say, her tastes – asserted through the foods she does and does not consume, the
restaurants she does and does not enter – communicate certain things about her
character, her background, and her social status to others. Johnston and Baumann
focus primarily on the social implications of foodie-ism and, drawing on social and
cultural theory, assert that “who eats what can speak volumes about who belongs, and
who is excluded from communities at a local and national level… ‘[T]o eat is to
distinguish and discriminate, include and exclude.’” Though this notion of
distinction will later be discussed in the more specific context of raw foodism, at the
moment it is important to note that, like Bourdieu, Johnston and Baumann claim that
this desire to construct and affirm one’s sense of self (particularly in relation to
others) through choices of taste resonates with the romantic notion that the individual
can participate in self-creation. Furthermore, it suggests that individuals can negotiate
their identities by making informed choices with regards to their consumption
practices.

The notion that individuals can codify and read consumption practices as
indications of certain characteristics or interests is further examined in Roland
Barthes’ “Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption.” In this short
essay, he endeavors to uncover the various ways in which individuals imbue certain
foods with meanings, and how those meanings change depending on where and in
what context the food is consumed. The basic idea that the individual’s consumption
practices are a means through which he can communicates certain things about his
social class or personal preferences resonates with the theories of both Johnston and

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Baumann and Bourdieu. However, Barthes takes a more critical, deconstructionist stance. He asserts that there are dissonances between what individuals consume and what they imagine they consume, and between their consumption practices and their interpretations of their consumption practices. Their interpretations, their imaginings of their own consumer practices (which, we should recall, are what individuals use to engage in processes of self-creation) lack a logical, solid, truly “meaningful” foundation. The meanings of their consumption practices are constructed in and tied to social, political, and cultural forces that are constantly changing and reinventing them.

Barthes explains that, “When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies.”

He then continues to describe the intricate interplay between the foods that the individual consumes, the individual himself, and his society. The meaning given to the food (and to the consumer of that particular food) is a social construct. The physical properties of the food alone do not give it meaning; rather, the meaning is established through man’s interaction with the food within a particular historical and social context. Man places his conception of the food onto it and in doing so, brings it into the social realm and establishes it as a mythologized product. Though the inherent qualities of the food remain, they are overlain with man’s set of constructed meanings. However, it is necessary to emphasize that this transformation of the food’s significance is not an individual process – “such deformations or

reconstructions are not only the manifestation of individual, anomic prejudices, but also elements of a veritable collective imagination showing the outlines of a certain mental framework.” The meanings that the individual attributes to a food are therefore informed by his perceptions of it, as well as by his culture, his social status, the context in which he consumes it, the words that he uses to describe it, and the way in which it is prepared.

Therefore it is clear that for Barthes, there is an idea of food that exists outside of (though bound to) the material product itself. Social individuals give the food its own spirit, and in a sense, its own life by naming it, by imbuing it with certain social significations, and by associating it with various groups or individuals. For example, what is “ordinary bread” in the everyday realm acquires a different significance and a new name, “pain de mie,” once brought into the context of the party. The words used to describe said bread, the meaning and the role of the bread, are dependent on the context and the culture in which it is consumed. These words, signifiers of particular qualities of food and potentially other objects or persons, are not objective accounts of the food’s physical characteristics; thus they add additional layers of meaning onto the food. Barthes’ analysis of the myths that surround health foods provides us with a more concrete (and relevant) example of how he understands the denaturalization and meaning-giving processes that are characteristic of modern consumer culture.

“Health,” Barthes argues, “is the alibi food gives to itself in order to signify materially a pattern of immaterial realities.” According to Barthes, “health” is only

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25 Ibid., 21
26 Ibid., 22.
27 Ibid., 24.
“experienced through food” if it undergoes a particular process of conditioning, or in other words, if it becomes associated with these “immaterial realities” – particular feelings and states.\textsuperscript{28} For example, the foods that individuals associate with health (i.e. mineral water, apples, nuts) are those that they consider capable of providing them with “energy,” “alertness,” and “relaxation.”\textsuperscript{29} However, these foods acquire such qualities only once the term “health” is attributed to them. Health is not a physical, material reality that exists in and of itself; rather, it requires food to substantiate it materially, as well as conditions of the mind and body to validate it symbolically. Whether or not the individual actually experiences those states is irrelevant; the myth of the “health food” persists; it is an idea, a concept based in, but existing outside of, reality. Barthes asserts that, “food is henceforth thought out, not by specialists, but by the entire public, even if this thinking is done within a framework of highly mythical notions”; thus this process of constructing a particular idea of, a “myth” about the food– as we saw earlier with the pain de mie – is the work, the collaboration of the collective imagination.\textsuperscript{30} Lastly, Barthes argues that, “this nutritional rationalizing is aimed in a specific direction,” which is, he claims, a struggle for power and control “in the modern world.”\textsuperscript{31} However, as will become clear in my discussion of the raw food movement, the health obsession (“nutritional rationalizing”) in America is also bound to, and sustained by its association with desires, such as those for “nature” or feelings of naturalness.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 25.
Locating Raw Foodism in Modern Consumer Culture

Many of my attempts to understand the current popularity of raw foodism have been met with assertions that, as one interviewee stated: “the raw food movement, it’s different now but it’s nothing new, it has been around for ages and ages…” Others have similarly noted that raw foodism is “the diet of our ancestors,” it is not a fad, or some short-lived diet trend. According to one raw foodist, it has become popular as of late because “the rich are getting wise… more and more actors and actresses are realizing that all the money they’re making, without health, means nothing.” Certainly, health concerns are rising in popularity, amongst the rich as well as the middle classes. However, whether this is due to a recent “wisening up,” or to a characteristically modern, consumerist desire to convey certain qualities or characteristics through the consumption of selective commodities, is not entirely clear. Informed by the theories that I outlined in the previous sections and by the narratives that my interviewees told, I argue the latter – that raw foodism is actively engaged with and, in a way, a product of modern consumer culture.

Several interviewees expressed that they did not necessarily choose raw foodism because they were unhealthy or in desperate need of a diet-change, but rather because they were, in the words of my interviewee Jeffrey, “always looking for better.” For these individuals, raw foodism was not a necessity, but a choice – a choice that indicates an attempt to move towards a particular “ideal,” towards the socially constructed “better” self that Foucault, Campbell, and Johnston and Bauman refer to in their respective works. The romantic idea of fixing the self is apparent in, for example, Jeffrey’s desire to “always look for healthier alternatives.” His means of fixing himself are expressed in commodified terms. He purchased the 80-10-10
raw food diet book that was available at the location where we met not because he needed it to survive, but because he wished to improve, fix, and optimize his physical and emotional self.

Similarly, one interviewee named Erin explained her decision to shop at farmers markets as not only a better option in terms of health, but also as a better overall experience. She told me:

I make sure that where we get our produce and all our ingredients are from local, organic sources. I’m a really big fan of farmers markets. I know a few of the farmers, and quite a few of them sell to one of the distributors that brings our produce, and I know them! You know, this guy Rob, he sells us his produce from his farm. Like the rosemary in the lemonade…

In the above quote, it is clear that Erin not only has the financial capacity to purchase food outside of a normal grocery store, but also has the cultural know-how that inspires her trips to the farmers markets and her desires to develop personal relationships with the farmers. By going to the farmers market, she does not simply buy a product. She buys an experience, a constitutive part of her identity, and a membership to a health-conscious, environmentally-friendly group. As we saw with Johnston and Baumann, Bourdieu, and Barthes earlier in this chapter, the decision to consume certain products rather than others is a decision to engage in practices that society has mythologized, has affixed to certain ideas and values. The activities and groups in which the individual is interested and chooses to explore are given meaning by the society to which he belongs. Moreover, they are constructed, temporally-located symbols that indicate certain things about the individual’s identity – namely, her socio-economic status, her cultural capital, and her particular interests.

Raw foodists seem to use their highly distinctive diets to link themselves to particular groups, experiences, and claims to cultural, social, and educational
capital. Diet is a symbolically-charged means of stylizing one’s daily life. Thus it serves not only as a path to health, but also as a means of indicating personal and moral values. Raw foodists show that they are willing to sacrifice certain pleasurable foods in exchange for a higher level of health and for a better, more special, more controlled, more knowledgeable self. They reject in order to distinguish themselves, to create themselves, and to better themselves physically, socially, and emotionally. The raw food diet, like the vegan, paleo, vegetarian, fruititarian, or locavore diets, is one of many “healthy” options. It offers followers one way to prove their knowledge, their cultural know-how by standing in as an opponent of the standard American diet. It is one option, among many, that signifies healthfulness, control, all qualities associated with the careful and calculated care of the self.

In the following chapter, I discuss the form and function of several raw foodists’ personal narratives in an attempt to tease out how and the structure of their narratives helps individuals construct and define their selves. Then in the last chapter, I further explore why these individuals use raw foodism to construct, distinguish, and care for their selves. It will become clear that, as this discussion of the care of the self indicated, the choice to consume in a particular way (in this case, to “go raw”) is not arbitrary, but rather is a decision that is informed by various social, cultural, and political pressures.
2. “GOING RAW”

*I think raw food is something that changes your views a little bit. And that probably goes for all diets. When you start to eat a certain way, it’s like conscious-shifting too. It really is. You’re taking something that you used to do, those daily patterns, and you’re changing it – and it’s funny that the pattern of food can change your life so drastically.*

– Ana, Personal Interview (2012)

“My Story”: Self-transformation Narratives of Raw Foodists

On the day of my first in-person interview, I found myself anxiously trying to occupy myself for an hour before the scheduled interview time. I spent about ten minutes buying a grilled cheese for myself, and flowers for my interviewee, Erin; then for the remaining fifty minutes, I went in search of a bathroom where I could wash off the scent of greasy, certainly not-raw grilled cheese. I feared my buttery, fried-cheese-smelling hands might not make the best impression on my first interviewee. But when I arrived, Erin seemed not to notice the scent, or my anxiety. She welcomed me warmly, retrieved me a coconut-sweetened lemonade, and sat me down. I decided to begin with a rather basic question: “So how did you get into this business?”

Little did I know, Erin’s response to that question would entail a not-so-brief account of her personal background. I was, of course, thrilled because I no longer had any awkward probing to fear. As an added benefit, her story was fascinating. Within the first fifteen minutes of the interview, Erin had already shared so much about her self, her past and present interests, and her newborn daughter. She explained in detail the “journey” she had taken – not unhindered by a few obstacles along the way – to raw foodism. We continued to discuss her business, her family, and the challenges she has faced with raw foodism, and she told me, “I’ve always been very curious and
particular about food – ever since I was younger – and it just kind of evolved to this point. I feel like I was always on this path to be where I am with food.” Later in the interview she reiterated this: “I slowly evolved to the place where I am with food – when I got to eating mostly raw, it became very natural.” These statements, in conjunction with her personal narrative, which was marked by a series of successes in face of social and familial conflicts, struck me as slightly religious. The story she told was teleological in form; she had “evolved” into a raw foodist. All events, struggles, and preoccupations up to that point were described as somehow related to her conversion to raw foodism.

On my drive home from that interview, I considered Erin’s narrative and was quite convinced that all of the events and feelings she had experienced earlier in her life did in fact foreground her decision to become a raw foodist. Though I have remained convinced of this for the entirety of my project, I have also come to realize that what was truly important about her narrative was not whether or not raw foodism was actually the “climax,” the “telos” of her story, but rather the very fact that she understands it as her purpose, her end. Erin presented her narrative as a series of logical steps that led her to raw foodism, and she was not the only interviewee who did so. In fact, the vast majority of my interviewees explained their journeys to raw foodism as a logical series of events, one leading to another, that climaxed in the discovery of, and conversion to raw foodism. Susan Harding, an anthropologist who did an extensive study on Christian fundamentalists, calls this form of narration “figural interpretation.” Using Erich Auberach as her source, she explains that, “In

32 It is undeniable that our decisions (particularly those regarding lifestyle changes) are, at least to a certain extent, affected by the events and challenges we endure.
figural interpretation, ‘an event on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms… The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan.’”

In other words, the event being described is not portrayed as coincidental, as one of many phases, or as a reaction; rather, it is understood and narrated as something that was fated, by divine or other un-humanly forces. I gradually came to realize that all of the self-identified raw foodists with whom I spoke had figurally interpreted their decision to “go raw.” They did not explain the event of going raw as isolated or causal, but rather as the logical, fated lifestyle switch.

I decided to further pursue this trend and, as I began my analysis of the interviews, quickly found that almost all the “food journeys” I had recorded shared more than just “figural interpretation” with Harding’s fundamentalists. They, like Harding’s interviewees, expressed their personal narratives in the style and form of a conversion narrative. In this chapter, I argue that the personal narratives of the raw foodists with whom I spoke were framed in terms of religious conversion. Though I do not attempt to claim that raw food is a religion, it will become clear that converting to the raw food diet is similar to religious conversion in that it necessitates (and requires) a shift in one’s ideology, priorities, and perspectives. It often results in major social, vocational, and lifestyle changes as well. Studying the framing and language of these personal narratives in the light of conversion narrative theory will

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shed light on how raw foodists value their diet, and the rationales that validate their food-centric lifestyles.

This chapter attempts to tease out three of the major issues with which I grappled while analyzing my interviews: 1) who or what serves as the source of information and motivation for conversion? 2) What does “conversion” to raw foodism entail? And 3) how might telling a personal story in the form of a conversion narrative affect – add or detract from – the experience of raw foodism? The first of these three questions was much more difficult to answer than I had initially anticipated.

There are no historical accounts of or academic literature on the raw food movement, so there is no easy way to discern who is leading and maintaining the movement. Though the raw food diet, like the paleo, vegan, and locavore diets, is certainly part of the larger health food movement that has been rapidly progressing over the past two decades or so, it is unclear whether or not certain individuals are at the forefront of raw foodism. Nevertheless, in my interviews it became quite clear that the blogs, webpages, and books written by raw foodists have helped promulgate raw foodism by making scientific findings, success stories, and support widely available. Those who write books or blog about the physical and emotional “healing powers” of raw food enable the raw food movement by inspiring conversions. They provide the source of knowledge upon which raw foodists depend to “convert” to raw foodism. Furthermore, as most of these blogs and books include stories of challenges, successes, and failures as well as comment or forum sections, they also act as a support system for new converts. The process of becoming a raw foodist is therefore not an individual affair. Conversion to raw foodism requires both a
belief in the rationales behind the raw food diet and, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the support that the Internet community provides. The notions of raw foodism (rules, new ideas, paths to success) are articulated, shared, and collectively reproduced primarily through blogs and forums, as well as through health food books.

