



# It's Not Just Dinner: Meal Delivery Kits as Food Media for Food Citizens

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Meal kit delivery services rhetorically appeal to middle class consumers who have busy lives, but want to eat good quality food without the hassle of grocery shopping and meal planning. In this paper, we advance three arguments to explore the cultural phenomenon of these meal services that are growing exponentially across the United States and in other countries. First, such meal kits, in their efforts to provide meal and ingredient variation, decontextualize food cultures while promoting a consumer sense of cosmopolitanism. Second, meal kit companies have attempted to address environmental concerns of waste production, but many of those problems have yet to be resolved despite rhetorical appeals to the contrary. Finally, while such meal kits do not address fully the challenges and problems of global food production and capitalist systems, they do confront those who use them with some of the realities of where their food comes from and what kind of waste it produces. We ultimately argue that such companies manifest the return of the repressed through the material and rhetorical production of food and waste even as they employ diverse cultural food options and erase those cultural origins at the same time. Meal kit delivery services' interactivity and confrontation with waste distinguishes them from traditional food media. Despite their investment in the performative dimensions of cooking as a way to reconnect with the food system, they also miss opportunities to address gender, culture, and waste, which limits the radical potential of that performativity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Meal delivery kits have become part of a burgeoning empire of the food industry and distribution system of consumer goods. Companies like Blue Apron, Plated, Hello Fresh, and many others promise the experience of real cooking, while providing delicious food and ease of preparation through recipe cards and delivery of ingredients. The advantages of such programs that seek to inspire home chefs with novel foods and recipes include family cooking, reduced grocery store shopping and meal planning, and healthier food options (Bilton, 2015; Jolly, 2015; Severson, 2016). The appeal of such meal delivery services is evident in the growth of subscription meal boxes and the sheer number of companies now offering such services. Blue Apron, for example, has been valued at more than \$2 billion and delivers more than 8 million meals per month (Cowley, 2015; Severson, 2016). Hello Fresh, a company started in Germany, has expanded to the U.S. market, raising more than \$50 million for its start up, and delivers in more than 37 U.S. states (De la Merced, 2014). Similarly, competitors such as Plated, Marley Spoon, Peach Dish, Gobble, Home Chef, and more than a hundred others, have all launched similar, but slightly different services (Severson, 2016). Amazon and Whole Foods announced a partnership to deliver meal kits in June of

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2017, which also demonstrates another aspect of the burgeoning food delivery market (Cusumano, 2017).

While the demands for such meal subscription boxes are evident in this expanding market, the drawbacks are also potentially significant. Some subscribers have complained about not having enough time to actually cook the recipes and others have discussed the price tag (ranging from \$50 to \$80 per week) as being out of reach for millions of U.S. Americans (Bilton, 2015; Jolly, 2015). Others have criticized the lack of connection to the experience of cooking (shopping for ingredients, creating a meal) as it becomes a routinized, recipe-following approach to cooking that does not teach kids nor adults about the science, culture, and origins of food and cooking (Cohen, 2017). Perhaps the biggest problem though, is the extensive packaging and the environmental costs of individual delivery (Bilton, 2015; Severson, 2016; Cohen, 2017). The boxes come with prepared ingredients that are individually wrapped, requiring the use of many plastic bags, boxes, and other forms of packaging. On the other hand, as Kim Severson (2016) observes, the delivery services can also cut down on individuals' gasoline consumption, food waste, and grocery store boxes and bags.

Regardless of the pros and cons to using such meal kits, it is quite clear that food consumers are using them through this growing market. For these reasons, we explore the rhetorical and material appeal of these companies by examining two in particular: Blue Apron and Plated. As these are two of the largest companies in this industry, they serve as excellent examples of how they market their services and recipes to consumers. And while they provide similar services, they are differentiated in their rhetorical approaches. For this project, from June 2017 to July 2018, we analyzed the companies' websites (each page/tab that was available), phone apps, recipe cards, food boxes, and other accompanying materials, such as promotions and nutritional information to better understand the consumer appeal and experience. We cooked several recipes together, and one of us has been a regular weekly subscriber to both companies for more than 2 years, while the other has been a subscriber on and off again. Blue Apron appeals much more to the ecological and sustainability minded consumer. The company's vision focuses on families and the environment through cooking:

Our food system—the way in which food is grown and distributed—is complicated, and making good choices for your family can be difficult. We are changing that: By partnering with farmers to raise the highest-quality ingredients, by creating a distribution system that delivers ingredients at a better value and by investing in the things that matter most—our environment and our communities. This will be a decades-long effort, but with each Blue Apron home chef, together we can build a better food system (Blue Apron, 2017).

Blue Apron endeavors to embrace this vision through four key approaches: “creating better standards [for high quality and sustainable ingredients], regenerating our land [focusing on ingredients based on crop rotation], eliminating the middleman, and reducing food waste [e.g., full utilization of crops]” (Blue Apron, 2017).

Blue Apron's approach is more centered on the entire food system, possibly a response to criticisms about excessive packaging, workers' rights, and lack of sustainable operations. On the other hand, Plated's rhetorical appeal is more about the individual who does not want to grocery shop or meal plan. Its website focuses on “Dinner for people who love food” (Plated, 2017-2018). The company specifically addresses consumer concerns about preparing meals through innovative and unique recipes: “Deciding what to do for dinner shouldn't be a struggle. Any craving answered, any night you choose. Skip the shopping. Make your groceries come to you. Come home to everything you need for a great dinner. Real, delicious cooking, without all the extra work. Techniques and recipes you'll love—at every skill level” (Plated, 2017-2018). For busy U.S. Americans, the ease in which one can purportedly prepare meals while still feel like they are actually cooking nutritious, wholesome food for their families is especially appealing. These advertising strategies feed into the genres of literature on effective time management, self-improvement, and multitasking that has become so prevalent and pervasive.

