Moral Orders of Multinationals: Registers of Value in Corporate Food Production

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes moral registers about and within one of the world’s largest food corporations. Based on fieldwork at a French multinational corporation, I trace how speech registers surrounding food circulate across institutional arenas, reconfiguring material connections between the company and consumers. I examine the emergence of a “Big Food” register, critical of the food industry, and analyze the discourses it has triggered within one corporation, comparing talk of ethics and economics among employees in Paris and Johannesburg. Corporate efforts to produce value through food result from struggles between value projects of diverse employees who are positioned differently relative to corporate hierarchies and global inequalities. I argue that moral language in and around the food industry can elucidate current transformations in global capitalism, revealing multinationals’ struggles to credibly voice registers aligned with consumers’ values in their search for competitive advantage.

Hopeful music burst from the speakers at the Global Nutrition Department’s quarterly meeting outside of Paris during the summer of 2017, and a narrator confidently announced, “You have power.” The employee presenting quickly pressed pause in order to explain that the video had been...
unveiled the previous week, during a speech by the company’s CEO at the Consumer Goods Forum, a meeting of corporate executives whose companies have a combined net worth of €3.5 trillion. Knowing nods suggested that many of those present had already watched the CEO’s speech on the company’s YouTube channel. The music resumed and the narrator asserted, “You might not know it,” but “you have the power to change everything for the better.” Speaking over images of ethnically diverse families happily eating, she explained that “each time we eat and drink we vote for the world we want.”

As a daily need for every person on the planet, food is at once the world’s largest industry (Murray 2007) and a basic human right (FAO 2004). Tension between the moral and monetary values of food is at the root of growing consumer mistrust of large food companies, as increasing numbers of people worldwide have come to view corporations as prioritizing economic gain at the expense of consumers’ health and the environment. Business insiders assert that this shift in public opinion has caused a loss of market share among the world’s largest food corporations (Kowitt 2015).

This article analyzes speech registers surrounding food and its moral and monetary entailments to consider how multinational corporations (hereafter, “multinationals”) respond to and try to shape these discourses in efforts to “add value” to their brands. Attempts to transform morals into monetary value or to otherwise create value through food are regimented by language. Food talk—that is, language about and around food (Cavanaugh and Riley 2017)—endows foods with value and is organized into registers, or “cultural model[s] that [link] contrasting and typified features of communicative display to contrasting types of speakers, characteristics, activities, practices, and values” (Gal 2018, 3). Distinctive registers are associated with diverse social practices and person types. By speaking like a lawyer, doctor, parent, or child, for example, social actors make claims about the relevant social and material relations that both link them to and distinguish them from others. Organized into registers of consumption, objects like commodities similarly mediate social relations when put on display or consumed (Agha 2011a).

I focus here on moral registers of food that span the communicative practices of suspicious consumers and corporate food producers, mediating material connections between them. These registers index social relations relative to an explicitly moral axis of differentiation, made evident in talk of eating “right” and in categories like “good foods” versus “bad foods.” The values that speech registers index allow speakers (and eaters) to position themselves relative to one another in social interaction. These communicative processes are also key to the production
of economic value. For those in the business of selling food brands and products, the ability to credibly voice a moral register aligned with the values of potential customers can confer competitive advantage, particularly at a historical moment characterized by heightened suspicion of the food industry.

Registers are socially and historically contingent, legible only to specific populations and changing in form and value over time (Agha 2004). For multinationals, creating monetary value by aligning with the shifting moral registers of international consumers is thus a complex semiotic process. And yet, the world’s largest food corporations have been extremely successful in doing precisely that, creating products with indexical values that resonate with consumers on a global scale to become among the most widely recognized and consumed brands in the world. This has occurred despite the criticism of mass-produced, industrial foods that companies have confronted since their inception (Goody 1982; Levenstein 1988).