Most striking about these books, blogs and forums is the frequency with which their authors’ raw food conversion narratives are articulated. Each blog, book, and forum, no matter its central purpose (providing recipes, offering health advice, or recording diet “challenges”) contains at least one page devoted to explaining the author’s personal journey to, and experience with raw foodism. This suggests that the articulation of a personal journey is more than just a desire to explain oneself. Rather, I would argue that the telling of the personal narrative is actually an essential part of the “journey” (as many raw foodists call it), or the “conversion process” (as I have considered it). Peter Stromberg, a cultural anthropologist who wrote *Language and self-transformation* on the rhetoric of evangelical Christian conversions, found that many of the evangelicals with whom he spoke were avidly interested in telling him their conversion stories. He writes, “…It is no coincidence that I encountered a remarkably high level of cooperation as I sought out believers who would be willing to tell me their conversion stories. To do so was, for these believers, not a chore but rather a central ritual of their faith.”

By describing the events leading up to conversion, raw foodists are able to reaffirm the rationale behind their decision to make such a profound lifestyle change. As Susan Harding similarly argues, the telling of the conversion narrative is part and parcel of the process of “gaining conviction.”

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It serves as a means through which individuals can assert the logic behind what may seem to be an irrational lifestyle choice to others. Though other means of justifying such a choice will be discussed in chapter three, The Natural Self and Its Others, for the remainder of this chapter, I will focus primarily on how and why I believe that becoming a raw foodist – “going raw” – entails a more or less formal conversion process. In order to fairly make this claim, however, I must first define what I mean by “conversion.”

**Understandings of Conversion**

Conversion has traditionally been defined as “a sudden transformation of a single individual, facilitated by the influence of a supernatural figure, after which the individual finally feels content.” Rather than being described as an extended process, conversion is often understood as an event, a realization made possible by some outside figure or power. The converted individual is fundamentally different from the pre-conversion individual. The pre-conversion individual is lost, the post-conversion individual is found; the former is somehow discontented, the latter is complete, saved, at rest. This typical understanding of conversion is aptly summarized by William James, who uses the narratives of both Saint Paul and Saint Augustine to support his definition. He writes:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what

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conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that direct
divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.\textsuperscript{37}

Like most traditional conversion theorists, James defines conversion as an experience
that takes place over either a short or extended period of time, and is accompanied by
some sort of outside intervention. The outside – presumably supernatural – intervener
completes the moral repositioning that occurs through the process of conversion.

Many religious theorists posit a similar definition of conversion. However, this
traditional paradigm does not provide the space, the breadth that is necessary to
thoroughly account for the raw foodists’ experiences.

I would suggest that we look to other definitions of conversion in order to
better understand how the raw foodists undergo conversion experiences. Jules-
Rosette, for example, explains conversion as a process of becoming estranged from
oneself, from one’s previous connection to the world. She writes, “Conversion then is
a reality-shaping process in which the member sheds old preconceptions in favor of
new things for, and ways of perceiving and structuring events.”\textsuperscript{38} Similarly,
Bogdanow explains conversion as “a form of passage, a ‘turning from and to’ that is
neither syncretism nor absolute breach… it involves a process of continual
embedding in forms of social practice and belief, in ritual dispositions and somatic
experience.”\textsuperscript{39} This notion of conversion as a process, as a passage in which the
individual’s world-view shifts is useful for understanding the raw foodists’ personal
narratives. In the majority of their stories, the raw foodists cite certain human-

\textsuperscript{37} William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, (Electrotyped and printed,
\textsuperscript{38} Bennetta Jules-Rosette, African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John
\textsuperscript{39} Bogdanow, “Being is Becoming: An Ethnography of Unitarian Universalist Conversion,”
38.
interactions, health concerns, or challenges that motivated them to alter their lifestyle by making a dietary change. The transformation from the standard American diet to raw foodism was often gradual and was preceded by a move to vegetarianism or veganism. The dietary shift from omnivorous to more selective consumption in turn necessitated a shift in priorities. The raw foodists were forced to gradually change their schedules and their routines in order to accommodate their new, somewhat demanding diet. They had to make changes not only to their diet, but also to the structure of their days (their daily rituals), their interactions with others, and the spaces they occupy. As will become clear in the following section, individuals who adopt a raw food diet are not merely limiting or altering the foods they eat; they are changing the very way that they function in their day-to-day lives. Therefore they are not merely “dieting,” but rather, are converting to a new way of life. Their lifestyles change and, as a result, so do their mindsets, their social groups, their ideas of themselves and others.

“Prerequisites” for Going Raw

Though generalized statements denoting the typical reasons that inform individuals’ decisions to convert are typically unproductive, a brief inquiry into whether or not there are certain “prerequisites” for conversion to raw foodism might be useful in this particular study. In my interviews I asked my interlocutors whether or not they thought that there was a certain type of person that was drawn to raw foodism. This quickly became my favorite question, as I found that each individual’s understanding of the question itself was slightly different. While several assumed that I was asking which demographic was typically drawn to raw foodism, most thought
that I was looking for an abstract answer about the personality or character traits that most raw foodists had in common.

All of the raw foodists who answered the question as a demographical assessment affirmed that the majority of those who attempt the raw food diet are middle-upper class females. One individual who did not identify herself as a raw-foodist, though she is the co-owner of a raw food restaurant explained:

In the beginning I noticed that a certain type of person was drawn to it – like four years ago – you know, the same type of person you’d expect to drive a Prius or have a solar panel in their house. Which is amazing, I’m jealous of both. But now it’s anybody, it’s a very wide range of people from high school people to seven year olds. And men and women almost equally, but bordering on more women.

Although I found a surprisingly high number of males in the raw food businesses and events I visited, my interviewees all assured me that there is an even higher average percentage of females. They cited vanity, weight-loss motives, and feminine “mindfulness”\(^{40}\) as reasons for this gender discrepancy. Vanity and weight-loss motives were also given as reasons why members of the middle-upper classes were drawn to raw foodism. However, it was also noted that the often-high costs of eating sustainably, locally, and organically on the raw food diet, and the infrequency of discussions of raw foodism in low-income areas were factors in limiting the potential-follower-pool. Though raw food is undoubtedly available everywhere, it is often not thought of as filling, as hearty enough to be a source of sustenance. Raw food restaurants and markets do offer more variety (i.e. raw chips, raw health-bars, etc);

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\(^{40}\) Two of my interviewees cited this. When probed further, one of them, a woman named Carol explained: “From the beginning of time, we’re the ones that teach the family how to eat. That’s our ally. Men are all ‘bigger picture’ and we worry about the health of the family and the health of us. I think it’s embedded in us.”
however, these businesses are usually only found in larger cities and in relatively affluent suburbs. As noted in Chapter One, certain “types” of people – those of a particular educated, middle-upper class, health-conscious “habitus”\(^\text{41}\) – are more likely to attempt the raw food diet. Thus it is clear that raw foodism is more or less limited to, and appealing to a rather specific group of people. Yet it is also important to note that not all (or most) of those in the select group that has access to raw foodism are interested in converting to raw foodism. Indeed, there are actually a significant number of individuals outside of that typical group that have been drawn to raw foodism.

Raw foodism is appealing to those who are looking for something to improve not only their physical health, but also their mental and emotional states. Individuals who believe food can act as more than sustenance, who look to food as something that heals physical as well as emotional issues, are able to engage with and truly benefit from raw foodism. That is to say, those who are willing to accept the responsibility and stress that comes with emphasizing food as the source of their physical and emotional well-being are often those who benefit from (and are successful in) converting to raw foodism. One individual with whom I spoke described this as a state of “vulnerability.” She explained:

I think that there has to be a certain amount of... I don’t know if susceptibility is too negative of a word, but that you have to be mentally in a place where you’re thinking: ‘I’m willing to invest this amount of time and this amount of money into this because I think it’s going to have such an impact on me physically or spiritually.’ I don’t know if it’s too much to say that you have to come from a place of vulnerability in some way, and by vulnerability I mean in the sense that you’re in the standard American diet and you’re feeling like crap.

The sense of “vulnerability,” of “susceptibility” that she describes does, in a way, match definitions and descriptions of “faith.” The idea of sacrificing a certain amount of time, money, and potentially peace of mind (if attempts at conversion are unsuccessful) in exchange for an improved physical and mental state is at the core of both the raw food diet and many religions. The individual must let go of some part of himself in order to fully convert, in order to make the changes necessary for a supposedly better lifestyle and a supposedly better state of mind. It is this willingness – this “vulnerability” – that is the primary, if not the only “prerequisite” for conversion to raw foodism.

**John: On the Search for “the Truth”**

In order to fairly represent the narratives that my interviewees told, I provide an excerpted version of their accounts before fleshing out my interpretation of their experiences. I do not attempt to analyze the experiences themselves, but rather focus primarily on the ways in which they relayed their experiences to me. As I stated earlier in this chapter, the telling of the personal narrative is just as, if not more significant than the conversion experience itself. The narrative exposes the way in which the individual imagines his personal experience and how he views himself. As is apparent in both of the narratives that I reproduce, the individuals with whom I spoke understand their experiences in terms of conversion. They view their pre-conversion selves as toxic, unhealthy, and energy-deprived, and their post-conversion selves as pure, healthy, and energetic.

The first conversion story that I attempt to flesh out is that of John, a self-declared raw vegan of over 30 years. He founded and now runs his own raw food
education, demonstration, and support space in a small Connecticut town outside of Hartford. The classes that he offers typically involve demonstrations or hands-on activities, and “support” is provided in the forms of raw dinners, raw foodist support group meetings, movie nights, and guest lectures. These events successfully provide raw foodists from Connecticut and other parts of New England with a sense of community. John holds this community together with his undying belief that raw foodism is the proper way to live. When I asked him how he got to this point, he spent approximately ten minutes (with only a few minor interruptions from me) explaining his trajectory. I chose to represent his narrative in full below, rather than perforate it with my analysis, because my analytical interruptions would disturb the flow, the rhythm that is integral to the persuasiveness of his narrative.

I started a little over 30 years ago. I was crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, went through my whole body, you know, my ankles, my feet, my knees, it got so bad that I couldn’t put on my jeans because my knee was so swollen. And I was going to a rheumatoid specialist at UConn medical center and I remember asking him after a year or so – what causes disease. He said they don’t know – he thought it might be hereditary but there’s no one in my family that has had this disease. And then I remember asking him, you know, after he said we can give you the strongest drugs to deal with it, and replace your joints with artificial ones. And I remember thinking to myself, oh you know I want my own joints. I want to learn how to get rid of this disease, not to learn to live with it. So when he told me there was no hope for me, I basically left his office thinking: ‘I’m never going to come back to a doctor again and I’m going to find out what causes this disease. And how to get rid of it.’

So I spent a good several years, maybe up to five years, just researching, learning, educating myself about how the body works and what causes this disease. And in the meantime, while I found out what causes this disease, I found out what causes basically all diseases. And that is: we don’t

42 I do not note the amount of time it took for him to explain his story with any intention of being condescending. In fact, I was thrilled that John, like Erin, was so willing to open up to me. I only comment on the length of the narrative in order to 1) further reinforce my point that the telling of the narrative is part and parcel of the conversion process, and 2) give the reader a sense of how long the unabridged version of the story is.
give our body what it needs to heal and repair itself. And I learned about when you cook your food, you basically kill it, and you can’t make healthy cells in the body with dead food. It just won’t happen. And so I started eating more raw foods and eventually incorporated all raw foods in my diet and I slowly noticed an improvement and got better and better until I rid of it. It’s been almost 30 years and I’ve been disease free.

I used to be like, ‘vegetarians are like, health nuts’ and like I just didn’t have any… Until I got sick, unfortunately, when my life turned around. Unfortunately a lot of people in this society that come from our classes, they wait until they get sick before they try this… and they exhaust the doctors and they exhaust other avenues, before they say ‘okay, let me try this.’ Then they try this and it works. But there are some people that do it just because they know it’s right and they understand the whole philosophy behind it: ‘cooking your food kills it, you can’t make cells in the body with dead food.’ But there are some that just – they’re addicted to their standard American foods and they don’t want to give them up unless they HAVE to, and after they’ve exhausted every other avenue they realize: ‘this is what I gotta do.” And that’s what they do.

I wasn’t interested in science, I just wanted to get well. That was my main motive. I mean 24 hours a day, 7 hours a week, I was in pain. It got so bad; I didn’t even want to live anymore. And so I said, I have to find the cause. And the drugs I was taking were making me sick.

I was looking for the answer. I was looking for the truth. It could have been medicinal, holistic, it could have been any way, as long as it was truthful, I wanted it. You know? When I came upon it, I just said ‘this makes so much logical sense. It just clicked, you know. It made sense and I followed it and I was determined and I had a motive, of course, the pain, and when you have a motive like that, you do what it takes. It was hard at the beginning switching over… At the beginning it’s tough because there’s a lot of addictive foods in our society.

In order to fully tease out the intricacies embedded in John’s narrative, I begin by pointing out four ideas that resonate strongly with the theory discussed earlier in this chapter. The first of the four themes that I discuss is the role of pain and distress in the conversion narrative. John devotes much of his narrative to contextualizing his decision to go raw in a way that highlights his disease, without any discussion of

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43 Emphasis added.
other emotional or physical factors. Secondly, he emphasizes the rationality, the logic of his decision by noting the amount of time spent researching his disease and potential cures. His decision, therefore, was not spontaneous, but rather was well informed and considered. The third notion that I focus on is the idea that his research ultimately led him to “the truth.” The language that he uses to describe the “finding” of raw foodism has an undeniably religious tinge that must be further explored in order to better understand the breadth and depth of his experience. Lastly, I attempt to unpack John’s understanding of “the switch” as represented by his narrative. More specifically, I look at how he views the distinction between what he was before and what he is now, and how he accounts for others in that equation.

John’s discussion of his decision to go raw simultaneously highlights the fact that his disease was essential to the realization of “the truth,” and condemns the factors (the doctors) that pushed him away from finding the truth. He explains the physical stresses that he had to endure and the emotional impact of the crippling symptoms of his rheumatoid arthritis: “It got so bad that I didn’t even want to live anymore. And so I said, I have to find the cause.” He repeatedly describes his pain and his pressing desire to get well in order to emphasize the essential role that his rheumatoid arthritis played in his decision to go raw. The rheumatoid arthritis was, for him, the spark that lit the flame. The doctors’ attempts to “fix” him with drugs did not put out, but rather fed and nourished that flame. By giving him drugs and by offering him the option of alternative limbs, they actually did, in a way, move him closer to his decision to become raw, his finding of “the truth.” They motivated him to make himself “vulnerable,” to open himself up to new, alternative options. This fact becomes abundantly clear upon examination of the structure of John’s
narrative. John establishes a kind of trial-and-error progression by continuously shifting between descriptions of his pain and those of his frustrations with the doctors.