As such, we analyzed the companies' rhetoric through websites, food boxes, and other materials to better understand how their services construct consumers' desires and needs in food systems and foodways, which are the socio-cultural and economic aspects related to food consumption. We argue that Blue Apron, Plated, and other food preparation kits offer the potential to change and foster food citizenship, but ultimately lose ground in doing so because of how food boxes are decontextualized, quantified, and commodified. Our contention is that middle and upper middle class U.S. Americans participate in food systems in predominantly capitalistic and consumeristic ways. Such companies help inform consumers about where their food comes from and what is involved in where it comes from, as a way to reposition the home as a site for engagement and understanding of food politics, but the food is removed from all context in how it is produced from seed to table. To this end, such companies manifest the return of the repressed; that is, consumers are confronted with their decontextualized food and trash waste, both materially and rhetorically. Emergent critiques of such companies evidence how consumers have responded with concern for such waste, with less recognition of how much waste goes into other types of food consumption, such as grocery stores, restaurants, fast food facilities, or meal delivery services. While such companies offer the potential to shape food citizenship, they also reinforce and reify food systems that have a heavy environmental impact and decontextualized cultural experience.

In order to advance this argument, we proceed by first discussing relevant literature related to food, foodways, and environmental communication to contextualize food citizenship through communication. We then examine how such companies create cultural food meaning through globalized food production that shapes a sense of consumer cosmopolitanism but at the same time decontextualizes cultural food experiences. Consumers may engage and reconsider foodways, but ultimately maintain and sustain global systems of food production. We conclude by assessing what these patterns mean in relationship to the material reality of how these companies function in relationship to sustainability.

## FOOD, FOODWAYS, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN COMMUNICATION

A growing body of communication research has focused on the presentation of food, foodways, agriculture, and sustainability in media, such as journalism, film, television, and other related venues. Of relevance to this project are communication-informed studies regarding the paradoxical status of food in late capitalism. In this body of literature, food seems to shuttle between necessity and luxury in complicated food production systems and representations through: (1) sustainable agriculture and critiques of corporate food systems; (2) food imagery and media/journalistic frames; and (3) colonial/postcolonial/decolonial lens. Understanding how we consume food and in what foodways is as important as how such food and its systems are mediated and commodified. As Leda Cooks contends, “Food is symbolically powerful because it is a necessity for survival and because it is no longer a widely (locally) accessible and equally *produced* resource...it becomes necessary for a lifestyle, rather than sustaining life” (Cooks, 2009, p. 95; italics in original). This contradictory status of food—as source of both luxury and sustenance, identity and existence—points to the extent to which food is embedded in our cultural, economic, educational, familial, and political structures. Perhaps this tendency explains why an issue as serious as food security, which affects people around the world and in the United States (Rahman, 2011; Pilgeram and Meeuf, 2015; Herakova and Cooks, 2017) does not necessarily dislodge food and agricultural communication from its entertainment- and luxury-based modalities *tout court*, even when engaging in critique or exposé (Retzinger, 2010). The how and why of food and foodways, whether for necessity or sport, as this literature underscores, ultimately makes the consumption of food a question of citizenship as well as gendered and cultural experiences.

The sense of food consumption as an opportunity to engage people in an ethos, if not the direct language of citizenship, is most visible in the way in which food brings people together in community-based endeavors: “Food, and specifically making food together, thus serves as a site for community and communication that crosses boundaries and cultures, at the same time as it necessitates experience and engagement with boundaries and differences they may delineate” (Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 2). Food preparation arguably serves as a microcosm for the way in which food is the enabling condition for navigating the boundaries and differences involved in thinking through alternative, large-scale models of society, an imaginative labor that Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “counter-visibility.” Mirzoeff argues that, at base, “counter-visibility has always been a drive for sustainability, or a politics of eating” (Mirzoeff, 2014, p. 228). Many environmentalists, activists, and others have embraced the notion of sustainable agriculture as a solution to the deeply problematic food systems in the United States (Retzinger, 2008). Documentaries, television shows, and investigative journalism have revealed how food is produced in non-sustainable ways (e.g., Van Gorp and Van

der Goot, 2012). As Opel et al. (2010) contend, the question of “where did my food come from is the starting place—a line of questioning—that is fundamental for new kinds of global citizenship...what we mean when we say ‘food’ reveals a complex set of land use and labor practices, corporate structures, public policy, plant and animal genetics, and human health impacts” (Opel et al., 2010, pp. 252–253). Environmental food messages include those that focus on sustainable and local food, land protection, food crop biodiversity, and reduction of meat consumption (Katz, 2010). But as Packwood Freeman (2010) contends, food politics are often not connected to environmental organizational advocacy, which only sometimes promote a reduction in meat consumption as a sustainability strategy.

However, such documentaries and other media programming can perpetuate the problem of viewing sustainable agriculture as a simplistic solution to environmental degradation and food security; that is, such food systems are not easily changeable. For example, communication scholars have extensively analyzed documentary films such as *The Garden*, which depicts community gardening and environmental and social justice in Los Angeles, contending that films like *The Garden* can provide useful fodder for resistance and discussion of food systems (Foust, 2011; LeGreco and Leonard, 2011; Retzinger, 2011; Singer, 2011). Particularly, Foust argues that “food demonstrates the impossibility of reducing material rhetoric to the logic of materiality or symbolism, for food is never freed from materiality...Yet, food is forever bound to representation or culture” (Foust, 2011, p. 354). But, consumers in many parts of the United States may not have space to create their own garden (community or otherwise) because they live in urban areas that are food deserts, or they live in an actual desert in which water is too short in supply for certain kinds of crops (Pilgeram and Meeuf, 2015), ruling out the possibility of shopping at a local farmer’s market. Furthermore, mainstream consumers continue the demand for mass produced food, such as fast food, which is a global phenomenon, even with cultural and local adaptations (Schortman, 2010). Overall, a reliance on consumers to create market changes will not likely change the entire capitalistic system of food production (Click and Ridberg, 2010).

In addition to discussions of agricultural systems and food production, media also represent the food itself and its consumers in particular ways. For example, food is fetishized and commodified in an idealistic manner (Lindenfeld, 2007, 2010). In films about food, “Whole fruits and vegetables in all their lushness and vibrant colour are featured frequently in tantalizing close-up shots, often with moisture clinging to their skin indicating their freshness” to convey a sense of simplicity and authenticity (Shugart, 2008, p. 83). Other scholars identify these trends as a type of food pornography that removes cooking from mundane routine to become a form of pleasure as well as leisure entertainment (Nathanson, 2009; Dejmanee, 2016). Cooking and travel shows, reality television, and social media embrace these trends with images of beautifully prepared food that are both a form of entertainment and inspiration for meal preparation for their audiences, thereby selling a cooking fantasy.