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argued that capitalism is particularly adept at absorbing criticism, incorporating critique to create competitive advantage. Anthropologists examining the “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) movement have similarly argued that companies’ ethical initiatives serve to deradicalize political movements, ultimately retrenching global inequalities (see Dolan and Rajak 2011, 2016 for reviews of this work). Narrowly focused on CSR as a tool of corporate accumulation, these studies overlook the semiotic processes through which companies become aware of and work to respond to external critique. Approaching corporations as homogenous social actors, they assume companies are deftly able to instrumentalize morality, obscuring the doubts, disagreements, and missteps that surround corporate ethical initiatives. Following Marina Welker (2014), I approach the corporation as multiple and enacted, examining employees’ efforts to understand moral notions that circulate outside their company in order to reveal how corporate responses emerge—and, potentially, stall and become forgotten—out of interactions among international employees who are differently positioned in corporate hierarchies.

Linguistic anthropologists examining corporations as “reflexive cultural forms shaped by ongoing sign processes” (Urban and Koh 2015, S1) have questioned the notion of corporations and the brands they sell as “unitary objects with inherent power” (Agha 2015, S174). These scholars have demonstrated how corporations emerge through ongoing metasemiotic processes both internal and external to a company (Urban and Koh 2013; Koh 2015; Prentice 2015; Urban and Koh 2015). Yet scholarship on corporations’ ethical initiatives has largely focused either on externally oriented attempts to manage corporate reputations
(Shever 2010; Benson 2014; Welker 2014; Chong 2018) or on internal efforts to encourage international employees to align with company values (Chong 2018). Less is known about the semiotic processes through which moral registers circulate both within and outside companies, shaping moral discourses and the material relations they mediate. By focusing on moral registers of food that span corporations and consumers alike, this article draws attention to the semiotic processes that mediate the circulation of moral discourses within and outside the corporation, revealing how shifting moral registers reconfigure material relations between companies and the public.

Scholarship on the semiotics of food has drawn attention to the multimodal processes through which food producers work to establish their products as “authentic” and “local,” qualities that have grown increasingly profitable as the value of industrial foods has been called into question (Paxon 2013; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; Weiss 2016; Cavanaugh 2016; Blum 2017; Karrebæk and Maegaard 2017; Riley and Cavanaugh 2017). But we know surprisingly little about the effects that shifting perceptions of food’s value have had in the corporate sector. Analysis of food companies’ efforts to understand and respond to the values that consumers associate with foods can shed light on how moral critique aimed at food corporations is reshaping the food industry’s material functioning.

This article takes up these issues in the context of a French multinational food company. Baylone is a French corporation best-known for selling yogurt which also owns brands of bottled water, baby food, and specialized nutrition products. In Baylone’s official communications, their search for economic value is intimately tied to the virtuous goal of “bringing health through food to as many people as possible.” This is part of what Baylone calls its “Alimentation Revolution,” defined on its website as a “movement aimed at nurturing . . . healthier, more sustainable eating and drinking habits.”

At the 2017 Consumer Goods Forum, the CEO spoke frankly about losing customers and acknowledged the industry’s role in the “explosion” of non-communicable disease and the depletion of planetary resources. He asserted that these were consequences of regarding food as a commodity, solemnly noting that although food tells us everything about who we are, “we made it a consumer good” and let market forces drive demand and supply. In other venues he has gone so far as to claim that “without social justice, there is no future for the economy.”

Baylone’s lofty goals are clear in the CEO’s calls for ethics in business. But who is his intended audience? Potential customers? Baylone employees, 1. This and other brand names used here are pseudonyms.
struggling to keep afloat in a company that has been losing money? Shareholders, hoping to hear a lucrative response to consumer mistrust? In this multinational, projects of value creation necessarily have multiple audiences. Analyzing the language of economic and ethical value at Baylone can shed light on how the global reach of food corporations shapes processes of value creation through language and food.