Throughout the narrative it is known that the end result, the telos, is of course the finding of his cure, “the truth.” No other incentives to go raw or find the truth are discussed. John focuses solely on his experiences with rheumatoid arthritis and the challenges he endured, which were set by both the disease itself and the doctors he encountered. It is essential to realize that the way that he structures his narrative – intentionally focusing primarily on the disease and its cohorts (those doctors trying to mask, rather than fix the symptoms) – validates his decision to go raw. Doing something outside “the norm” requires an explanation – one that was notably prompted by my questioning – and John provides a valid one. However, as will become clear by the end of this analysis, John does not necessarily “blame” the disease. Rather, he seems to almost value the disease for its essential role in opening him up to, and forcing him to search for “the truth.”

John validates his conclusion that the raw food diet and the lifestyle it entails are, in fact, “truthful” by providing evidence. He notes that he spent years researching how the body works, and when pressed further to describe his research, he explains that he was looking for “the answer.” When he states, “It could have been medicinal, holistic, it could have been any way, as long as it was truthful,” he makes it clear that he did not limit himself to one or two paths, he never singled out raw foodism or even limited himself to holistic solutions for that matter. Rather, he used his acquired knowledge to come to the decision that raw foodism was “the truth,” was the most rational, logical, “answer” to his question. Thus it is clear that there was no ulterior motive for his conversion to raw foodism. He chose it not because he had been
pressed to do so by doctors or any other industry, but because the **objective facts** proved that raw foodism would heal him.

Throughout these sections where John describes the fact-informed path he took to find “the truth,” we see an emphasis on the rational logic behind his research and decision that is conveyed in somewhat religious terms. I do not mean to suggest that all of the terms John uses have an inherently religious connotation. Rather, I claim that the way in which John places them in opposition to the artifice, the falseness of the medical industry, gives them a somewhat religious affect. While raw foodism is associated with “the truth,” “the answer,” and “health,” the medical industry is – both directly and, at times, indirectly – associated with “artificial limbs,” “the strongest drugs,” “dead food,” and “pain.” The two are posed in contrast to one another as post and pre-conversion, enlightened and “normal” selves. Whereas the former represents positive change, the latter represents a diseased, pain-ridden norm to which most people are accustomed. The point where he describes “finding the truth” and breaking from the norm is the very point at which (we can infer) the conversion took place. After having researched and educated himself, he gradually started to make the switch and only then could (and did) the realization take place. John says, “When I came upon it, I just said ‘this makes so much logical sense. It just clicked, you know. It made sense and I followed it and I was determined...” Though he was clearly an active participant in the conversion – he had to educate himself and he is the one who “came upon it,” – he experienced the “click” as a sort of supernatural event. Suddenly, his new lifestyle made sense, felt right; the truth that had been in front of him all along was at last realized. The black-and-white contrast established between his pre and post conversion selves reinforces that there is a
better life, a truthful life that stands in opposition to the life that I and all other non-
raw foodists are currently living.

Though perhaps inadvertently, John drew me into his narrative and positioned
me as this latter, diseased and pain-inflicted other. Susan Harding explains how she
was drawn into the narratives of the fundamentalist Christians with whom she
worked, merely by listening to and passively participating in their narratives. She
writes, “I was primarily distinguished by what I lacked and, given my lacking, by
what I needed. I stood for absence, for void, yet I was aware of something more,
something missing, unseen, hidden. And I would come to need that, to desire it,
having been launched on a quest for affirmation and revelation which may be
achieved only through conversion.”44 Similarly, I was written into John’s
conversion narrative. He was the enlightened self, I was the other, he had found the
truth and I was one of the “they’s” who had not. At one point he remarked, “…there
are some that just – they’re addicted to their standard American foods and they don’t
want to give them up unless they HAVE to, and after they’ve exhausted every other
avenue they realize: ‘this is what I’ve got to do.’” In this phrase, I was the “they,” I
was the one who had yet to realize “what I’ve got to do.” Harding explains that this
experience of being placed within the conversion narrative serves as the converted’s
attempt to convert the other. In this framework, the converted is able to not only
reassert and reaffirm his own conviction – by gaining recognition from another (me)
– but is also able to show another what he is and is not, what he lacks. Therefore John
had not only converted, and relayed his personal conversion narrative to me – the

44 Susan Harding, The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics, 44.
(Emphasis added).
process of which was itself a means through which he solidified the conviction he had gained through conversion – but he had also (knowingly or not) made an attempt to convert me.

In my analysis of John’s personal conversion narrative, I have attempted to show that John views his conversion to raw foodism as a process that was sparked by physical and emotional trauma, furthered by a period of research and gaining conviction, and ultimately resolved by the finding of raw foodism, the “truth.” In my understanding, John presented a figural interpretation of his life events; in his narrative, raw foodism served as the telos. All events preceding his conversion to raw foodism were expressed in their relation to raw foodism because his decision to go raw marks an essential turning point in, the definitive climax of his life story. As soon as “it clicked,” he truly began his transformation into a truth-inspired, healthy individual. From these conclusions, it should be apparent that John’s narrative is not one of simply pain and healing, but of conversion to a new, improved state of life.

Steven: Conversion and Reversion to a “Natural” Place

I met Steven at an all-day lecture-seminar in Windsor, Connecticut. The seminar itself was a rather unusual experience for me. As I walked into the building, I found the event’s two main speakers, Karen Ranzi and Douglas Graham, stationed at the entrance with an array of their books, pamphlets, DVD’s, and motivational quotes lain out in front of them. The table to their right had nametags for all of us (presumably to encourage intermingling) and a raffle for a mini mason-jar blender. Included in the cost of the seminar was breakfast and lunch: a cornucopia of fresh organic fruits, celery, and kale that was set on the table directly behind them. I was immediately struck by several elements of the event. First, I noticed that there
were no dried foods, no dehydrated or “gourmet” raw foods provided. Seeing as I had mostly only visited raw food restaurants up until that point, I was surprised that the only raw foods available were raw “whole” foods – the only form of raw food, I would later be told, that is truly “raw” and “natural.” Second, I was caught off guard by the raffle, and the self-promoted raw food books and DVD’s that, quite frankly, struck me as being akin to Christian propaganda. Neither the motivational quotes, nor the raffle, nor the books or pamphlets were free. They all came at a cost: a cost that promised a better life and optimal health. Without these guidebooks, I and the other attendees were supposedly lacking the instruction we needed to be truly enlightened and successful raw foodists. As I had already paid $100 to enter the event, I could not help but feel like the event was giving off a tele-evangelist vibe.

The seminar was held in a chapel, where about 30 individuals that were either devout raw foodists or seriously considering raw foodism were seated. We began by listening to Douglas Graham speak on the term “natural,” then after a fifteen minute break, we heard Karen Ranzi’s first talk on raising your children with a raw lifestyle: a lifestyle that apparently involves eating whole raw foods, and limiting societal restraints (i.e. alarm clocks, schedules, etc). The 30-minute talk-15-minute break-30-minute talk pattern repeated itself all day, with the exception of a 1-hour lunch break. It was during that lunch break that I approached Steven, a man that I initially noticed because he had brought his own green smoothies (and supposedly a mini-blender with which he continued to make them throughout the day). Steven, like almost all of my interviewees, was wholly willing to share his personal story with me. When I asked how he got interested in raw foodism, he provided me with a full account:

I’d heard about it for ten years – I used to be a newspaper reporter at NPR up in Lansdale, PA and it was spring 2002 when I met Arnold, who told me
how fruits and vegetables can reverse and prevent disease. At the time it seemed like very out-there information. I never anticipated myself acting on it. But it always stuck with me; I always kept it in my head. Two years later I started drinking fruit smoothies for breakfast because they’re lower in calories. They were good, but I didn’t notice any big change. Then in April 2010, a friend told me about green smoothies and the greens really made a difference because I wasn’t getting enough lettuce in there. So when you put greens in a fruit smoothie all the sudden it’s like boom! You get a lot of greens, they’re very filling and they give me a lot of energy. Mental clarity – I could tell a difference within just a week. After 7 days I could just tell, wow – this is really doing something.

So I continued drinking them and before I knew it – three months after I started – I went on vacation for 3 ½ weeks and started drinking them in the morning and the afternoon as well. By the time I got back after gorging on Tex-Mex and barbeque and all that, I came back and went vegan. It was very easy. And then, I accepted my friend’s challenge to go raw. January 1, 2011. He had done like yearly cleanses and had gone raw for a week one year, two weeks the next, three weeks after that. So we were both going to try to go 100% raw.

So I went 100% raw right away. Of course I didn’t know what I was doing – I failed miserably, but I stuck with it and was 90% raw last year. It wasn’t until April 2011 when I read about Doug Graham and the 80-10-10 that I started moving in that direction. Before this, I was just eating the standard American diet. It changed with the smoothies.”

[Interjection] “Why the smoothies?”

Mostly health reasons – they’re low in calories and much better for you than cereal or a breakfast sandwich. But also they taste great. [The green smoothies] make me feel like superman. I’ve been drinking these for about 900 days in a row. I’ll eat as many as 46 bananas a day. I eat a lot of calories, and bananas are good calories that are always cheap, always available.

[They provide] mental clarity, greater connection to the Earth and awareness of the way you should be living. Life isn’t about gadgets or TV or movies or cell phones. For a lot of people, I think a long time ago, it was just when we were kids or when our parents were kids that this [technology] became a thing. It’s all recent history. We’re living entirely the wrong way. We’re the only species that creates this artificial environment.

… You’ll have to try. The mental clarity is just beyond anything you’ve ever imagined – and your ability to focus on a path. You know, I can get up at 7 am and start stretching for about an hour, then go to work and stay focused until 11 or midnight and I only have maybe one lull in mental clarity. I never dreamed that was possible. I remember being in college and studying
and I’d work such long unproductive days. But I thought that was just normal. …I kind of feel more ambitious but in a different kind of way. I feel like doing something, but something positive. Something big. I guess if I ever said I found my true calling, this would be it. It feels like a mission and a purpose to spread the word about it. I’ve found that a lot of others feel the same way. 2/3 people are overweight. All these numbers are just horrible. I encourage you to give it a go when you have the opportunity. It’s something to work towards. I think a lot of people think it’s the kind of thing you can just try for a week or a month but it really takes a year until you get there – until you’re able to get over the old lifestyle. Some people are able to do it faster, some people are able to go 100% overnight but that’s very very rare. I don’t even think those people are necessarily succeeding.

In order to flesh out several of the central conversion-related themes in this interview, I begin by unpacking Steven’s rationale behind his decision to go raw. Unlike John, he did not have any major issues with his health or any serious conflicts that sparked his decision to go raw. Steven had been relatively healthy before becoming a raw foodist; it was not until after adapting to raw foodism that he realized that the physical state that he was in, and that most average Americans are accustomed to is not optimal. His realization of this, like the realizations narrated by both Erin and John, is figurally interpreted. Though raw foodism did not initially interest him, “the information stayed with [him],” it remained in his system, so to speak, and emerged when the time was right. Thus it is necessary to explore how he understands his reasoning for, and the logic behind his decision to ultimately go raw. As was discussed earlier in the chapter, one possible reason why Steven may engage in figural interpretation is because it allows him to place his conversion within a series of logical events. The factors that influenced his decision are rational, backed up by

45 This also harks back to Foucault’s notion of the care of the self that was discussed in Chapter One. He apprised us of the 19th century idea that we can improve and perfect our appearances (and thus the ways in which our souls are perceived).
certain individuals and systems of knowledge, and are marks of his success. However, this structure of argument is particularly interesting in Steven’s case because his descriptions of the process of converting and his reasons behind his conversion contain certain gaps, certain major lapses in logic.

After discussing the structure and rationale behind Brian’s narrative, I will attempt to tease out how Steven understands the effects of raw foodism on his post-conversion self. Steven’s descriptions, like those of John, suggest a complete transformation of the self. There is a clear divide between the pre and post conversion selves, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. Furthermore, I will argue that the catalyst for Steven’s conversion was the green smoothie (mentioned several times during the course of the interview). It not only drew him into, but also sustained and solidified his conviction throughout the process of conversion. These three discussions – concerning 1) the figurative logic behind and structure of Steven’s conversion narrative, 2) his distinction between his pre and post-raw selves, and 3) the role of the green smoothies in deepening his conviction and actualizing his conversion – will be put in conversation with the theories and questions provoked by John, Erin, and the theorists mentioned earlier in this chapter. I will further draw out some of the commonalities of the raw foodists’ narratives in an attempt to better understand their conversion experiences.

In her analysis of Jerry Falwell’s personal conversion narrative, Susan Harding finds that the narrative gaps, the parts of the narrative that are either left out, or are left mysterious, inexplicable, are essential to the persuasiveness of his story.

46 As will be noted in the analysis, but should not be ignored here, these “marks of success” are temporally located in Steven’s narrative.
They allow the listener to make sense of the narrative by filling in the gaps with their own logic. Harding explains, “He produces the gaps, the anomalies, the excesses, the apertures for the uncanny, and his people produce faith by harmonizing his discrepancies.” In other words, the narrator provides a somewhat incomplete narrative, and the listener fills in the gaps to make sense of it in his own terms, with his own logic. Similarly, when listening to the conversion narratives of raw foodists, I found that I was often agreeing with a logic that was quite different from my own, merely because it was presented to me in a way that allowed me to use my experiences and my own logic to fully comprehend what had happened. I could easily place myself in the raw foodists’ shoes because their narratives were porous enough for me to fit in, and find my experiences, and my logic in theirs.

Steven’s interview was one such narrative. He presented his story as a logical sequence of events: he started drinking fruit smoothies because they were low in calories and were a preferable breakfast option to cereal, then he tried green smoothies and found that they gave him more energy, and finally after switching to veganism, he went raw as a New Year’s resolution. Though he does not decline to mention that he did have some difficulty going 100% raw at first, he boldly claims that going raw had a significant impact on his physical and emotional states, as well as his view of and relation to the world. Though I do not wish to question whether or not he actually experienced that change, I do sense that there is a gap to be noted in this cause-effect equation. Steven attributes all of the shifts in his physical and emotional states to his change in diet. No other changes in lifestyle are accounted for.