Not only do media forms sell luxury, privilege, leisure, and self-realization through consumption (e.g., Shugart, 2008), but they also can exclude, marginalize, and/or fetishize cultures and people who do not have access to such leisure forms of entertainment nor the resources to participate in cooking beyond the fantasy. Enck-Wanzer (2011) notes that the documentary *The Garden* might be one exception, in which farmers are engaged in vernacular discourse through cultural syncretism and pastiche, but most representations of food and food systems are targeted to audiences of privilege. Shugart (2008) and Lindenfeld (2007), in their analysis of food films, note that audiences consume the Other through exoticization, commodification, and appropriation of food cultures. Rahman (2011), in an analysis of the film *Khamosh Pani*, argues that we should adopt a feminist eco-cosmopolitan frame to better understand how globalization contributes to food insecurities and food dictatorships, as well as how mediated texts represent, commodify, and otherize non-white people. As Herakova and Cooks contend: “authenticity and nostalgia seem uncomplicated only as they inform and provoke our senses: a smell, view, song, or touch, can evoke an immediate feeling of (desired, imagined) family, relationships, community, home. Yet, these concepts, commodified and objectified most significantly in food, intertextually signify identity in (post)modernity. Along with the changes in the U.S. from family farms and community-based food procurement to industrialization of food systems came the simultaneous advocacy for the massification and standardization of food products and tastes” (Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 8). Mikkel Eskjaer astutely observes that, “A paradoxical consequence of mediatization may be the purchasing of organic food on the Internet instead of buying local products. As such, mediatization may support the *economy* of ecological production but not necessarily the *ideology* of ecological consumption” (Eskjaer, 2013, p. 54, emphasis in original). In light of such communication scholarship on the representations of food and agricultural systems, it is clear that food production companies such as Blue Apron and Plated sell much more than food itself, as they attempt to create food awareness and citizens. In the following sections, we contend that such companies decontextualize the food preparation process for the home chefs who make such meals. We then examine the ways in which these decontextualized experiences of meal-making are symptomatic of consumption that is part of the global food chain.

## CULTURAL DECONTEXTUALIZATION IN FOOD PREPARATION

Meal delivery kit boxes, such as those prepared and shipped by Blue Apron and Plated, are self-contained meals, ready to be cooked. Consumers can use apps to monitor their meals that arrive weekly, unless orders are skipped. Boxes arrive regularly on the same day of the week (selected by the consumer) and generally contain recipe cards, fresh produce, eggs, meat and/or fish, canned goods, spices (except salt and pepper), and other condiments necessary to prepare each recipe. Consumers are expected to provide their own salt, pepper, and olive oil with

Blue Apron’s services, and with Plated, sometimes eggs or other kinds of cooking oil. Home chefs also supply their own cooking tools, although Plated ships baking tins, parchment paper, or other inexpensive accessories, depending on the meal. When one opens the cardboard box, ingredients are found, packed in refrigerated bags with 2–3 ice packs, depending on the weather (more ice bags in hot weather, for example). Some produce items are packed loose in the box without packaging, such as garlic, onions, zucchinis, eggplants, and squash. More vulnerable and fragile items might arrive in plastic bags (e.g., green onions) or cardboard containers (e.g., eggs). Canned goods are also often part of recipes, such as tomatoes, tomato sauce, or beans. Blue Apron also includes what they have called “knick-knacks,” which are the spices, nuts, cheeses, butter, fresh herbs, or other ingredients needed for the recipes; these ingredients arrive in both individual packets and then are packaged together with the other “knick-knacks” in either a larger plastic or paper bag.

Companies such as Blue Apron and Plated include a wide variety of ethnic and cultural variations of recipes and dishes from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Central and South America, Europe, and Africa. Some of these recipes are traditional meat-based dishes that are adapted into vegetarian recipes. For example, a 2017 Blue Apron recipe card showed how to make Vietnamese Banh Mi sandwiches, with a vegetarian twist, using mushrooms instead of meat or tofu that would be more common in Vietnam or Vietnamese restaurants in the United States. Banh Mi, meaning bread, but usually referring to the baguette itself, is part of Vietnam’s colonial legacy, in that the French colonizers brought the baguette to Vietnam, and then it was culturally adapted through mixing rice and wheat flours. This Vietnamese sandwich uses ingredients such as pickled carrots and cucumbers, as featured in the Blue Apron recipe. It also uses mayonnaise mixed with sriracha sauce, a Thai or Vietnamese American chile sauce. A 2017 Plated recipe offered a deconstructed sushi bowl, educating consumers that sushi refers to a type of Japanese rice, rather than raw fish that many U.S. Americans associate with sushi. The vegetable sushi bowl features sushi rice along with “Tangy cucumbers, sautéed carrots, and pan-roasted mushrooms... topped with wasabi mayo and creamy avocado. No rolling required!” Another 2017 Blue Apron recipe features enchiladas, using flour tortillas instead of the more traditional corn tortillas that are widely used in Mexican enchilada dishes. The recipe is also made with kale, black beans, and greek yogurt, all of which are non-traditional ingredients for Mexican enchiladas.

In addition to culturally adapted recipes, the recipe cards themselves notably do not feature people, except for the disembodied hands in the pictures of the recipe steps. In the recipe cards reviewed, the hands appear to be white, sometimes male (as evidenced by arm and hand hair). It is unclear who is behind the mise-en-place and other aspects of food preparation as featured in the pictures, but it clearly appeals to the middle or upper-middle class (white) consumer in the type of materials used for food preparation and the type of food being prepared. The mise-en-place is expertly and perfectly arranged. The cooking utensils, pots, and pans are also available for purchase, falling in the mid to high-range in cost, and available from the



Blue Apron store online. Spices, such as salt and pepper, can also be purchased. The phone and tablet applications also feature cooking tips, such as how to mince garlic, chop onions, or zest lemons.