My point of entry into these language practices is a set of qualitative research projects that Baylone calls “FoodStyles” studies. Drawing on twenty-two months of participant-observation in Baylone’s Paris-based Global Nutrition Department and its Southern Africa Branch in Johannesburg, this article analyzes the language Baylone employees use in their attempts to create monetary gain by drawing on cultural meanings associated with food. While at the CIRAD research center (Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement) in Montpellier, France, I collaborated with Baylone employees on the research portion of the FoodStyles studies. Mediating between corporate employees and local ethnographers, I worked with researchers at the University of Western Cape to carry out a project on urban eating practices in South Africa. The data from this project would be analyzed for academic publications, while simultaneously responding to a set of “business questions” defined by Baylone employees. My position afforded a privileged view into chains of commoditized communication through which emic values presented in ethnographic research were translated into business vernacular, shaping innovations. I thus requested and was given consent by Baylone employees to carry out my own concomitant meta-ethnography focused on how moral discourses shaped corporate practices and how the company used ethnographic research in its efforts to achieve both ethical and economic ends.

In what follows, I examine how Baylone employees develop ethical stances that demonstrate alignment with consumers’ concerns in attempts to repair material relationships with suspicious consumers. Moral registers in the corporate arena reconfigure the material organization of the multinational itself as employees use moral language to move up corporate hierarchies. I begin by tracing the emergence of “Big Food,” a notion widely circulated in international media and research which characterizes the current climate of consumer distrust. The concept of Big Food groups large food corporations into a single object of criticism. I show how the register of Big Food has reconfigured the indexicality of food and its producers and consumers, forging new connections between consumer critique and the material functioning of multinationals. I then turn my attention to moral registers within the corporate arena, examining how
consumer criticism of large corporations has triggered multiple uptakes of the Big Food register within the same company, through analysis of talk of ethical and economic values among Baylone employees. Examples from Paris and Johannesburg illustrate how corporate efforts to produce value through food are mediated by multiple metasemiotic discourses which frame combinations, or “graftings” (Gal 2018), of business registers and moral discourses in distinct ways.

Examining moral registers at Baylone reveals how corporate-level efforts to produce value through food result from struggles between value projects carried out by employees who work for different brands and branches, in various geographic locations, and are differently positioned in corporate hierarchies and global inequalities of race, class, and gender. I demonstrate how transformations in the moral registers surrounding food have had a material impact on the food industry, prompting food corporations to develop new moral stances that reconfigure material connections within the corporation and between companies and consumers.

**Enregistering “Big Food”**

Founded in the early twentieth century, Baylone developed into an industry giant by the 1970s. As neoliberal trade reforms created an environment favorable for corporate expansion in the 1990s, the company opened branches in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, becoming a household name internationally. In places like South Africa and much of Latin America, speakers often use the word Baylone to refer generically to any brand of yogurt. Today the company sells its name-brand yogurts alongside regionally specific products that are less recognizable as Baylone brands. In recent years, the company has acquired small businesses specializing in earth-conscious products, like plant-based foods and organic yogurts.

With over 100,000 employees worldwide and roughly €25 billion in annual sales, Baylone is one of the world’s largest food companies. While Baylone’s size entails immense wealth and power, in recent years its size has been a liability, as discourses critical of large food corporations have coalesced around the concept of Big Food. The world’s largest food and beverage companies have lost billions of dollars in market share, which industry analysts attribute to “the public’s mounting distrust of Big Food” (Kowitt 2015). The Financial Times recently declared big brands to be doing “battle with the ’little guys’” as they struggle to imitate small startups that adapt quickly to consumer trends and work to acquire their smaller competitors (Daneshkhu 2018).
Since the early 2000s, Big Food has emerged as a concept that aggregates diverse criticisms of the food industry’s impact on the environment, consumer health, and local economies with critiques of large corporations’ power over state regulatory institutions (Pollan 2003, 2016; Bittman 2011; Stuckler and Nestle 2012). Through parallelism with the existing term “Big Tobacco,” journalists used the concept of Big Food to highlight similarities between the tactics of large food corporations and cigarette companies (Pollan 2003; Zernike 2004). Scholars followed suit, using “Big Food” to refer to “the multinational food and beverage industry with huge and concentrated market power” (Stuckler and Nestle 2012, 1; see also Brownell and Warner 2009). The register of Big Food drew attention to the wider social consequences of what and how we eat and often includes accusations that large corporations are killing us individually, through non-communicable diseases, and collectively, through environmental degradation. The label “big” became synonymous with “bad,” indexing unethical corporate practices and establishing likeness (iconicity) among all large food corporations.