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48 He did not explicitly state that this was a New Years resolution, but he did note that it was a “challenge” that he began on January 1, 2011.
in this equation besides *diet*. However, there is a significant chance that such a major change in diet was accompanied by other lifestyle changes – greater attention to taking care of oneself, prioritizing one’s well-being over work-related stresses or anxieties, etc. The narrative gap that Steven creates is not immediately apparent but is, nevertheless, effective. The listener (in this case, I) cannot question whether or not such a significant shift in emotional and physical health was made, because I myself have not gone raw. This gap requires belief, conviction on both my and Steven’s parts. Steven reaffirms his conviction, his belief in raw foodism through the telling of his conversion narrative; meanwhile, I participate in the confirmation of that belief by listening and actively engaging with his narrative. I use the narrative he provides me with to imagine his experience with raw foodism and, in doing so I put myself in his shoes. That is to say, I use my perspective, my logic to understand and recreate his narrative in my own terms. This facet of conversion narratives is notable because it not only shows how belief is created, but also how it is shared and conveyed. Steven could have easily converted me, and has probably converted others through the telling of his personal story because it contains the gaps necessary for an other to imagine, accept, and re-imagine themselves participating in the transformation that he describes.

Also apparent in his narrative is the rather dramatic division that Steven envisions between his pre and post-conversion selves. While his former self is “unproductive,” less ambitious, and less energetic, his raw-self has “greater mental clarity,” an “awareness of the way you should be living,” and “an ability to focus on a path.” He recalls former “long unproductive days,” yet notes that he “thought that
was just normal.” Whereas before he was successful, but not notably driven, now he has “a calling… a mission and a purpose.” I cite these particular phrases because they are bold claims to a change in self and, moreover to a change in (physical and emotional) person. His claims to having found his calling, and to having discovered the key to greater happiness and seemingly limitless energy, suggest a complete change to his entire character, his entire “purpose.”

However, he does not make his claim to this dramatic transformation without the context and support of other influencers. Steven cites certain individuals (Arthur and his unnamed friend) and his research on Douglas Graham as sources of information that informed his initial decision to go raw, and his solidified conviction in raw foodism. His decision was predicated on a certain system of knowledge: the information and resources provided by those of the raw and health food communities. Therefore his transformation was not an individual, but a collective affair. That is to say, his logic, his understanding of his new and old selves operates within – and is thus accepted by – a particular community, a particular system of knowledge. Steven’s conversion to raw foodism was a shift in perspective and lifestyle that was motivated by a greater communal shift in food and health concerns. Wanner, a social anthropologist interested in religion in the Ukraine, comments on the role of the community in personal conversion narratives. She claims, “For changes in an individual convert’s attitudes and relationships with others to be lasting, they must be sustained in communities that foster and reward them.”49 This is significant because it emphasizes the fact that Steven’s conversion and the experiences he described were

inevitably shaped by the information and conversion stories he received from others. That is to say, the raw community supports and is supported by – informs and is informed by – the conversion narrative that Steven tells. By sharing his story with me, he is adding a new layer of depth to that raw food conversion narrative; he is contributing to the promulgation of raw foodism.

However, I do not wish to suggest that other individuals – primarily his friend, Arthur, and Douglas Graham – were the sole forces driving Steven’s conversion. Though he did mention the influence of these individuals several times, he also repeatedly referred to the power of the “green smoothies.” The green smoothies – his introduction to and sustenance within the world of raw foodism – seem to have served as a kind of ritual that catalyzed Steven’s conversion. Several times within his narrative, Steven comments on the effects that the green smoothies had on him. He explains, “everything changed with the smoothies,” they “make me feel like superman.” Furthermore, he notes that he “has been drinking them for 900 days in a row.” The emphasis that Steven clearly places on the green smoothies suggests that they were the ritual that helped further solidify his conviction in raw foodism. The practice of consuming the green smoothies allowed him to cling to a particular thing within the world of raw foodism. Repeatedly engaging in the practice of drinking them helped him concretize and confirm the ties he had started to establish with raw foodism. That is to say, the green smoothie served as the primary agent that bonded him to raw foodism. They gave him the energy, the motivation – both emotionally and physically – that he needed in order to further, and ultimately complete the process of conversion.
The significance of ritual, of a physical manifestation of devotedness, is detailed by Jules-Rosette in her ethnographic account of African Apostles. She writes: “Ritual performances are the training grounds for forms of thought and expression that may be translated directly from religious experience to daily life. They provide the interface between old and new thought forms.”50 The number of times that Steven notes the green smoothie, and the role he assigns it within his conversion narrative strongly suggests that the green smoothie played the role of a “ritual performance” in that it helped feed his conversion to raw foodism. Steven consumed the green smoothies before going raw, and continued to consume them throughout his conversion. Thus they served as the mediator between his old and new life, and allowed him to sustain a connection to his previous lifestyle while drastically changing his current one. He drank the smoothies before, but now he drinks more. He ate raw food before, but now it is his life, and his livelihood. His experience with raw foodism was therefore intensified through the ritualistic form of the green smoothie. Furthermore, it helped him remain committed to, and aware of his active engagement in the process of “going raw.” He was hence able to clearly distinguish between (and thus further polarize) his past self and his converted self.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show that the narratives of those who have “gone raw” contain characteristic elements of conversion narratives. They employ many of the same rhetorical techniques (such as the implication of the listener, the creation of narrative gaps, and the figural interpretation of events) as conversion stories like those described by Harding and Stromberg. The converted individual

represents himself as enlightened as a result of his willingness to be vulnerable, and to open himself up to the possibilities of betterment. Furthermore, she sees her current self as superior to her former self, and this distinction establishes a very clear division between two phases in her life. The “before” phases is marked by failures and stresses, the latter is characterized by a “mental clarity,” “greater awareness,” and, less explicitly, the fulfillment of previously unrealized (and unacknowledged) potential. In the following chapter, I will attempt to further delineate the distinction between the converted self and its others (including the “former self”), and will explore the significance of establishing an “other,” particularly during times of identity transformation. As will become clear, the processes of conversion and of telling the conversion narrative are essential to the formation of the new and improved “natural self.”
3. THE NATURAL SELF AND ITS OTHERS

PART ONE: CONSTRUCTING AND RE-CONSTRUCTING a “NATURAL SELF”

So, you know, do I really believe in raw food? Yeah it just makes sense. You can’t be in a field and kill a cow just standing there with nothing, but you can pick vegetables and fruits and eat them and survive. Do you understand what I’m saying? I think it’s more natural; it just makes sense. I mean, you have to create a weapon to kill an animal. What’s the easiest thing to do, the path of least resistance? It’s fruits and vegetables. Even nuts are not easy. If you buy them from the grocery store, it’s super easy. But if I were sitting in a field, the easiest thing on Earth to me would be fruits and vegetables and herbs. You know, it just doesn’t make sense to eat anything else, but we do it anyway.

– Carol, Personal Interview

One of the most fascinating and yet most obvious components of my interviewees’ narratives is the adamancy with which they associate their practices with a paradoxically cultured idea of “nature.” All of the raw foodists with whom I spoke used the terms “nature” and, or “natural” to explain and justify their lifestyles to me. In order to reinforce the relationship between their habits and “nature,” many, like Carol, who is quoted above, also created images of nature by verbally walking me through a field and showing me the foods that were available (raw foods) and those that were absent (processed foods). These ideas of “nature,” of what is “natural” are interesting in that they are generally posed in contrast to artifice, society, culture, etc. Nature is pure, truth, uncontaminated by man’s hand of domination, whereas society is artificial, distanced from the truth, contaminated. However, placing nature in such a dichotomy actually denatures nature; it becomes linked to man, his needs, and his concerns. In other words, in being constructed as a counterpart to man, it becomes subject to human desires, human concerns, human re-construction. Though this tendency to place the world in a nature-culture dichotomy
is common to most members of modern western societies, the narratives provided by my interviewees suggest that the ways in which raw foodists generally polarize nature and culture are highly distinctive. The raw narratives quoted in this chapter show the terms in which raw foodists define nature, and the specific ways in which they include and exclude themselves from “nature.” They establish nature as a structure that stands in contrast to an other (a culture, a society, an obsession with technology, etc), which, in fact, is not its “natural” position.

The essential questions that guide my analyses in the first part of this chapter primarily concern the converted, raw individual, the way in which she represents herself, and what her representation of herself indicates about her relationship with society, the “other.” More specifically, I am interested in fleshing out the questions what is the nature of the raw foodist’s relationship to food? What role does food serve in the construction of her self, and how significant is that role? How does he relate to others within and outside his community? In Part Two, I will question what concerns or preconceptions are driving the construction of the natural self, and how raw food manages to alleviate those concerns. In other words, I will attempt to explore what preoccupations or outside forces are motivating one’s desire to “go raw?” Where and how are these concerns made apparent? How does food act as the tool that manages (or fails to manage) these concerns?

I must reiterate that this tendency to draw the world in terms of a nature-culture paradigm is not unique to raw foodists. It would be unfair and unwise to suggest that the nature-culture paradigm is only visible in the narratives of raw foodists. However, in this particular work, I am focusing only on the narratives of raw foodists, thus I can only draw specific examples from their expressed perspectives. As will become clear later in this chapter, the ways in which raw foodists’ narratives employ the nature-culture paradigm are very unique.
In order to address and fully explore these issues – these notions of the natural self and its other – I will begin by re-presenting the dichotomies that my interviewees established during our conversations. I will then explore the idea of nature more thoroughly by examining the “pure,” “clean,” “safe” connotations that many raw foodists associated with it. Lastly, I will unpack some of the benefits and dangers of creating this natural self; in other words, I will piece out what is at stake in the raw foodists’ constructions of their natural selves. I hope to be able to tease out the intricacies of the construction of the raw, natural self in relation to its other in order to shed some light on the motives behind (and results of) raw foodism, the raw foodists’ relationships with food, and the larger concerns that affect – and are affected by – these relationships. Moreover, further exploring these notions of nature (and its other) will aid us in better understanding how the raw foodists understand and interact with their selves and others.

**Distinction: The Natural Self and Its Others**

When I first started my interviews, I was admittedly confused as to what made raw foodists “special” in comparison to vegans, paleo dieters, or vegetarians. I attempted to guide my interviews in a direction that would ultimately answer my persistent question: why is raw foodism the *right* diet, the *right* lifestyle? My findings were surprising, to say the least. I found that raw foodism had not only separated itself from veganism and other restrictive diets, but had also split into several different camps of its own. Some of the raw foodists with whom I spoke explicitly identified themselves as “raw foodists” (which, for all of my interviewees, meant raw vegans), while others chose not to in order to refrain from “labeling.” Those that self-identified as raw foodists also told me the percentage that
denoted their level of “rawness.” For example, though several interviewees identified themselves as 100% raw vegans, most others estimated that they were about 80-90% raw. I recall one particular instance in which, on my way out of one of the raw food restaurants I was visiting, I casually asked the hostess if she was a raw vegan as well. She sighed and, with a sort of despondent look on her face, admitted that she was only about 75% right now, but is working towards 100%. This response was quite striking to me because it was the moment at which I realized that there is (at least for some) an “ideal”; there are different, hierarchically-organized levels of “rawness.” It was at this point that I understood that raw foodism is not one cohesive movement, but rather is a somewhat disparate movement that is bound solely by a belief in the consumption of mostly raw, uncooked foods.

Yet, as I delved deeper into this project, I found that even the definition of “raw food” varied among raw foodists. Though many asserted that any food cooked (or fermented, or dehydrated) under 117 degrees could be considered “raw,” some told me that the “true” raw food diet was one that consisted of solely whole, unprocessed, mostly unprepared foods. In other words, raw foodism is, according to my research and several of my interviewees, split between “gourmet raw foodists” and raw foodists who do little or nothing to alter the food from its natural state. Thus I found that the structure of raw foodism is not as easily defined as it seems. There are only a few definitive strands that run through the various different camps and sects. One of these threads, which I will focus on in what follows, is the strong conviction that “natural” is different from, and better than the norm, which is understood to be the artificial, impure, amorphous other.
Further delineating this distinction between the raw foodist, natural self and the normative-other is, as I will assert, essential to understanding raw foodism. In this discussion, it will become clear that many raw foodists find and construct their identities by defining the differences between themselves and others. “Going raw” is a means through which the individual can distinguish himself, can establish himself as purer, healthier, more natural, more aware of his environment. The raw foodist is distinguished in his tastes, as well as in his social, environmental, and political consciousmesses. However, it is necessary to note that, as we saw with Bourdieu and Johnston and Baumann in Chapter One, the choice to be a distinct Natural individual who does not subscribe to popular tastes requires a degree of privilege and cultural knowledge. I will use the theory laid out in Chapter One to draw out “tastes of luxury” and “tastes of necessity,” and to further explore what sort of knowledge is necessary for an individual to cultivate those tastes.

The Function and Position of the Other(s)

I discovered a small raw food restaurant next to a Whole Foods near my house, in a relatively affluent suburb of Philadelphia. Upon entering, I was warmly greeted by Carol, a raw foodist of over seven years. She immediately brought me to a quiet space in the back of the store and started in on describing the “journey” she took to reach raw foodism. She explained that her interest in changing her dietary practices was sparked by a conversation she had with a co-worker when she was about 17-years-old – a conversation that, in a sense, epitomizes Bourdieu’s theories concerning the distinction of taste.

Well I was so excited to start this job because I grew up kind of poor and when I went to work on cruise ships – you know, it’s a very posh kind of life, you can eat anything you want, whereas a fancy dinner was way down the road from me growing up. So I went to dinner with this woman – she
was a hairdresser – and we sit down for dinner and I can order anything I want, you know, Baked Alaska… anything I want. And I ordered prime rib. That was a big deal for me. And so she said, ‘do you know what you’re eating?’ and I’m like sure, ‘I’m eating prime rib.’ And she said ‘no, do you know what else? Do you know that’s a cow? So my very first turnaround was this.

Carol explained that her co-worker helped her complete the “turnaround” by providing her with literature on veganism. Her co-worker thus provided her with an awareness of a different option, a different type of “taste.” In this sense, we can understand Carol’s pre and post turnaround as a demarcation between the two types of taste that Bourdieu had referred to as the tastes of the working class versus those of the bourgeoisie. The former generally lacks the cultural knowledge and pretention of the latter, and thus associates heavier, richer foods with wealth and “tastes of luxury.” Meanwhile, the latter claims a cultural knowledge and awareness that is typically only available to those of the upper class, those with the means to attend to their form, their health, their ethical concerns. In this quote it is clear that Carol represented the former – the tastes of the working class – before her conversation with her co-worker. Only after her interactions with this co-worker was she able to make the transition to “informed” consumption.