These selected examples are typical of Blue Apron and Plated recipes, in which multicultural food is presented, but adapted and decontextualized. Abarca (2006) contends that food is deeply connected to embodiment and cultural discourses, but food meanings are also tied to how we respond to food systems. She argues that many women learn to cook through culinary epistemological concepts of *sazón* [seasoning] and *al gusto* [to taste], suggesting that one can cook through taste, smell, and touch. While food companies claim that their recipes teach consumers cooking techniques, food traditions, and sustainable approaches to food production, Abarca notes that recipe following is a first world privilege: “cooking with scientific precision involves money and time. To cook with scientific precision, women are expected to employ every machine, device, or apparatus as these become items of *necessity*... The marketing strategies of consumption, the ideologies of first world superiority (Americans) over third world inferiority (Mexicans) control scientific culinary methodologies and not the sense of sight in and of itself” (p. 62). Nutrition labels, provided in every box as required by law, also provide a reductionistic and quantifiable approach to understanding food: “nutritionism animates a common sensibility about what to eat and underwrites evaluations of our eating practices” (Mudry, 2010, p. 340). Such labels provide “a discourse of quantification [that] refigures food both ontologically and epistemologically” (Mudry, 2010, p. 339). Globalization through recipes quantifies and moves away from traditional cooking approaches, as Radha Hegde explains: “Terminologies that traditional cooks use such as the pinch, a drop, or a handful are now translated into cup measures and forms of precise reproducibility” (Hegde, 2016, p. 80). Relying on the visual recipe cards then, can have the effect of privileging sight and losing “cognitive sensory-logic of the *sazón* and confidence to cook *al gusto*” as well as a sense of agency that comes from the artistry of cooking (Abarca, 2006, p. 74). Moreover, meal kit delivery services’ visual framing of the cooking process with white male hands and mise-en-place works against the improvisational logic of *sazón*, which historically has been gendered female.

The decontextualization of culture and gender in meal delivery kit recipes and other mediated forms (apps, website, etc.) results from the quantification and commodification of the meals themselves, marketed as healthy, nutritious, and environmentally sustainable while also claiming to reduce the workload of meal making by cutting time for grocery shopping and meal planning. As Radha Hegde explains in her analysis of Indian American food bloggers, the fusion cuisines promoted in recipes, blogs, apps, and websites also “Mobilize the familiar and the banal through the use of image, text, and formats...[shaping] diasporic life and identifications in the global neoliberal context...[and creating] a diasporic brand of cosmopolitanism” (Hegde, 2016, p. 84). Meal delivery kits similarly form a disconnected but at the same time globalized food network, in which its recipients, who likely see themselves as cosmopolitan foodies, can enjoy global cuisines that have been

adapted, commodified, and quantified for shipping and mass production suitability.

While Blue Apron’s decontextualized approach to food prep is akin to cosmopolitan food blogging, ironically it lends itself to the specificity of local, individual experience since its materials are comprised of actual manipulable foodstuffs rather than merely mediated, textual and visual materials. While Eskjaer is correct in his assessment that the mediatization of food conflates media with consumption, we argue in the following sections that Blue Apron unwittingly turns passive consumers into environmentally-minded producers who are forced to confront the waste of the global food system and are free to “hack” the food box as they wish. There is room for improvisation even within the rigid discourse of the box, as some chefs (including one of the authors of this paper) routinely use the contents of the box according to their own whims and needs, often batch-cooking ingredients together regardless of which recipe they belong to, ignoring the recipe cards altogether, adding other ingredients, and preparing something that does not follow the recipes at all.

Yet the consumer appeal as constructed by Blue Apron is precisely the lack of need for *al gusto*, *sazón*, and creativity in cooking. Indeed, the rendering of cultural food knowledge into step-by-step recipes works to empty the performative aspects of cooking in favor of a seemingly universally replicable and applicable formula. Blue Apron and other similar meal kit delivery services create a commodified, quantified, and decontextualized box of food that may claim to provide a sense of food citizenship but one that is negated or diminished by the rhetoric of globalization and cosmopolitanism as well as the waste produced by such consumerism, as we examine in the next section.

## SYSTEMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Legitimate concerns about Blue Apron, Plated, and other such delivery meal kits are part of the broader critique of capitalist systems that require the labor and agricultural resources to produce food on a mass scale. In other words, the environmental and labor problems that arise from such delivery services are really issues that stem from the broader capitalist system that focuses on mass consumption in the United States. As Eskjaer (2013) also explains, the mediatization of such services reflects not only the way in which consumption and media have become one and the same, but also the social consequences of commodifying the notions of eco-friendliness or sustainability. For example, many consumers and journalists have complained about the packaging that comes with each Blue Apron delivery (Bilton, 2015; Severson, 2016; Cohen, 2017). Yet, this is a similar problem facing all delivery services, from Amazon and other online companies to online versions of brick and mortar stores. Any item that is delivered to one’s doorstep will likely contain more packaging than if that item were purchased at a store. Some of the environmental impact might be offset by reducing transportation and gasoline consumption (e.g., comparing UPS or FedEx deliveries around a neighborhood compared to driving

oneself to the store in a car). Items purchased from a grocery store or other big box store are also delivered to those stores in cardboard boxes and other packaging. Shoppers purchasing produce often use plastic bags to individually wrap produce items, and many other items come in some form of packaging. However, as Butler (2017) argues, the ice bags used to keep meal kits cold enough to keep perishables fresh weigh 5–6 pounds each and produce around 192,000 tons of trash per year from Blue Apron's services alone. Butler further explains that one of the ingredients in many of these companies' ice packets, sodium polyacrylate, is made from fossil fuels and is not biodegradable. Blue Apron has offered customers the opportunity to participate in a recycling program in which they can send back ice packets and freezer bags, but it is not clear how many people actually do so. While the bags are currently (as of 2018) labeled as 99% water, the remaining ingredients are not clear. Plated, on the other hand, does not attempt to address environmental concerns much at all; the company does not offer ideas for recycling or explain what to do with ice packs in the same way that Blue Apron does.

