The Social Lives of Superfoods

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Discipline of History
School of Humanities
University of Adelaide
February 2016
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Abstract

Superfoods have emerged as an increasingly significant category of health food products and related popular discourse about food, health, and values. They are celebrated for their purported extraordinary nutritional and/or medicinal values, ‘natural’ qualities, associations with ‘exotic’ or ‘pristine’ places of origin, and histories of traditional or indigenous use. However, the term ‘superfood’ defies precise definition, and both products and discourse are poorly understood by the public and regulatory bodies.

Existing scholarship has examined social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of related concepts and products, such as functional foods and low-carbohydrate diets, demonstrating ways in which new forms and ideas emerge through the convergence of nutritional science discourse, globalised food provisioning, and the commodification of food and health. These studies have largely focused on the nutritional anxieties felt by Western consumers. Other literature has paid greater attention to the impacts of the globalisation and industrialisation of food and agriculture on producers, often located in the developing world. Research bridging worlds of food production and consumption is called for, but only recently beginning to emerge in the scholarly literature.

There is currently no existing scholarship examining superfoods in particular. Because superfoods can be understood both as a discourse about food and health and a group of agro-food products, they offer a distinctive lens through which to conceptually bring together geographically (and, often, socioculturally) distant worlds of production and consumption. In drawing together these diverse worlds, I have employed a 'biography-of-things' approach inspired by the work of Appadurai and Kopytoff. Drawing upon assemblage theory, actor network theory, and circuits of culture theory, and employing a case study design encompassing diverse social science methodologies, this study examines the emergence of superfoods as a sociocultural form.

The research demonstrates how a range of seemingly disparate existing elements, including developments in nutritional science, neoliberal trade agendas, traditional indigenous knowledge, food processing and transportation technologies, changing ideas about food, health, and ethics, and the proliferation of digital media, are drawn together in the creation of a new form with broad social and environmental impacts. It has implications for future research into the cultural power of in-between (food) objects and the ways in which they enable us to examine the tensions that pull at contemporary food culture.
Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Jessica Loyer

19 February 2016
Acknowledgements

This thesis was supported by an Australian Postgraduate Award, a University of Adelaide Graduate Centre Research Abroad Scholarship, and an Australian Federation of University Women South Australia Doreen McCarthy Bursary. Professor Rachel Ankeny and Emeritus Professor John Gray provided advice, guidance, and support throughout the entire process of imagining, executing, and writing this thesis. Their assistance in designing and conducting this research, evaluating the findings, and providing feedback on countless drafts is invaluable. I am grateful to my colleagues within the Food Values Research Group and former School of History and Politics for stimulating discussions and useful feedback in various seminars, presentations, and casual conversations; I particularly wish to acknowledge Professor Barbara Santich, Dr Heather Bray, and Dr Claire Walker. I gratefully acknowledge the time and insights provided by participants during fieldwork, interviews, and focus groups in Peru, the United States, and Australia; without their generous participation this research would not have been possible. I am particularly grateful to Ivan Manrique (International Potato Center) for his advice regarding fieldwork in the central Andes, and to Jose Montalvo and Beatriz DesLoges for their assistance with Spanish translation.

While this thesis is my own creative work, it owes its existence to the generosity of my family, friends, and colleagues around the world who have supported and inspired me emotionally and intellectually throughout. Special thanks to my grandparents, Helen and Bernard Tack and Dorothy and Robert Loyer, for their encouragement; to Emilie and Bill Lahey, and to my parents and siblings, Margi, Roger, Sarah, and Alex Loyer, for housing (and entertaining) me during my US fieldwork; to my teachers and fellow students at the Wiracocha Spanish School in Cusco; to Ana Maria Gutierrez, Clara Bitcon, Jayson Haebich, the Entheogenesis Australis community, and the Astral Lotus family for encouraging my interest in the stories of superfoods and my academic aspirations; to Ulrich Eck, Marta Dudzinska, Jackie and Robbie Robinson, Natalie Brierly, and Callum Vallely for caring for my fur-baby so that I could undertake overseas fieldwork; to Maddy Moore, Stefan Moore, and Rowan Ashby, for putting up with my various emotional states while writing and distracting me with frequent culinary adventures; to my dog Pippa for her insistence on daily walks that helped me to clarify my thinking and maintain perspective; and to Tim Brierly for his endless support, particularly in accompanying me on an often confronting journey into the Peruvian central Andes and lending an ear to my developing ideas.