However, it is necessary to recall that Bourdieu does not assert that there is merely one taste of luxury and one taste of necessity – there are lesser’s and more’s, gray areas and regions of overlap that affect and are affected by the various types of “knowledge” (i.e. that provided by education, that which derives from one’s upper-class upbringing). In this particular case, I do not wish to claim that the hairdresser with whom Carol spoke was “upper-class.” Yet keeping the Bourdieuian theory that was discussed in Chapter One in mind, I argue that she had a certain degree of
knowledge, and a certain cultural know-how that allowed her to make an informed decision to part with the standard American diet. Though neither individual represented in this quote was, to my knowledge, from the American-social-class equivalent of Bourdieu’s haute bourgeoisie, it is clear that both were exposed to (and privileged with) a knowledge that allowed them to break from the “norm” in America – that is, not the “norm” as represented by the media, but rather the “norm” in terms of what most Americans can and do consume.\(^5^2\)

The distinction between those tastes that are informed by a certain cultural knowledge and those that are not was once again acknowledged in an interview I conducted with Melanie several weeks after my conversation with Carol. Though Melanie was distinct from Carol in that she had an upper-middle class upbringing and a top-tier University education – and thus had a slightly different other against which she was distinguishing herself – it is clear that she, like Carol, found that her raw food lifestyle provided and continuously reinforced a sense of, as she terms it, “specialness.” Melanie had experienced issues with eating disorders earlier on in her college career. She explained that, in an attempt to recover from anorexia, she decided to experiment with veganism and eventually, raw foodism. Though she was only 100% raw vegan for two months, she noted a certain “specialness” that she felt throughout her experiences with both veganism and raw foodism. In describing her initial transition from not eating to veganism, she explained:

\(^5^2\) I clarify this here because the “norm,” the standard American diet that is represented by magazines and cooking shows like Bon Appétit or the Food Network, emphasizes healthy living. However, the healthy lifestyles represented in these forms of media are not what all raw foodists are defining themselves against. For example, when raw foodists discuss the standard American diet, they are actually talking about the processed foods that constitute most lower-class American diets.
I think another part of it was that I was trying to feel special or different in the food that I was eating. So in any kind of social situation I was still ‘the vegan’ or whatever. And I think that there was a sort of sense of trying to find distinctness from other people in that.

It is evident that Melanie, like Carol, had to be privy to a certain cultural or nutritional knowledge in order for her to know about, and make the switch to veganism. Furthermore, feelings of “specialness” or distinction could not have developed if she had not viewed veganism as not only “different” from the common taste, but also as superior to it. Though this is clearly a cultural conception that is not necessarily based in science or “rational” logic, it is essential to realize that her preference for veganism over any other sort of “special” diet indicates that she had been exposed to, and affected by an ideology that prioritizes healthy, light, nutrition-rich foods over a heavy, fat, and rich foods. The lifestyle that the former diet entails – marked by moderation, control, and healthfulness – is, in modern American society, valorized over that of the latter. Johnston and Baumann’s *Foodies*, which was discussed in my first chapter, “The Care of the Self,” explains that the individual’s awareness of, and attention to health and “conscientious consumption” is bound up with “cultural pressures to exercise social and environmental responsibility.”

The desire to “eat well” and the understanding that eating well will produce feelings of “specialness” or positive feelings of “distinction” is, at least to a certain extent, tied to upper-middle class American consumption practices and expectations.

Both Melanie and Carol’s preferences for foods that distinguished them from working-class tastes attest to Bourdieu’s notion that with the “right” bourgeois educational and cultural capital, individuals will demonstrate tastes for lighter,
healthier foods. In both of these cases, the acquisition of that knowledge required extensive exposure to an upper-class environment in which the distinction between the expensive taste of the masses and the expensive taste of the wealthy had been made. The distinction between, and hierarchization of these tastes was reaffirmed by both individuals who chose and preferred the healthy, light, pure foods of raw foodism over the heavy, processed foods of the standard American diet. In these cases, the raw food diet served as a means through which these women could differentiate themselves. It allowed them to show that they are culturally, environmentally, socially knowledgeable enough to make the choice to self-restrict, to eat in a way that is, for a multitude of reasons, presumably better for the individual’s emotional and physical well-being. Thus raw foodism served as a kind of social lever, in the sense that it elevated these women to a greater sense of “specialness.”

Yet it did not advance these women on a solely superficial level. It also provided them with a position, a platform upon which they could define an “other” and thus further define themselves. That is to say, by going raw, by developing a taste for more “natural,” lighter foods, and by linking that taste to a particular group (raw foodists), these women classified what they are and, in doing so, also classified what they are not. They labeled their post-conversion selves and – explicitly or implicitly – formed an idea of, or classification of an other. Carol defined her current raw-foodist self in opposition to her previous self, a self who consumed the standard American diet and had little to no “cultural capital.”

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diet, uninformed self in opposition to her raw foodist self, she not only established a sort of hierarchy, but also implicitly made certain assertions about who she is, who she is not. Her choice to move in a new, distinct, uncommon direction became a formative part of her identity; it elevated her socially, spiritually, and emotionally.

Similarly, Melanie retrospectively noted that she derived some of her value from the sense of distinction that came with the label “vegan.” She placed her raw foodist self in opposition to (and above) other dieters. Because she had attached herself to a particular uncommon identity, Melanie was able to stand out “in any kind of social situation,” and was able to both superficially and more metaphorically raise herself above her peers. Though Melanie did not specify her other as a standard-American-dieter as Carol did, it is clear that she understands her raw foodist self as a distinct individual amongst the masses. She seemed to derive a sense of stability, of self-assuredness from her choice to eat and live in a manner that is structured and easily defined. She could easily identify herself not only to others, but also to herself. In her own terms, she “was looking to find distinctness from other people.” Thus it is clear that Melanie viewed herself (and continues to present herself) as an individual with a very unique, well-informed, hyper-conscious diet. Her dietary decisions are not those of the masses, nor are they those of most in the upper class. They are those of an extremely self-aware and well-educated dieter who is not only conscious of what she eats (its nutritional value), but is also aware of how her eating habits inform the others’ view of her. The way in which she presented herself to me was therefore the result of a sort of reflexive understanding of who she is as an eater, who she is not, and who the others imagine her to be. Her identity (as she narrated it to me) both affects and is affected by her understanding of the other.
In the following section, it will become clear that the raw foodists’ notion of herself is dependent not only on her understanding of, or classification of the other, but also on her definition of the term “natural.” This term is and has been essential throughout this essay, as it motivates much of the logic behind raw foodism. It is one of the few strings that ties the rather dispersed raw food movement, and is thus key to our understanding of raw foodism, and more importantly, the self (or variety of selves) that is constructed by raw foodists.

Finding “Groundedness”

The Raw and the Processed

“...We find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object”

– The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir

As Simone de Beauvoir eloquently points out, the construction of one group, or the “consciousness” of one individual necessitates the identification of an “other.” The “subject” cannot realize herself until she has realized that which she is not. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the raw foodists with whom I worked consistently placed raw food in an alliance with “nature,” and in direct opposition to the various forms and representations of their others: modernity, industry, artifice. Whereas raw foodism was described as “natural,” “true,” “pure,” and “alive,” its others were associated with “artificial environments,” “processed foods,” and “industry.” In order to further distinguish the raw food diet from its others, most of my interviewees contrasted raw foods not with “natural,” carefully-prepared cooked foods, but rather with extremely processed foods (i.e. Kraft macaroni and cheese, and supermarket cupcakes to name a couple). Instead of highlighting the distinction
between raw food and cooked food, they repeatedly emphasized the deep contrast between the raw and the processed. Sara, a raw food business owner, used rather strong language to communicate this difference:

I think it’s funny when someone comes in and they bring someone and they’re just like oh – I’ll just have a juice. So I don’t understand you, you’ll eat a dead cow on your plate with instant mashed potatoes that probably have Windex in them yet you think that our food is weird. You have no concept of what is weird. If you wrote down the ingredients of a Kraft dinner and took them apart and put them all in little bowls in front of someone, and then wrote down the ingredients of one of our meals and put them in little bowls, people would never eat the little bowls of individual Kraft dinner ingredients. But they’d eat that all together over eating our food.

In this particular statement it is clear that Sara represents raw foodist practices (“our food”) in opposition to the foods that are associated with modernity and, more specifically, with the current standard American diet. She breaks down the ingredients that make up gourmet raw foods – all approved components of a raw food diet – and places them in opposition to the ingredients of a box of Kraft macaroni in order to show that the sharp contrast between natural and artificial products. In doing so, Sara not only defines an other (as processed foods), but also defines herself and her practices as closer to nature. She establishes a strong connection between nature and raw foods, and implies that raw foodism is purer, safer, further distanced from human activities and human machinery. The natural, raw foods – and the resultant natural self – are less “weird,” and – as per my understanding – less tainted, less corrupted than those of (and those who follow) the standard American diet.

I was initially somewhat puzzled by my interviewees’ tendencies to draw a distinction between the raw and the processed, rather than between the seemingly more pertinent, questionable distinction between the raw and the cooked.
However, as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, it is my contention that this significantly more extreme contrast is one of several means through which raw foodists “ground” themselves and their identities. I wish to highlight the term ground because I have found that the idea of groundedness is essential to understanding not only the way raw foodists view themselves – as grounded in particular practices, in nature, and in the values and lifestyles of our ancestors – but also the way raw foodists feel about themselves. That is to say, they are grounded in the sense that they are physically, materially maintaining a lifestyle that is regimented, restrictive, and rooted in a certain idea of the past. However, they are also grounded in the sense that they feel connected to a particular nature-oriented identity. As Sara’s statement clearly emphasizes, she is not simply defined by the fact that she does not eat cooked food, rather she identifies with a distinct, kind of counter-cultural group that rejects the “popular tastes” (to hark back to Bourdieu) of the present.

I have broken the interview-analysis into three of the central themes that I parceled out from the interviews: “Finding a Sense of Groundedness in…” 1) Nature, 2) Routine, and 3) the Past. These three sections should help clarify several of the ways in which raw foodists actively find a sense of mental, emotional, and physical stability. I emphasize the term “actively find” because the act of “grounding” oneself, particularly in the case of the raw foodists with whom I spoke, is not a passive event. It requires the individual to look for, and to create his own way of being. By focusing on the intricacies of raw foodists’ ideas of their selves, their practices, and the often-invoked “nature,” I foreground what I discuss in Part Two: why raw foodists’ ideas of nature are intertwined with (and seen as the logical counterpart to) longings for a sense of groundedness.
Finding a Sense of Groundedness in… Nature

Though the motives behind the raw foodists’ desire to associate themselves with nature is quite complex and cannot be reduced to one or two conclusions, it quickly became clear to me that for many of my interviewees, a central part of their relationship with nature is founded on a need for (and fulfillment of) a sense of stability. Most of the raw foodists with whom I spoke described raw foodism as “grounding,” “truthful,” “reliable.” In my understanding of our conversations, raw food was able to serve as a source of “groundedness” not only because raw foodism involves a strict, structured diet, but also because raw food is “natural,” “whole,” literally and metaphorically bound to the Earth. As will become clear in this section, raw foodism provides many of its followers with a sense of stability and groundedness because it involves a consistent regimen (of consuming certain foods) as well as a symbolic connection to the Earth.

One of my first interviews was with Erin, a raw foodist of over two years who explicitly expressed feelings of groundedness in connection with her raw food lifestyle. Our conversation helped me realize the appeal of raw foodism, as desires for stability and groundedness are something that I not only understand, but also seek out in my own diet. Erin and I seemed to share a desire to shape and stabilize our lives through diet and had found our respective unique ways of doing so. Despite differences in diet, I found that we both place a high value on food, and prioritize it as more than just sustenance – we use it as a means of grounding our selves, our identities, and our daily lives. Erin explained, “I just… I feel good. I feel centered and I feel grounded when I eat vegetables and when it’s fresh.”
In this particular statement, Erin is defining raw food as “fresh,” as mostly “vegetables,” and, most importantly, as something that makes her feel “grounded” and “centered.” Each of these terms, to a certain extent, relies on, or alludes to images of nature. Freshness, “ground”ing, and vegetables are, both literally and symbolically, associated with the Earth, with nature – which is presumably stable, reliable – rather than industry – which is, as Erin mentioned later on in our conversation, uncontrollable, distant, abstract. By describing how she feels when eating raw by making these allusions to nature, she establishes raw food as 1) stable in itself, and 2) the provider of her sense of stability. In other words, her idea of raw food (natural, constant, reliable) is consistent with, and, to a certain extent, a determinant of her emotional state. The raw food grounds her not only because it is, in her mind, associated with nature – and therefore with stability – but also because it is a means through which she exerts control over her emotional and physical state. Despite where the food has been, and what has been done to it before consumption – which is, in her case (as a New York City restaurant owner), in the control of her distributor and the farmers who associate with her distributor – it is “fresh,” raw, less “processed,” untouched by industry. She is empowered, is in control of the food and, more importantly, of her self. Erin’s words struck a chord with me and allowed me to more clearly see this side of raw foodism – a side that my intuition told me was fundamental to its power and appeal.

Carol confirmed my suspicion when she explicitly addressed the divide that Erin’s statement implicitly created between industry and nature, processed and unprocessed, cooked and raw, unstable and grounding. At Carol’s live-raw food restaurant, she keeps many of her foods in their natural state – in the dirt,
growing – as long as possible before serving them. Throughout our conversation, she repeatedly stressed the importance of this “live” food, of the fruits, vegetables, and sprouts that she uproots only moments before they are to be consumed. She and her co-workers control the food throughout its lifecycle – its growth, its death, and its preparation. When we began to discuss the power of live raw foods, she explained:

It’s grounding and there are many different reasons for that – you know, the live food, it’s right from the ground. It’s grounding. Seriously… See I just think that there’s a truth in sitting against a tree. I grew up not knowing anything like that, what it is to sit against a tree or lie on the ground and feel grounded. And what does grounded even mean? It means being one with the earth, getting the energy from the earth… You get so ungrounded and up here and then it’s like ok stop, breathe, focus on your breath and just be here. In this society, you’re in fight or flight mode all the time when you’re on the Internet or computer or whatever, and we just need to come back down!

Upon hearing her describe the sensation of groundedness as knowing the “truth,” as “sitting against a tree or lying on the ground,” one might initially presume a sort of new-age religious motive. Her language suggests that the food is real, true, worthy of her faith. Though the association of nature with a religious or spiritual realm may be well founded in this quote, what is more important here is the sure distinction that she is establishing between nature and technology.