In addition to the possible environmental impacts, meal kit delivery companies have also been criticized for unfair labor practices and dangerous work environments (O'Donovan, 2016). The consumer is further removed from the farm workers and grocery store workers who connect food to its production and distribution; in fact, the consumer does not even need to meet the delivery truck person as the box can be left at the door, making even more invisible the many workers who bring food to higher income consumers. Each company develops a number of recipes for each week's deliveries. Plated and Blue Apron claim to use seasonal and available ingredients that have to be scalable for the millions of meals that are sent out. Blue Apron employees have described this as "a chaotic, stressful environment where employees work long days for wages starting at \$12 an hour bagging cilantro or assembling boxes in a warehouse kept at a temperature below 40 degrees" (O'Donovan, 2016). The company's rapid growth has also contributed to workforce problems in that unqualified and untrained people are hired to meet labor needs. Furthermore, the sodium polyacrylate used in the ice packets is potentially hazardous for those who handle it in the powdered form; workers can develop a lung disease from working with this material (Butler, 2017). And yet, the labor and environmental impact that companies like Blue Apron and Plated impose are both unique to their services (e.g., ice packet waste), but also similar to the impact that other big, national/global companies have in terms of waste production, labor issues, and workforce expansion. Certainly, all companies such as these can work to improve fair labor practices and sustainability approaches, but some companies are better than others, and all participate in a capitalist system, which suggests systemic change is needed, rather than just companies or individual consumers making such reforms. That is, individuals and organizations can and should engage in more sustainable and fair behaviors, but that does not mean capitalistic structures will follow. Click and Ridberg (2010) specifically make the point that rhetoric regarding food systems focuses on individual consumer choices, rather than the way in which food systems operate. Meal delivery companies are now part of that system; consumer

demand for more sustainable practices from such companies is important, but they are also part of a larger, global food system that also needs change. "[A]s repeated everyday practices (Warren), food production, consumption, and memory-making are also sites where we can reflexively consider processes of intersections – between global and local, authenticity and replication, remembering and forgetting, and between histories and presents – as they shape identities, dis/connections, and differences" (Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 14).

## RECONSIDERING AND CONFRONTING FOOD PRODUCTION

Blue Apron's self-described commitment to supporting local and regional food growers through its curated selection of ingredients potentially provides a way for consumers, both rhetorically and practically, to engage with issues pertaining to the environment. Plated includes very little specific information about how they acquire their ingredients or how they might contribute to a more sustainable food system approach; as such this section focuses more on Blue Apron's rhetoric of sustainability and how such appeals aim to connect to consumers. As Opel et al. (2010) contend, the question of "where did my food come from is the starting place—a line of questioning—that is fundamental for new kinds of global citizenship... what we mean when we say 'food' reveals a complex set of land use and labor practices, corporate structures, public policy, plant and animal genetics, and human health impacts" (Opel et al., 2010, p. 252–253). According to interviews that key members of the company have given to the popular press, Blue Apron regards itself as poised to shape this "new kind of global citizenship" with its corporate ethos of "rebuilding the food system" with its clients (Blue Apron, 2017). On its website, Blue Apron articulates its vision as a "decades-long effort" in which the company, together "with each Blue Apron home chef, ... can build a better food system." In its "Join Us" message online, Blue Apron's sales pitch encourages potential customers that subscribing to the service means taking the ethical high road: "By cooking with Blue Apron, you're helping to build a food system that's better for everyone" (Blue Apron, 2017). Plated refers to "responsibly sourced meats and sustainable seafood [and] farm-sourced seasonal ingredients" (Plated, 2017–2018), suggesting at least minimal attention to sustainability practices.

The idea that customers "cook with" these companies renders an otherwise purely transactional relationship between buyers and sellers as an intimate, potentially familial communion over food. Blue Apron and Plated's call to arms draws upon what Herakova and Cooks have described as the communally and culturally defining nature of food: "Food, and specifically making food together, thus serves as a site for community and communication that crosses boundaries and cultures, at the same time as it necessitates experience and engagement with boundaries and differences they may delineate" (Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 2). The Blue Apron Blog serves as the locus of "community and communication" between cultures and species by providing profiles of farmers called "Meet the

Suppliers” and “Food Stories,” which focus in-depth on the life story of one particular ingredient. Such posts, as well as others on “kitchen tips” and holiday recipes, are part and parcel of Blue Apron’s overall commitment to cultivating in its customers an appreciation of the “food-loving life” (Blue Apron Blog, 2017). These posts are also included in each kit as print-based media intended for the consumer presumably to read while cooking. But this “food-loving life” seems to go beyond mere consumption. Rather, as Plated and Blue Apron’s sales pitch demonstrates, the love of food involves care and ethical regard of other eaters as well as food and the food system itself, which is evident in Blue Apron’s corporate commitment to developing “higher quality ingredients,” encouraging “regenerative farming practices,” delivering “fresher food,” and “reducing food waste” (Blue Apron, 2017; also Plated, 2017–2018). The company exemplifies the kind of “ecopragmatism” (Browne, 2007) associated with Victory Gardens during the two World Wars. This pragmatic approach to the environment transforms the prosaic task of “tending one’s garden,” in Rebecca Solnit’s words, into “a way of entering the public sphere” (Solnit, 2009). This corporate investment in not only food, but the infrastructure undergirding it, helps to elevate the mundane activity of cooking from a daily necessity to a way of establishing a personal, experiential stake in a public problem of global significance: namely, anthropogenic climate change.

The hands-on nature of the meal kits and cooking in general is where the main potential lies for thinking with others about the rhetorical, material, and ideological barriers that separate humans from the more-than-human world. As FitzSimmons and Goodman have argued, food and agricultural networks are “the locus of metabolic incorporation between humans and nature” (FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998, p. 195). By helping consumers actively engage with the plant and animal worlds through cooking, fresh food delivery services are poised to develop a pragmatic sense of hands-on, bodily environmental awareness for their respective markets, something that cooks and other artisans engaged in the “transubstantiation of matter into form” have long understood (Treanor, 2015, pp. 69–70). In other words, it is possible that longer term cooking experiences with these companies’ meal kits could lead to a sense of *al gusto* or *sazón* as home chefs gain more practice in cooking. At the very least, consumers do have a hands on experience with food, even if ingredients are not purchased in a store or farmer’s market.