Nature – the ground, the trees, the Earth, the live food – is grounding to Carol primarily because it is tangible, because it is visible. She describes the certainty with which the tree can be leaned against, the ground can be lain upon, and the live food can be taken “right from the ground.” The Earth is, in this understanding, physically and materially present. It is within our grasp, within our control. Technology – “the Internet or computer or whatever” – stands in stark contrast to nature both literally and symbolically. After extending her fingers to the ground when describing
nature, she abruptly raised her hands to the air in order to show the physical and symbolic distances between nature and technology. She emphatically waved her fingers in the air when explaining that in this society, it is so easy to get “ungrounded” – to be literally and figuratively removed from the solid, identifiable Earth and lost in an indefinable space above our heads. Technology, industry, and all products associated with man-made artifices are estranged from us in a way that the ground, the trees, and the live-raw foods are not. Whereas the former are imagined as a kind of enigmatic sphere that exists both for and outside of us, the latter are reliable, knowable, and presumably unchanging. We cannot know the Internet nor can we know exactly where and how our food was processed. However, we can touch the ground and feel the Earth in which “live foods” are grown, and that is enough of a reassurance to provide the sensation of groundedness.

Raw foods – or in this particular case, live raw foods – are inextricably bound up with images of nature, a life-giving, life-stabilizing realm. Furthermore, they are placed in opposition to processed and “cooked” foods, which are tied to notions of technology and estrangement. Thus it is clear that raw food derives its capacity for groundedness from both its association with nature and its distance from industry. Yet, as I show in the following section, raw food is stabilizing and grounding for raw foodists not only because it is associated with nature, but also because it is a rule-bound category, a defined set of “acceptable” foods that stands in contrast to all other foods – processed foods, foods that are associated with industry, foods that should not be eaten.

Finding a Sense of Groundedness in… Routine
According to the raw foodists with whom I spoke, it is not only the establishment of raw-vegan food rules, but also a strict adherence to these rules that provides a sense of groundedness. If and when the raw regimen is broken, its beneficial effects are apparently not felt as consistently or powerfully. Raw food is therefore something upon which the individual depends and must maintain in order to find it continuously satisfying both in its taste and its familiarity, its routine. In my discussion with John, a raw vegan of over 40 years, it quickly became clear that he understood the raw food diet primarily as a vehicle through which he could maintain his physical health and thus ground himself. In describing his understanding of health, he explains:

…[Your body is] like a wheel with spokes. If one of those spokes is missing or out of alignment, you’re going to have a bumpy ride or you’re going to get sick. So it’s all about them all working together…[Diet] is just one component. But it’s one component that is kind of at the beginning of the rest of it. Once you eat well, your mind gets clearer and you start thinking clearer, and then you start, you know, things just sort of fall into place.

Like John, Carol also emphasized the importance of consistently making the “right choices.”

You know, [diet] is all about choice. You make choices, you do it, [eat well], or you don’t do it. The more you do it, [eat well], the more control you have over it. I believe that food – especially certain types of food – can be very addicting. But my body doesn’t react well [to these addicting, non-raw foods]. I don’t feel good after. It’s kind of like a mind versus body thing. Your body wants the good food and your mind wants the addictive food.

In John’s description of the functioning of the body, he likens health to a wheel with spokes and thus establishes a particular, almost mechanic mind-body dynamic. In this sense, he seems to be positing the body as an object over which we have absolute
control. Though all “spokes” are working together to keep the body, the “wheel” functioning, the bike ride will presumably only be smooth if the wheel is maintained properly. In other words, “you’re going to have a bumpy ride” if the wheel is not regulated, if the spokes are not kept in order. The body, the wheel is the site of regulation that ensures the functioning of the mind, the success of the ride. The other aspects of our health are contingent on diet because it is, according to John’s metaphor, the spoke that essentially holds the wheel together – we need it to provide the healthy foundation that keeps our bodies in order, and we need it to help maintain the order. Similarly, Carole points out that if she wants her body to “feel good,” she must fight the temptations of her mind, the desire to eat addicting foods. Yet she also claims that, “the more you do it, [eat healthily], the more control you have over it, [diet].” Thus she essentially asserts that her well-being is dependent on her ability to routinely fight the urges of her mind and listen to the nonverbal, sensational language of her body.

Though neither John nor Carol use specific terms of grounding to describe how and why one should eat healthfully, the theme of groundedness is, once again, present. By explaining the practice of raw foodism as something that should be repetitive, as something that allows one to assert control over one’s health and over one’s self, they suggest that it is not only the raw food itself, but also the routine decision to eat raw that helps them keep their bodies in tandem with their desires and vice versa. It is clear in their statements that control over diet is grounding in that it not only establishes a constant, but also in that it ensures a certain health routine. Raw foodism both creates and maintains a certain health stasis. It stabilizes, strengthens, and fortifies by providing a healthy, dependable routine. Yet it might also be
noted that not only the practices, but also the rules themselves can serve as a source of order, a sense of groundedness, a sense that all the spokes are properly aligned. Though this idea will be further explored in Part Two, where I employ the theory of Mary Douglas to explicate some possible rationales behind a desire for order and rules, it is, at this point, simply necessary to realize that the regimented structure of raw foodism is grounding because it is regimented and contained within a particular structure.

Finding a Sense of Groundedness in… the Past

The third distinctive way in which several of my interviewees established a dichotomy between nature and technology, between the natural self and the artificial, modern self was by expressing a desire to “return” to the lifestyles of our ancestors. One such interviewee, a member of a raw food company, was named Ana. Unlike most other raw foodists with whom I spoke, Ana expressed an interest in maintaining a pure, natural self not only through consuming raw food, but also through regulating the types of containers, skin products, and nail polishes that she uses. Though she never explicitly referred to her desire to use only natural products as a “return,” it is quite clear in the following passage that she is intentionally extricating herself from the norms, the lifestyles, and the products of modernity.

I like to make a lot of my own beauty products and I’m very funny about what I put on my body so I will say that raw food opened my mind up to that as well. I started making my own body wash, my own toothpaste – I’m really interested in that. I’m very conscious of putting things in glass. I don’t like putting things in plastic. I was never huge into material things or makeup or things like that, but I have definitely minimized in all aspects.

In a perfect world, it would be great to never have plastic, but it’s so stressful and you kind of have to… you know, we’re still living in society, I’m not living in the woods, I want to live in society and I just want to do the best I can every day, whatever that means.
In this quote it is evident that Ana feels a certain separation between her self and the society of which she is a part. Though she clearly recognizes that she is a member of a modern American society, she also makes a calculated effort to control the extent to which her body is affected, or – to put it strongly – contaminated by her environment. She recognizes that her ability to control what does and does not enter her body is inevitably limited because “we’re still living in society,” yet she still makes a conscious effort to keep her body as clean and “natural” as possible. She expresses a certain valuation of her self and in doing so, distinguishes herself from those around her. In this particular passage, Ana stresses that the products she uses are her “own” – “my own beauty products,” “my own body wash, my own toothpaste” – and thus presents herself as a more natural, arguably less “modern” individual. Ana does not conform to the norms of typical modern American society (where progress, work, and financial success generally come first), but rather differentiates herself by rejecting the products and the values of that lifestyle in favor of a lifestyle that allows her to prioritize herself and the quality of the things and spaces around her. By holding herself to values and lifestyle choices that are not common in the American society, she is advocating a break from the present.

Though other interviewees expressed a similarly unconventional, or “un-modern” system of values, few made their case as bluntly as did Steven. He expressed an intense desire for a return to an ancestral past. Though it was unclear exactly what era he was referring to, he seemed to be harkening back to a time long before modernity. Upon being asked to further explain the benefits of raw foodism, he replied:

[It gives me] mental clarity, greater connection to the Earth and awareness of the way you should be living. Life isn’t about gadgets or TV or movies
or cellphones. For a lot of people, I think a long time ago, it was just when we were kids or when our parents were kids that this [technology] became a thing. It’s all recent history. We’re living entirely the wrong way. We’re the only species that creates this artificial environment. I’m trying to move away from that, I’m trying to get to a point where I can just have an Internet business and live very simply.

I responded to this statement by asking how his Internet business factored into his longing for a return to a seemingly purer, less artificial environment. He interjected:

I didn’t create the rules – the rules were created ahead of time. You know, other species go out and eat nature’s splendor but we have to go out and work for it. We need money. The Internet is the answer to that for me. I need money to pay for food.

I mean, I rarely watch TV. Way less than the average person does. Ever since like 2000, I don’t really spend many hours at all in front of the TV…I want to live in a hut basically. I think that would be great. I have no desire to live in a three million dollar house at all. Even if I had the money, I wouldn’t buy things like that. It doesn’t jive with me or with how we should be living. I see a lot of people out there struggling to pay for a house. I see my parents working to maintain a house for no reason… I want to move really badly. I want to move near the equator, like Costa Rica. That’s where we should be living. We came from equatorial Africa eating fruits and grains. And we started moving into all these other territories. We’re the only species that has a coat or a fan or air conditioning. We’re here by all artificial means. In Boston you can’t even get enough vitamin D in the wintertime. It’s just not natural to live in this kind of environment. I want to live very simply. Almost like in a shack. Very minimalistic.

As is clear in the desires he expresses and the forcefulness of his language, Steven is interested in a raw-food-led return to nature not only because it offers him feelings of groundedness – “a greater connection to the Earth” – but also because it allows him to escape what he feels has become an “artificial” existence. He understands the past, our roots as “natural” because it is associated with human origins. In this understanding, our origins are supposedly more truthful, more natural because the paths that we took to get to this modern state have been bolstered and literally
paved through “artificial” means. Our rightful place is not where we are, but where we came from; it is not what we have constructed, but what we were given.

This idea of natural is, as was discussed earlier, interesting in that it assumes a dichotomy between nature and culture. In this particular (rather common) understanding, nature encompasses all that which is not directly associated with “human” activities and practices. This view, however, is problematic as it contains certain gaps, certain exceptions. As Steven pointed out, running his Internet business is one such exception to a “natural” lifestyle because it is necessary for his survival in modernity. Yet as is clear to any listener of his narrative, his purported rule (nature is everything not-human) and the singular exception to it (but making one’s living through technology is acceptable) contradict one another. This contradiction is problematic because it is rationalized and validated by “the rules of society.” Furthermore, because Steven accepts the contradiction as indisputable, unchangeable, he does not see that there is perhaps a more productive way to have a relationship with nature – a way that might involve an active effort to change the environment and the “rules” around him, rather than by attempting to return to a past that is, as he shows himself (by his submission to “the rules”), unrecoverable.

However, raw foodists are certainly not the only individuals to engage in such a paradoxical treatment of “nature.” In his work, *Ideas of Nature*, Raymond Williams points out that we all are part of this, to a certain extent: “When nature is separated out from the activities of men, it even ceases to be nature, in any full and effective sense. Men come to project on to nature their own unacknowledged activities and
consequences.” In other words, once nature is tied into man’s idea of himself, it is no longer an untouched, pure entity, but rather is an abstract sign of purity that gets bound up with (and helps define) the individual. But in its transformation from nature-as-nature to nature-as-part-of-man, nature loses the practical components of its naturalness and acquires human (unnatural) properties. It is no longer a pure entity that is separated from man; instead, it is a symbolic marker of purity, an idealistic demarcation of that which is “true” and that which is not. A similar dissonance is apparent in the way that raw foodists represent the relationship between raw food and nature. According to most raw foodists, raw foods are natural not necessarily because they are untouched or unprepared by human hands, but because they have not been heated above 117 degrees. Despite the fact that they have been prepared and altered from their “natural” state, dehydrated, blended, and juiced forms of foods are permitted on the raw food diet because they were not cooked. Though once again, the notions of what is “nature,” or “natural,” are clearly determined by man – and are, in that sense, unnatural – the hand of man remains invisible, unacknowledged as an active participant in the demarcation of the “natural” world. The individual perhaps remains unaware of his role in the construction of the world around him and in turn, is not cognizant of the oversights, the re-imaginings involved in the construction of his own self.

At this point, it should be apparent that the raw foodists’ ideas of themselves are informed by their ideas of nature which, as I will argue in Part Two, are influenced by broader concerns about control and purity. Their tendencies to seek out

a sense of groundedness in routine, nature, and the past suggest that they desire more control over their environments, of what goes in their body and how their body is perceived. In order to support this assertion, I will employ the theories of Douglas, Foucault, and Bordo. These theorists will help shed light on how and why raw foodists’ notions of the natural self, and their answers to the need for “groundedness” get validated and reinforced through raw foodism.

PART TWO: ON THE NEED FOR GROUNDEDNESS

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future”

– Simone Weil, The Need for Roots

Simone Weil wrote The Need for Roots with the intention of formulating a plan for repairing the political and cultural structures that were damaged during World War II. Though the context of her discussion obviously differs from my own, the understandings of human nature that lie behind her more specific recommendations are applicable to this work as well. Weil explains that individuals need a sense of spirituality, of stability, and of support in order to be truly productive members of society. They cannot function well without feeling that they have roots in a community – a place that not only ties them to the past, but that also gives them a sense of support and certainty for the future. Thus the role of community, and of society is to provide this sense of rootedness through various cultural, social, and spiritual (belief-based) forms. Without such supports, individuals are prone to feeling lost or unproductive, detached and unstable. In other words, humans cannot truly be, exist, produce in their worlds without a sense of rootedness.
This sense of rootedness that Weil describes is, in a way, analogous to the sense of “groundedness” that the raw foodists seem to be attempting to find through diet and major lifestyle changes. As evidenced in Chapter Two and Part One of this chapter, raw foodists look for and gain a sense of stability through their practices. They fulfill their need for groundedness through a diet that incorporates routine, discipline and control, nature (which is linked to stability), and an ancestral past. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to further delineate how and, most importantly, why this need for groundedness is felt, expressed, and fulfilled in raw foodism.

Exploring the Desire for Solid Ground

Though I do not wish to discredit or delegitimize any feelings of groundedness that the raw foodists expressed, it is necessary to realize that even though many raw foodists cite a “return” to nature and invoke memories of our “ancestors’” eating habits, they are citing these practices within the context of their modern ideologies and histories. In other words, even though these practices were perhaps a “norm” at some point, they are not now. They constitute one lifestyle choice among the many that are available in modern American society. The fact that the practices of raw foodism are a choice, rather than an imperative, distinguishes them. The intention and context behind these practices is tied in with the practices themselves: the differences in intention cannot be (nor should they be) ignored in the analysis of the raw foodists’ narratives. Looking to food as a source of groundedness says something both about these individuals’ notions of nature and about the stresses (linked to technology and a loss of control over their sources of food) that they feel. Before exploring some of the larger social concerns that may be influencing raw
foodists’ desires to find a sense of “groundedness” in their dietary practices, I use
Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* to flesh out some of the issues of routine, control,
and order that are raised in the section from Part One on “Finding a Sense of
Groundedness in Routine.”

What I found most interesting – and perhaps most paradoxical – about the
narratives quoted earlier is the idea of finding order in nature, something that is not
itself orderly. As I began reexamining my interviews, it became apparent to me that
many of the raw foodists with whom I spoke (like John and Carol) establish – or at
least present their practices as – a seemingly methodical way of understanding and
embracing disorder. If we understand this in light of the theories Mary Douglas
proposes in *Purity and Danger*, it appears that the relationship with Nature, the desire
to order, and the desire to establish a cleaner, purer self is potentially grounded in a
deeper desire to make sense of the world around us.

Like any diet, raw foodism imposes certain limits on the individual and
essentially ensures that, on a day-to-day basis, the individual will eat only a limited
range of foods. A constant, habitual practice is thus established. The ability to create
and maintain certain limits, certain boundaries is “grounding” in the sense that a line
has been drawn, a rule has been established, a limit has been defined. In the words of
Mary Douglas, “Dirt,” like certain foods we deem “impure,” or “inedible,” “offends
against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to
organize the environment.”56 The tendency to distinguish between the pure and the
impure, the acceptable and the prohibited is part and parcel of a natural human desire
to exert control over the environment and to maintain that sense of control by
imbuing natural objects with positive or negative charges. Diet, the set of food rules, like the prohibitions that distinguish the “sacred” from the “profane,” is therefore a means through which individuals organize their environments, their practices, and their lives in a way that makes sense to them. They limit themselves not only in order to give their lives structure, but also to give meaning to, and to make sense of the world around them. Douglas further explicates:

In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea… it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function. 

Though according to Mary Douglas, all humans do this – create and follow rules – in their own respective socially, religiously, ethically, or culturally-informed ways, I would argue that raw foodism is a more or less institutionalized way of creating health-conscious food rules by which one can live. The rules it creates provide a foundation that raw foodists can personalize and adhere to.

With both Douglas’ work and the raw foodists’ testimonies in mind, the body can be understood as a site of regulation. It is an object over which we can exert control by restricting, cleaning, and feeding it as we see fit. We can order and control – at least to a certain extent – what comes into contact with our bodies in the sense that we determine what is and is not taboo, we determine what is and is not consumable, touchable, permissible. The individual’s sense of control and awareness of her purity (or impurity) is constant, something that both “grounds” her and allows her to maintain her sense of order. Yet teasing out some of the reasons for which we

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57 Ibid., 8.
58 Ibid., 2.
have come to imagine the body as a controllable, attention-worthy, attention-demanding object that requires proper care and maintenance for its functioning and for our sanity, requires us to explore the phenomenon that Foucault dubs the cultivation of “docile bodies.”

Many modern theorists have argued that the idea of the self – and therefore the understanding of how to care for the self – is not only determined by social or cultural norms, but is also deeply tied to dominating power structures, which affect and are affected by changes in technology and cultural shifts.\textsuperscript{59} Foucault, for example, contends that the changes in power structures have created new power dynamics that have produced new ways of conceptualizing the self or of imagining the body and human agency. The idea of the self, the care of the self, and external factors (i.e. society, culture, class, power structures) work through and with one another. They are inextricably connected to one another in a dialectical relationship. The maintenance, cleaning, controlling, restricting of the self is therefore not solely motivated by individual desires or relationships, but rather is the result of a conglomerate of external factors, the most important of which, according to Foucault, are the dominating power structures and authorities.

Foucault argues that this idea of the body as something malleable, something that those governing could subversively transform and “fix” began at the close of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, a period of militarism and absolutism. He claims that, “the classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body - to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained,

\textsuperscript{59} I.e. Foucault, Bordo, Durkheim, Douglas, and Barthes.
which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces."60 Then with the turn of the 19th century, as medicine and science continued to develop, the care of the self became increasingly dominated by the idea that the body – not the social body, but rather the individual body – could be shaped, transformed, bettered in a way that would be useful to those in power.

While clearly the conceptualization of the body as “useful,” as a “target of power” was not unique to the nineteenth century, the notion that the body could be modified, developed through the subversive transformation of an individual’s “movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity”61 was new and was an idea that only grew in its significance as technology continued to advance. Furthermore, as the systems of power (not only on a national or international scale, but also on a smaller, social scale) shifted from totalitarian to democratic rule, from direct to indirect subversive controls, society was not freed, but rather was further repressed. Modern society is, according to Foucault, more repressed than it was under totalitarian or militaristic controls because its citizens are not even aware that their every movement, their every dietary change, their every thought is dependent on the opinion of others. Moderns unknowingly subscribe to an ideology that dictates how they speak, consume, interact, and think. As a result, they inhabit docile bodies, bodies that are essentially vessels for the ideologies produced by the dominating power structures that have developed over the past several centuries.

In this sense, the cultivation of the body has become a form of social, as well as individual control – a sort of construction site upon which both the individual and

61 Ibid., 181.
society could “work.” This harkens back to John, Carol, and Erin’s experiences of “groundedness” in the sense that diet – specifically raw foodism – is an essential means through which they exercise control and transform their bodies to suit societal standards (of health, of weight). If we directly apply Foucault’s notion of the docile body to these individuals, it might be argued that they are not only attempting to maintain standards of normalcy, but are also subconsciously subscribing to a particular diet because the authority figures in their lives have manipulated them in such a way that has made them “decide” to do so.

I agree with Foucault’s theory in that I think that the individuals quoted above are working under the assumption that the body can be improved, optimized, shaped to reach a socially, culturally, and individually established “ideal.” Carol, John, Erin, Steven, Sara, and Ana are all concerned with diet – they derive their sense of “groundedness” from diet – at least to a certain extent because they believe in the optimization of health. In other words, diet can only act as their central provider for groundedness because 1) they understand their bodies as “fixable,” “maintainable,” and 2) diet is recognized as a means of body “correction.” Though this is not to say that the individual is not deriving pleasure or benefits from dieting, it is essential to realize that the concern with diet is more or less a concern with “fixing” the self and is thus a culturally mandated concern, especially in so far as social pressures reveal the body as sick or broken. It is the modern, Western conception of the body as malleable, as something that can reach an optimal state of health (if the correct consumption habits are practiced) that allows the individual to place an emphasis on his body – what enters the body, its shape, and its function.
Yet I would disagree with Foucault’s argument that the individuals who adhere to these norms, to these ideas of a bodily (and presumably a consequential moral) correction are lacking any sense of agency. To ascribe their dietary practices to a modern ideology without considering any other motives would, in my opinion, discredit many of the values and rationales that lie behind raw foodism. That is to say, reducing the reasoning behind raw foodism to “modernity” and the power structures of modernity would erase many of the intricacies that complicate the rationales behind raw foodism and the raw foodists’ relationships with modernity. I would argue that, though raw foodism is largely a product of modernity, it is not a purely subconscious response to power structures; rather, it is an engagement with increasing social concerns about control.

Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher, primarily works in the field of body studies and uses Foucault’s theory of docile bodies to discuss concerns with the female body. Her work, like that of Foucault, contains discussions of control and, more specifically, analyses of the way in which internalized social concerns manifest themselves in the physical body. It will therefore be useful in further teasing out preoccupations with controlling, defining, maintaining the self. As Foucault pointed out in the Care of the Self (in Chapter One), there is and has been a socially and culturally recognized link between the body and the moral self in Western societies since antiquity. We have grown accustomed to assuming that the body is the reflection, the manifestation of the individual’s personal values. A laissez-faire attitude toward the physical body is viewed as a laissez-faire attitude toward certain individual virtues – namely, moderation, control, and a sense of moral strength. In Susan Bordo’s appropriation of this argument, she claims that the female is
(consciously or subconsciously) aware of the fact that her body is a producer of signs. She works to control herself, to maintain (or reach) certain expectations in order to exhibit “spiritual purification and domination of the flesh.”\textsuperscript{62} Knowing the various ways in which her body can be perceived and read, the female attempts to develop her inner self by controlling physical desires and instincts. In doing so, she can show that she is independent, able to take care of herself both physically and mentally by moderating her desires, limiting excesses, and maintaining an awareness of instinctual urges. The female attempts to show – through the calculated maintenance of her physical appearance – that she is in control of her self, of her desires, of her environment.

Though the concerns that Bordo points to in \textit{Unbearable Weight} are specific to women and are more concerned with disordered eating habits than I, her proposal that social concerns manifest themselves in the practices and manifestations of the physical body is relevant to my discussion of raw foodism and groundedness. The raw foodists, like the women to whom Bordo refers, are plagued with anxieties not only about the way in which their body represents their individual desires, but also about how much control they actually have over what \textit{enters} their bodies and what is \textit{manifest on} their physical bodies. Although Bordo does not discuss the effects of industrialization and an increasing prevalence of processed (machine-controlled) foods, I would argue that these two features of modernity are at the heart of the raw foodists’ preoccupations with finding solid “ground.” Concerns about industrialization and the processing of food are not immediately apparent in the raw foodists’ interviews; however, I think that, like the women to whom Bordo refers,

they have internalized these concerns and allowed them to manifest themselves in their practices, in their calculated move “back to nature.” In Bordo’s arguments concerning women and in my arguments concerning raw foodists, the body serves as a site of construction. It acts as the form through which the individual can ground herself, order herself, control herself, identify herself. She physically binds herself to a particular, “natural,” controlled regime, and is thus literally grounded in and to her practices. Yet she is also emotionally grounded in the sense that she feels secure because she has established a particular identity for herself, and has further defined that identity – what she is and what she is not – by specifying an other.
CONCLUSION

For the raw foodists with whom I spoke, their expressed longings for groundedness were fulfilled through the consumption and construction of particular identities. Though the latter term, “construction,” was explored throughout the majority of the preceding chapter, I now bring it into conversation with the former term and show how “consumption” factors into the “construction” of an identity, particularly in the modern American consumer culture in which we live.

In Chapter One, I attempted to contextualize the events and persons associated with the raw food movement by discussing some of the theories that examine the preoccupation with the “care of the self.” Using Foucault, Campbell, and Bourdieu, I laid out some of the roots of this preoccupation – one of which, and perhaps the most important of which, is the increasingly defined and socially-reinforced link between physical appearance and inner virtue. In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault explained that this body-soul duality was established and articulated as early as the classical era. Then, as was shown in “Docile Bodies,” the early 19th century took up this idea and built on it. The 19th century ideologies that formed as a result of shifts in political powers allowed for the popularization and normalization of the notion that the body could be trained, manipulated, and corrected. In turn, concerns for the physical body increased and became more deeply rooted in social and political structures. The body was no longer merely an image of virtuousness (or a lack thereof); rather, it had become a manipulable, fixable object. It gained sign-producing abilities that it had not truly possessed until this 19th century transformation.

The next major shift that I discussed in my sketch of the “care of the self” was that described by Campbell. In his article on modern consumerism, Campbell
notes that the 19th century romantic notion of the self as something that one could “re-create”\textsuperscript{63} and construct helped to shape and legitimize the consumer culture that developed during the Industrial Revolution. As consumer products that promised to alter the physical self became more widely available, the individual began buying with the intention of conforming to popular, or “normal” aesthetic ideals. The idea of the perfection of the self was bound up with consumer culture, as altering the self became increasingly portrayed in (and available in) commodified forms. Yet as Bourdieu shows in \textit{Distinction}, what the individual consumes is not only a way to engage in this process of self-perfection, but is also a way to show and symbolize to others who and what he is. As options increased, and as the individual’s paths to self-perfection and self-creation continued to expand, consumption was more and more commonly viewed as a means of caring for, constructing, and \textit{re-presenting} the self. The products that the individual does and does not consume allow him to show his individuality and his distinctness, or the extent to which he conforms to (or goes outside of) societal standards and norms.

Though in highly distinctive ways, both Johnson and Baumann and Barthes further delineated some of the ways in which the individual’s ideas of himself get further complicated. Johnson and Baumann discuss one particular instance – the “foodie” – where ideals of a certain “type” of self are collectively constructed and conformed to; meanwhile, Barthes explicates the larger ideological structures that shape the individual’s ideas of himself and of the things around him. In these works, both the self and the idea of the self are not merely products of the individual’s own

consumer practices. Rather, they shape and are shaped by society, by others, by consumer culture. They are intrinsically tied to the other systems and people with which they directly and indirectly interact on a daily basis.

Thus within the idea of the “self” is packed a conglomeration of ideologies, cultural preconceptions, and individual desires that are constantly shifting as a result of both personal and external factors. The individual acts and is acted upon, becomes and helps others become, and shapes and is shaped by his particular society. The raw foodist is no exception to this. Though his reaction to societal pressures and concerns is undeniably different from mine or from the typical American dieter, he is under the same ideological constraints, stresses, and pressures with regards to the construction of his self. The raw foodist, and raw foodism itself is intrinsically tied to and embedded within modern American society. The raw foodists with whom I spoke seek out groundedness in the foods and practices that they consider “natural” or free from human contamination because they not only provide them with a sense of control, but also allow them to find a sense of stability in what is, undeniably, an unstable, progress-driven nation. In the article, “We Are What We Eat,” Paul Swanson similarly asserts: “The anxiety about eating food that may be toxic to our health reinforces a consumer desire to only consume ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ foods. Presumably, only such foods enjoy the historical track record of being healthy and safe to consume…”64

The concerns that raw foodists expressed in their discussions of “going raw” and of converting to raw foodism were primarily posed in the form of a nature-

culture, nature-industry dichotomy. Their natural selves, though clearly constructed in opposition to the “industry” or “culture” side, are, nevertheless, bound in an inverse, ostensibly reciprocal relationship with industry. In this sense, raw foodism is a lifestyle that provides individuals with the sense of “escaping” modern society from within it. It allows them to construct identities that position them as natural “subjects” in opposition to the more prevalent “other”: the standard American dieter, the typical, modern, progress-driven man that has been distanced from, and perhaps dissociated with the “truth.”

**Narrative and the Politics of Becoming**

“This suggests that far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted. Arising, as Barthes says, between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that experience in language, narrative ‘ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted.’”

– Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”

Like all social individuals, raw foodists are, to an extent, shaped by the ideologies of modern American society. Though they have successfully found a niche that breaks from the norms of American society, they have not actually extricated themselves from that society. Rather, in rejecting modern American norms, they draw themselves into a clearly distinguishable relationship with these norms. As was shown in the preceding chapter, raw foodists position themselves, and realize their selves in relation to their “others,” but in doing so they do not break, but actually solidify the bond that they have with their others. I bring this issue to light once again because I feel that understanding the ideological constraints by which social individuals are bound is essential to understanding how certain identities are creatively formed and narrated within certain systems and structures. In Chapter
Three, I made this argument using both my interviews and the works of Foucault and Bordo. Now, I further tease out the notion that we are simultaneously pushed and pulled, pushing and pulling to establish our own identities in light of Kathryn Lofton’s work, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon.*

Though Lofton’s descriptions of Oprah as an icon, as a figure that shows her viewers who and what they want to become cannot be directly applied to raw foodism (in the sense that there is no single individual who is inspiring raw foodists), certain ideas that she brings up – specifically those concerning the viewer’s idea of her self versus her actual self, her idea of becoming and the actual process of becoming – are relevant to this discussion of the raw foodists’ processes of self-construction. The theory that Lofton lays out helps illuminate some of the ways in which movements in the United States are analogous to quasi-religions that help individuals construct and re-construct their selves. Movements, such as the Oprah craze and raw foodism, produce and package certain notions of what one could be (Oprah-like or natural, respectively) and, in turn, guide their followers in forging their identities.