Cooking with meal delivery kits such as Blue Apron and Plated therefore potentially helps consumers of food reconsider themselves as producers of food. This is a reversal of expectations with far-reaching economic implications. As Jason Moore argues, to give food precedence over all else is essentially to release the domain of “nature” from its historical definition as either a tap or a sink: either a source of plenty or a wasteland (Moore, 2015). Traditionally accounted for as an economic externality (Cubitt, 2017, p. 82), the category of “nature” has encompassed everything and everyone who has been subject to patriarchal control: from animals, plants, and land to women (Mies and Shiva, 2014). Promoting food from a mere consumable to the necessary condition for human production, according to Moore’s interpretation of Marx, means shifting the domain of nature

from an economic externality—the material substrate on which value depends—to the matrix through which value is created (Moore, 2015). Moore and others have described this shift in the production of value as an elevation of the household or *oikos* to a domain of public significance (Meyer, 2001; Moore, 2015). That is to say that the household can serve as the primary stage upon which citizens enact political and economic change (Meyer, 2001). But this view goes beyond the neoliberal rhetoric emblematically promoted as a call to action at the end of food documentaries such as *Food, Inc.*, that one can “vote three times a day” for a sustainable food system through one’s food purchases (Kenner, 2008). Rather, a household-centric view requires thinking of the household as a site not of mere consumerism, but, in John Meyer’s terms, of “provision” (Meyer, 2001, p. 162). The household in Meyer’s view is an assemblage of actors, interests, and material that extends beyond the merely economic to the political (Meyer, 2001, p. 162). The concept of “provision” accords the household the status of a “nexus for a vast array of infrastructure, resources, and practices” (Meyer, 2001, p. 143) that “shape . . . , constrain . . . and enable . . . the participation and citizenship of household members” (Meyer, 2001, p. 165). Meyer argues that focusing on “the materiality of the home” ultimately allows for “intimate and experiential understandings of these material flows that can inform and prompt broader forms of collective action” (Meyer, 2001, p. 164).

Home delivery meal kits, insofar as they appear as anonymous cardboard boxes at one’s doorstep, seem to avoid the conspicuous consumption of sustainable products on display at national grocery store chains and even at urban farmers markets (Slocum, 2013). Buying green can be more of an identity position than an engaged political practice, what Timothy Morton has called the problem of the “beautiful soul” (Morton, 2007, p. 121) that has been in play since the Industrial Revolution, when the concept of a pristine “nature” was separated as an idyllic reserve away from the polluted spheres of industry and business. Morton argues that refocusing on the way in which food in particular and consumption in general both create a material connection between humans and the environment helps to disrupt the nineteenth century inheritance of starkly separating humans and nature (Morton, 2007). Food bridges this gap because it is the essential form of human consumption in which the non-human other becomes a part of the self. But that incorporation of the non-human other must not idealize it as authentic, pure, and natural. Rather, the key, according to Morton, is to “love the other precisely in their artificiality” and “refuse . . . to digest” it (Morton, 2007, p. 269). Eating is the particular form of consumption that Morton finds central to fostering a sense of “ecological awareness” because eating involves an uncanny confrontation with an agricultural system whose very inception has fostered a disconnect between humans and nature (Morton, 2012, p. 7). Much like the futility of Oedipus in avoiding his fate, any attempt, according to Morton, to correct or optimize a system whose operating logic depends on optimization results in recapitulating that system: “When everything is a field . . . the significance of things is drained” (Morton, 2012, p. 17). Morton argues that we are stuck in an endless loop of existence where we are thoroughly imbricated in the environment we claim as a

separate entity. Rather than try to defy the existing food system, Morton instead advocates staying within the agrilogistic loop through the mechanism of consumption. Like Meyer, Morton argues of the importance to pay attention to rather than ignore or repress the fact that the household is a major locus of material consumption. To do so, according to Morton, means to “reintroduce the uncanny into the poetics of the home [...] which] is a political act” (Morton, 2007, p. 177). By confronting the repressed figure of consumption and its waste products, Morton argues that we avoid recapitulating the same Romantic-era logic that separated out sullied human activity from the pristine natural world.

In the case of Blue Apron, Plated, and other meal delivery kits, the “uncanny” is reintroduced into the home through the inescapably material connection between human and the environment that is palpably visible upon receipt of the box. Engaging with a meal delivery kit is a highly mediated process that involves a number of material elements, including: the box in which it arrives, shipping labels, cooling packs, recipe cards, labeled bags, and the food itself, which acts as both nourishment and instructional medium. As Mikkel Eskjaer contends, mediatization shapes food box experiences, but also “contributes to the re-enchantment of consumption by re-framing it as sustainable, based on principles and values that pretend to transgress – perhaps even defy – traditional consumption” (Eskjaer, 2013, p. 54). While Eskjaer sees this “re-enchantment of consumption” as problematic, we argue that it is an unavoidable symptom of an environmental stance and, in fact, something to be embraced in all its contradictions.

Each layer of this alimentary palimpsest hints at some aspect of the food’s material relation to the consumer as well as the environmental costs of that relation. In other words, the cornucopic illusion of the produce aisle, where fruits and vegetables magically appear regardless of season and devoid of the trappings of global logistics, has dissolved. What remains is a form of food media that aims to transfer the tacit knowledge of cooking to the end consumer (Sutton, 2013). Unlike documentary and other food media that are limited to the audiovisual realm, meal kits allow the user to interact with the media. The informational cards and pamphlets included in each box encompass everything from expert culinary skills to knowledge of a plant’s growth cycle to cross-cultural recipes. The kit and its attendant media act as a guide for the apprentice home chef, but without the immediacy of interpersonal exchange. Instead, the home chef engages in a complex choreography of reading, smelling, touching, opening, and discarding. The materials themselves are designed to produce a particular type of agroecological subject: one who potentially engages with the idea and products of sustainable agriculture through stories about the food and its growers.