The larger purpose of Lofton’s argument is to show that Oprah – as a symbolic figure – and the work that she does – in engaging and maintaining a follower base – can be understood as “religious.” Within this discussion, I focus primarily on how and why Oprah is able to inspire individuals to transform themselves, to re-construct their individual identities. It should become clear that Oprah is packaged as an “ideal self” and thus provides an inspirational exemplar of an individual who has made it, who has transformed and improved her life. I use Lofton’s discussion of Oprah to argue that the raw foodist conversion narratives, like the image of Oprah as an “ideal self,” create and convey an image of a
transformed, ideal, better individual. The raw conversion narratives inspire not only their listeners, but also their narrators – the raw foodists themselves – to continue becoming the self to which they aspire. Making a connection between the “ideal self” as marketed by Oprah and the “ideal self” that is conveyed in the telling of raw foodist personal conversion narratives should be useful in understanding the active, never-ceasing process of creating (or re-creating) an identity.

I then discuss how the process of becoming the ideal self that the Oprah portrays and that the raw foodists imagine inspires the viewers of Oprah and the listeners of raw foodist narratives to engage in certain practices. Oprah markets certain products that will supposedly help her viewers be more successful, and become better individuals. Likewise, the raw foodists that tell their conversion stories explain their practices to their listeners and thus provide the “unsaved” with a route to salvation. In doing so, they both remember and reaffirm the importance of their practices. I ultimately argue that the converted individual (in both Oprah’s religion and raw foodism) is not necessarily better because she has bought certain products or has engaged in certain practices; rather, she is content because she has defined an ideal that positively alters her way of thinking about herself, her practices, and her position in society. This discussion will help further unpack the intricacies involved in raw foodists’ practices, their understandings of their practices, and the positive relationships (between their selves and their practices) that issue from these understandings.

The Saved Narrator and the Unsaved Listener

“Oprah” is a figure that is constructed by both Oprah herself and by the O Network (which produces Oprah’s talk show, the O magazine, and the Harpo
lifestyle channel). She is represented as a “palatably diverse, commensurably civilized, folksy populist, and previously Protestant”65 woman who is not only successful, but is also relatable to most Americans. She remains bipartisan, accepts the viewpoints of others, and is able to sympathize with many of her guests. This quality of “relatability” is important because Oprah’s viewers must be able to see themselves in her; Oprah must reflect some of the desires, faults, or interests of her viewers in her own image and in her personal stories. Without this common ground, Oprah and her viewers cannot reach the level of intimacy that is necessary for the viewer to be able to truly value Oprah’s opinions. Lofton compellingly argues that:

She draws these congregants with a powerful vision of who they are, a vision that returns them again and again to her gaze and their imagined and lived reciprocal, commercial relationship. Oprah needs these stories of others to validate her story; she consumes their confessions as much as they consume her.66

Hence Oprah provides individuals with various entryways through which they can find points of commonality, through which they can identify aspects of themselves in her. For example, as Lofton points out, Oprah listens to her viewers’ confessions, claims to understand them, and responds to them accordingly. At the same time, Oprah herself confesses – she lets her viewers and guests in on the personal problems that she has (i.e. weight issues, relationship problems, etc) and thus draws them in closer, and invites them to define and establish a particular relationship with her. In this sense, Oprah and her viewers are mutually dependent on one another to establish the ground upon which their relationship can develop.

66 Ibid., 17.
Nevertheless, despite Oprah’s relatability, she is still imagined and placed above the typical American. She is positioned between the divine and the human, as a figure with whom her viewers can identify, and yet simultaneously esteem. Due to both her celebrity status and her famed success in the media and journalism industries, Oprah is seen and portrayed as superior to the common man. She is ostensibly more content, often more successful than her typically upper-middle class viewers. Though she came from a humble background, she is now financially successful, seemingly satisfied, and yet still able to understand the viewpoints of others. As a result, she is not only relatable, but is also inspirational and awe-inspiring. Oprah is, for the majority of Americans, an individual worth both reverence and admiration because she makes them aware of what they are, what they could be, and what they could have. Oprah is the saved, her viewers are the unsaved; she holds the key to success, they must simply follow in her footsteps.

Therefore Oprah’s success is dependent on her ability to show her viewers that she simultaneously represents both who they are and who they want to become. Though she has successfully saved herself and bettered herself, she still relates to those who have not and occasionally confesses moments of relapse or confusion. Yet her ability to overcome those moments, to continue being successful and moving forward in her life only strengthens the conviction that her viewers have in her. That is to say, Oprah’s moments of confession bring her viewers closer to her, and also prove once again that she is able to overcome her struggles, and that she is, in this sense, superior. Lofton writes: “For O, the encouraged return is the persistent pursuit of personal growth as a transcendent possibility… the O difference is a consumption
swathed with her application, her need, for the best individual self.” 

Oprah helps her viewers imagine their ideal selves and, as will be shown in the following section, also shows them what they need to realize those selves.

Although there is no direct equivalent to Oprah in the world of raw foodism, I would argue that the conversion narratives told by raw foodists engage those “unsaved” individuals in a dialogue with their ideal selves in the same way that Oprah makes her viewers privy to the image of their ideal selves. As was stated in the chapter “Going Raw,” the role of the conversion narrative is not merely to tell one’s personal story; it is a ritual practice that helps further define and solidify the individual’s sense of self. It reinforces the individual’s break from her past “unsaved self,” and strengthens an attachment to the individual’s ideal “saved” image of herself. Like Oprah, the raw foodist narratives place the listener into the “unsaved” position in the saved-unsaved dichotomy. At the same time, they establish the raw foodist as “saved” and provide the listener with an image of who and what she can be.

Though this image is created in the likeness of the unsaved individual (in the sense that it contains the unsaved self at the root of, in the past of the saved self), it is a more perfect form of him. It shows him who and what he should be, and how he should become that person. The saved self is presented in its entirety as a whole, transformed individual and, similarly, Oprah is presented as a complete, saved whole – an image of what one will presumably become upon conversion. However, as is apparent in the following section, images of complete, transformed, idealized selves are tied to certain products and practices. The products that Oprah endorses, like the

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67 Ibid., 32.
lifestyle recommendations and diet choices that are explicated by the raw foodists
during their narratives, are essential to becoming, actualizing the “saved” self.

The Ideal and the Actual:  
The Role of Material Goods in the Processes of Self-Creation

Oprah is not truly known, but rather is imagined and commodified as a product that the individual can consume in order to forge her own Oprah-like identity. Oprah appears as both a human and a symbol that is complete, definable, and seemingly purchasable. The symbol that represents her – the O – is repeatedly reproduced and attached to different commodities, as well as different lifestyle choices. For example, the O-List, a list of Oprah-loved products that is published every holiday season, is not merely a collection of Oprah-endorsed goods; each product on the list is accompanied by a description of why Oprah likes this particular product, what it is useful for, and what purpose it can serve in bettering your life. Thus the list entails "propositions of self-discovery, self-indulgence, and the set-up of an ideally accessorized moment."\textsuperscript{68} The list, like Oprah herself, does not just provide a means to material satisfaction; rather it shows individuals what they can do to feel and become like her. With this in mind, Lofton compares Oprah to Martha Stewart and explains that, ""Martha is about what you can have, Oprah is about who you can be."\textsuperscript{69} Oprah therefore not only provides both a material and symbolic vision of who her viewers can become, but also shows them what they need in order to become that. She is the ideal, she is the “saved” individual, and her viewers are the “unsaved” individuals that need her products in order to complete their transformations.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 27.  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 31.
Similarly, with respect to raw foodism, listening to the raw foodists’ narratives is only one component of becoming one’s ideal image of oneself. In order for this self to be realized, certain practices and goods must also be consumed. In the raw foodist narrative, raw foods are linked to the description of the ideal self. The construction of the self therefore necessitates the consumption of these raw foods, and the engagement in raw foodist practices (i.e. caring for oneself by not only eating well, but also by sleeping, limiting stress levels, etc.). In consuming raw foods, however, individuals are not only consuming the food itself as a form of sustenance, but are also consuming the ideas that they have affixed to the foods. In other words, the raw foodist consumes both the food itself and the ideas of health and the image of the bettered, “natural self” which are tied to it. He is not simply grasping for the physical, raw food itself, but is actually buying and eating the idea of the self that the food is promising to help him realize.

Like the distance that exists between the true Oprah, and the Oprah image that we see, there is a dissonance between the actual raw foodist self and the idea of herself that is represented by her personal narrative. The form of the narrative allows individuals to choose the light in which they portray themselves and in this sense, it is an idealized, discrete version of the self. It represents the ideal self that the raw foodist intends or desires herself to be. The telling of the personal story, to a certain extent, allows the individual to further define and realize the self to which he aspires. It is thus not only essential to the process of conversion (which also involves encouraging others to convert), but is also necessary for the continuous, never-ending process of constructing the self. Raw foodists tell their narratives not necessarily
with the explicit intention of deceiving their listeners or themselves; rather they
describe their stories, and themselves in an attempt to continue the process of
becoming “natural” selves. Furthermore, because most of the raw foodist narratives
tie the “ideal self” to certain practices (eating raw foods), they help solidify the
symbolic connection between raw food and the ideal self. Raw foodist narratives, like
the Oprah figure described by Lofton, convey an image of a “saved” self and attach
that image to a particular set of lifestyle choices.

**Storied Lives, Storied Foods**

*Going back to why I became a vegan, a lot of what I had read about veganism talked
about food in terms of nourishment as opposed to how I had been viewing it before,
which is as something that inflicts damage upon you because you’re eating x amount
of calories and you should only be eating y. So it became about: this thing is
nutritious, this thing is good for you... I think that one thing that has changed since
going sick is that I’ve realized that foods can heal in a very tangible way. I can feel
that I’m getting better and I’m grateful for that.*

*Melanie, Personal Interview*

Though the raw foodists clearly recognize that raw food is packed with
nutrients, what they fail to point out, or perhaps note, is that it is also packed under
layers of meaning that are both temporally and culturally situated. While some of
those layers of meaning are the result of the nature-culture—raw-cooked paradigm
that has long been perpetuated, others have recently been formed in response to
social concerns about health in an industrialized, processed-food-obsessed society.
Thus the meaning affixed to raw foods is temporally and culturally fixed in the
present, and has also been in the making for many years through longstanding
paradigms. Raw food is, and has been, tied to certain images, various perceptions and
misconceptions, and larger ideological paradigms.

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In the previous chapters, I problematized both the raw foodists’ narratives and the ways in which they denature the foods that they consume by projecting certain (unnatural) meanings onto them. I attempted to show that the construction of the raw foodist’s natural self involves the telling of a personal conversion narrative, as well as the definition and reproduction of the ideal self – both in the form of the narrative and through the process of imbuing raw food with particular ideas and meanings. In addition, I also discussed the process of bettering oneself by buying into the image of what one could be with respect to Lofton’s “religion” of Oprah. However, in the spirit of reflexivity, I would like to broaden these understandings of raw foodists’ self-construction practices and apply them to the general body of Americans. I use my previous discussions of raw foodists’ identity-forming narratives and practices in order to re-examine, on a broader level, various structures and tendencies of individual self-construction.

As should have been evident in the discussion of Barthes in Chapter One, all members of this modern consumer culture do, to a certain extent, use processes of rearranging and reimagining their environments and their selves in order to self-create. Like the raw foodists or Lofton’s Oprah viewers, we all engage in processes of denaturing objects, and constructing meaning by buying commodities that are mediated through the television, through others, and through newspapers or magazines. However, the way in which each individual engages with the products around him, and the meaning with which he imbues these products is dependent on his habitus, his past experiences, the social and cultural knowledge to which he has been exposed. Furthermore, the individual’s understanding of and (positive or negative) reaction to the products around him is dependent on the meaning that
he attributes to them. Thus there is a dialectic formed between the product, the society, and the individual. The relationships between individuals and the products that they do or do not consume—the products that aid them in the formation of their identities—rely on the nature of, and the factors that influence this dialectic.

But moreover, the nature of one’s relationship with food is determined by the meaning that the food is thought to carry. If the individual looks at a food product as defined by the plastic casing in which it is wrapped, the images, colors, and text on that label will make her feel the influence of the marketing ploys. Likewise, if one looks at a food as a nutrient-rich healing life-force, the powers with which she endows it will be transferred to her upon consumption. She is not simply constructing and imbuing the food with meaning, she is also allowing the intrinsic properties of the food to affect, touch, and heal her.

The raw foodist practices and identity-forming processes that this project has sought to understand are driven by a perception of raw foods as natural, life and energy-giving substances. The feelings of groundedness, energy, and connectedness that the raw foodists express are substantiated through the consumption of these powerful, meaning-imbued, meaningful substances. However, these feelings, these meanings and myths with which raw foodists have imbued raw foods are not random, nor are they dissociated with the society in which they were produced. They are deeply embedded in ideological structures, in current debates and social issues, and have been informed by both social and cultural concerns. Raw foodism is popular not because it has coincidentally been “rediscovered,” but because it stands as an alternative means through which individuals can find a sense of groundedness in an increasingly industrialized food-world.
Brillat-Savarin’s oft-quoted phrase, “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es,”71 which literally translates to, “Tell me what you eat, I will tell you what you are,” has, after many translations and re-interpretations, come to be understood as, “You are what you eat.” Yet this haphazard interpretation of his words suggests that the foods that we eat are innately bound to certain universally and temporally-uniform meanings. However, as has been shown in this work, and as Brillat-Savarin is perhaps implying, looking at the ways in which we story, describe, and narrate our foods is essential to understanding “what you are.” The meanings that are tied to food, which are conveyed in our individual narrations of what we eat are both temporally and culturally fixed. We cannot eat, drink, or diet in society without attaching various layers of socially and individually constructed meaning to our foods, our drinks, or our diets. With these concluding reflections in mind, I might suggest that the telling, the process of explaining what we eat, is essential to Brillat-Savarin’s equation. The narratives of what we eat help shape and populate the very narratives of our selves; therefore changing the ways in which we story, imagine, and mythologize our foods enables us to concurrently change the ways in which we regard and care for our selves.

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