In many ways, Blue Apron and Plated act as certain types of farm-based food tourism, which, Cindy Spurlock argues, is “able to refigure a sense of environmental subjectivity wherein the logics of the citizen-consumer are both practicable and desirable to those who experience the tour” (Spurlock, 2009, p. 18). Instead of the citizen-consumer going to a farm to experience firsthand the way in which “food production and consumption are visibly

and actively foregrounded as embodied practices” (p. 9), Blue Apron and Plated claim to bring that experience conveniently home in the form of a carefully curated selection of produce, accouterments and instructional recipe cards. The customer can then presumably experience the way in which cooking food is an “embodied practice,” using the recipe cards’ step-by-step photographs as a model for how to cook the meals in question. The cards, in conjunction with the blogs, which detail the stories of food producers and featured ingredients through the frame of sustainable agriculture, act as a way in for the consumer to think environmentally about the sources of her food. As Spurlock argues, such an approach “may serve as a more palatable alternative to the hypermediated context of gloom and doom that often accompanies contemporary environmental rhetorics (i.e., change or die)” (p. 18).

Ultimately, the performative aspect of cooking and food production boils down to its radical possibility, what Leda Cooks has dubbed its “performative tactics of resistance” (Cooks, 2009, p. 104). Cooks, who compares the Pro-Ana (pro-anorexia) and permacultural movements through their focus on the re-formation of body and land respectively, asks: “How do we perform through food to constitute, resist, and critique the politics of power and identity?” (Cooks, 2009, p. 96). For Cooks, performing through food is about more than simply following a set of procedures that have been removed from their cultural culinary contexts and histories. Cooking for Cooks is about establishing an archive of memories or “acts of preservation [...] such as recalling an often invisible history of gestures, of stories about food, and so on” (Cooks, 2009, p. 109). In the recipe cards, the consistent use of white, presumably male, hands engaged in a classic French approach to *mise-en-place*, with all the ingredients pre-cut in their respective bowls, elides that “invisible history of gestures” associated with the preparation of certain dishes. The kneading of bread dough, for example, has been interpreted as not simply a necessary step to making bread but “as a connective tissue to others” that “both reflect[s] and reimagin[es] patterns of relating, of tasting, of making, and consuming” (Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 4, 5).

Blue Apron co-founder Matt Wodiak echoes the rhetoric of reassessment and redefinition of agricultural practices, but within the structure of global economics, not knowledge-sharing based on interpersonal relationships. Wodiak sees Blue Apron’s commitment to changing the food system as “rewrit[ing] how things are done, as if starting from scratch” (Barth, 2016). But his invocation of “starting from scratch” is paradoxical in the sense that Blue Apron relies on the very global economic infrastructure that it seeks to deny and empties out the experiential aspect of food creation. In some ways, Wodiak’s presumption of being able to change such an entrenched system follows the logic of the agroecological documentary films mentioned earlier, which advocate local agriculture as the solution to the industrial model. Yet distancing the company from the localism of the likes of slow food advocate Alice Waters, whose restaurant *Chez Panisse* was one of the first in the U.S. to develop a farm-to-table model, Wodiak opines, “it doesn’t really help the American public, or the agricultural community, if you’re serving \$300 dinners” (Barth, 2016). To him, that means rethinking not only the industrial food



system, but the organic farming system and ethos that defines itself as distinct from the industrial model, despite being heavily dependent on it, what Julie Guthman has termed the “agrarian paradox” of the Californian organic movement (Guthman, 2014, p. 176). Rather than adopt the purist stance that local is always better, Wodiak and the other co-founders of Blue Apron as well as Plated have focused on “finding a way to replicate the model at scale” (Barth, 2016). In this way, rather than deny the agrilogistical regime, they are working with the existing system and searching for solutions that ultimately embrace the uncanny abject industrialism that their compatriots in the sustainable food scene often attempt to repress.

Superimposing a local/regional model on a national or international logistical infrastructure produces some uncanny effects in Blue Apron’s distribution system. Blue Apron has three distribution centers, located in California, Texas, and New Jersey (Barth, 2017). But the produce in the meal kits often does not correspond to the growing seasons of customers’ localities. For instance, cucumbers often are shipped from its Texas center to East Coast customers 1 month before cucumber season arrives on the East Coast (Barth, 2016). On an international scale, Wodiak admits that “there’s less carbon emitted to aggregate meat on a shipping container on a boat from New Zealand than if we were driving it from Nebraska to Chicago” (Barth, 2016). Such effects are not significantly different from the average grocery store in New York being able to supply mangoes in the dead of winter. And Blue Apron argues that the seasonal availability is not so temporally jarring as it is in distribution networks that extend across hemispheres. Blue Apron’s Chief Agronomist, Allison Grantham says that their focus is on “shorten[ing] the length of the food system” (Barth, 2016). One of their contracted growers, Rogelio Bautista reports that having a guaranteed market for his produce is much better for his business than simply selling at farmers markets, much like subscription-based Community Supported Agriculture (or CSAs) work (Halzack, 2016). Maintaining some form of “food system” seems to be important because otherwise growing and distributing produce simply is not profitable for all parties involved.

A key feature of such “shortening” of the food chain (Barth, 2016) is that they are able to supply quirky produce such as the fairytale eggplant and pink lemons—crops that wouldn’t otherwise be feasible on a large scale (Halzack, 2016). In some ways the types of produce Blue Apron provides defies the logic of global logistics while remaining firmly within it. Logistics entail what Deborah Cowen describes as the “rationalization of space ... and the simultaneous privatization, standardization, and commodification of matter” (Cowen, 2014, p. 199). While the traces of logistical standardization are usually “tucked out of sight” (Cowen, 2014, p. 1) for shoppers in brick-and-mortar stores, Blue Apron seems to embrace the paths its produce takes from farm to plate and even use it as a selling point on its blog by introducing customers to various growers. Practically speaking, Blue Apron has embraced at least some of the methodology of global logistics by “filling in the pieces that have been handled by distributors in the past” (Barth, 2016). They firm up planting contracts with growers three years ahead of time in a “massive spreadsheet” programmed with “algorithm[s] designed

to accurately predict ripening times and yield” (Barth, 2016). Moreover, Blue Apron forges business relationships with farmers who cultivate specialized crops like the fairytale eggplant in particular places, not abstracted spaces. Even while the fairytale eggplant is disconnected from that space when it arrives in the consumers’ homes, some attempt is made to re-connect the consumer to its origins in ways that traditional grocery stores do not. Matter in this scheme is still commodified but arguably the “shortening” of the chain of exchange potentially reduces the need to standardize and rationalize the commodities on offer.

Still, meal delivery kits’ reliance on a global logistical infrastructure constantly threatens to undermine the “food-loving life” (Blue Apron Blog, 2017). While their invitation to customers to “build ... the food system together” initially seems like an empowering invitation to shape food policy, it is really the logical extension of a business endeavor that depends on global logistics. As Barbara Cowen has argued, logistics elevates “distributors over manufacturers, blurring the line between production and circulation” (Cowen, 2014, p. 202). The dark underbelly of Blue Apron’s sales pitch therefore seems to be that food is legible and comprehended only through the larger system that enables it to exist. But recalling Timothy Morton’s notion of the Oedipal nature of the “agrilogistic” loop, any attempt to escape that larger system results in only a delay of the inevitable: the return of the repressed.

Something like Blue Apron’s individually packaged “Farm Egg” might begin to look like a viable option despite its initial appearance as utterly wasteful (Crook, 2016). Wondering whether this solitary egg, cushioned from the vagaries of global logistics in a cardboard cradle, “may just be another ridiculous, hilarious symbol of Silicon Valley’s disconnect with the world’s most pressing dilemmas,” *Techcrunch* reporter Jordan Crook writes that the “Farm Egg” makes him “question everything” about sustainable food systems (Crook, 2016). Such is the Oedipal nature of “ecological awareness,” according to Timothy Morton. As much as we try to escape the effects of industrial and corporate practices as they pertain to the environment, they return with a vengeance and demand that we acknowledge them. According to Morton (2012), things like the “Farm Egg” are symptomatic of the agrilogistical moment we find ourselves in and attending to them, using them as prompts to think through the dark side of consumption, is key to living with anthropogenic climate change.

## CONCLUSION

The waste in the Plated and Blue Apron meal kit boxes is not likely dramatically different from the waste that is conveniently hidden from shoppers’ view in the grocery store produce aisle, with the possible exception of the ice packs in each box. Waste is part of our foodway systems. With the production-side of industrial agriculture being as fossil-fuel intensive as it is, not to mention the externalized costs to the environment and to the chickens themselves, who vie for breathing space in crowded industrial coops, on-demand agriculture seems to make sense. This endless calculus of figuring out the best solution for the

moment encapsulates the challenges of thinking environmentally while living in a global capitalistic system. Ideological purity about buying local is not always possible in places like the deserts of the Southwest United States, for instance, where few sustainable, drought-resistant crops exist. Such meal delivery kit companies employ rhetorics of sustainability, gourmet cooking, nutritious food offerings, and cultural variation with great economic success. Consumers find such rhetorics appealing because it is convenient, until it is not. Reviewers of such food kits find the packaging confrontational because of its presence and requirement of its disposal. Yet, cultural decontextualization that offers a sense of consumer cosmopolitanism along with middle class consumerist trappings are embodied in such services in problematic ways. The type of global ecological citizenship through food that meal delivery kits promote needs to counteract the standardizing aspects of their kits: from anemic recipes that drain the sazón (Abarca, 2006) out of a dish to global logistical systems that force fit the square pegs of unique produce into the round holes of seasonally limited markets. Companies like Blue Apron and Plated need to know that if consumers come to know their food and foodways and to cultivate a “food-loving life” (Blue Apron Blog) primarily through meal kits, the cultural and gendered aspects of eating and cooking are lost or ignored.

Part of the reason that Blue Apron and Plated falls flat in its invocation of crafting citizenship through the performance of cooking is that there is a rote quality to the culinary experiences they promote. Blue Apron envisions its own engagement with the food system as textual, but denies the system that went before (“starting from scratch”), a stance that is curious given the company’s reliance on the collective intelligence of all its growers and food producers, many of whom are multi-generational participants in the food industry. The pamphlets in the meal kits, in contrast, recount expert agricultural and culinary knowledge by setting down in writing the tacit knowledge of growers and other food professionals. On the one hand, the meal kits provide subscribers access to a rich archive of agricultural and culinary experience; on the other hand, in the name of access, the recipes tend to standardize those same culinary experiences. The net effect of this contradiction is that the meal kits operationally discourage a “from scratch” mentality, one that arguably allows for radical departures from established culinary norms. And this is despite the fact that the businesses imagine its mission as creating a tabula rasa of food production and distribution. Most significantly, in the process of claiming to reform the existing food system, using ethnic food recipes as the primary mechanism to do so, Blue Apron erases the histories, cultures, and practices of the diverse population of food workers and

participants who have subsisted and have thrived within that food system (Abarca and Salas, 2015).

At best, Blue Apron’s and Plated’s inclusion of culinary procedures in its recipe cards might introduce new techniques to customers that could then be folded into their respective household traditions. At worst, their use of vaguely ethnic or cosmopolitan recipes to forge a sense of food citizenship gives consumers the impression that by cooking recipes inspired from various cultures, they are engaging in a radical act of shared identity with the other. In appealing to a generalized sense of food citizenship through marketing the “food-loving life,” the political appeal is more about lifestyle choices for upper-middle class white consumers rather than any radical break with the food system but those possibilities exist to some extent. A truly radical approach to eating and food in this late stage of climate change would need to go beyond multiculturalism and question the very boundaries between humans and the environment, what Barnett has coined “the politics of edibility” (Barnett, 2018, p. 220).

Because the representations of food in meal delivery kits are presented in a form that does not seem like entertainment media through film or television, they often are taken at face value as what is for dinner on a given night, but the physicality of waste is ever present. The paradoxical nature of food media—as both luxury and necessity—in late capitalism makes it difficult to make clear critiques of good objects vs. bad objects, as Morton argues. There is an Oedipal logic to agriculture within the context of the Anthropocene which creates unexpected, uncanny effects in endeavors that are otherwise deserving of the most trenchant critique on the basis of the erasure of culture and gender. Reinvesting the household as a site of material provision requires taking seriously the ways in which cultural and gendered difference literally matter in those households. In some ways, then, the return of the repressed in the form of seeing our food systems’ waste presents a more environmentally minded consumer, even as the cultural and gendered aspects of cooking are erased. Yet by emptying out cooking of its radical performativity, these companies miss an opportunity to question crucially the relation between humans and the more-than-human world.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to this work and are listed alphabetically. Both authors have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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