This section traces how the political concerns emphasized in discourses critical of Big Food emerged out of a nutritionally focused register of food talk, as speakers and institutional actors laminated economic and environmental concerns onto the language of health that had dominated moral registers of food up to that point. Although these two semiotic registers overlap substantially, they diverge in critical ways. Whereas the repertoire of the nutritional register centered on micro- and macro-nutrients found naturally in foods (fat, cholesterol, sodium, etc.), talk of Big Food shifted focus to artificial additives (trans-fats, high-fructose corn syrup, etc.) and expanded beyond questions of health to highlight concepts like local, fair trade, and small-batch foods. Both of these registers originated in the specialized language of experts (nutritionists and scholars of food politics), ultimately filtering down into talk recognizable by the general public. The channels through which these discourses expanded differed, however: whereas the food industry played a key role in the dissemination of nutritional language, it is an object of critique in Big Food discourses.

Both the nutritional and Big Food registers divide and rank types of food, organizing the people who make and eat them into social hierarchies which map onto inequalities of class, race, gender, education, and place. The main social domain of language users who subscribe to the values enregistered in these moral discourses of food comprises educated, (sub)urban, middle- and upper-class white people, especially women. For those in the know, these registers communicate indexical values associated with a moral person type, one who eats right or produces foods that are not only good in flavor, but also virtuous in their
environmental, economic, and health impacts. Additional questions of political orientation and generation were incorporated into the indexicality of the Big Food register, reconfiguring the social domain of language users able to credibly voice this repertoire of food talk.

The emergence of the register of which “Big Food” is a shibboleth marks a specific historical configuration of moral discourses surrounding food. Since the advent of the food industry, companies have grappled with value-laden discourses about mass-produced food, but the form of critique received by these companies has changed over time, transformed through a feedback loop between consumers’ fears and industry responses and mediated by marketing research, advertising campaigns, journalists, and scholars. Mass production increased distance between producers and consumers and obscured knowledge about the conditions in which foods were made (Goody 1982). In the early twentieth century, food companies worked to locate their legitimacy in the new sciences of nutrition and hygiene (Levenstein 1988). As people became accustomed to their new role as food consumers, they were socialized into the specialized vocabulary of nutritional science, progressively learning which nutrients scientists—and advertisers—deemed lacking from their diets.

In the 1960s, reports linking cholesterol to heart disease suggested to the public that “their normal diet may be lethal” (Levenstein 1993, 135), and food marketing shifted to focus on ingredients and nutrients alleged to be harmful, rather than helpful, to health. The following decades saw a rapid proliferation in nutrition-focused language that was driven by industry-funded research and battles between interest groups in scientific journals and the media (Levenstein 1993, 176). Dixon and Banwell argue that corporations’ attempts to “value-add ‘health’” resulted in the “growing dominance of nutrition and health considerations in all facets of dietary discourse,” that is, the “nutritionalization” of talk surrounding food (Dixon and Banwell 2004, 126, 119; see also Poulain 2009; Fournier 2011).

As this nutritional register expanded, changing the socialized competence of language users, it also reconfigured the moral values attributed to foods. Speech registers surrounding food presume and entail systems of contrasting values which rank food and its producers and consumers in moral orders. Scientific findings that cholesterol, salt, fat, and sugar were linked to disease were taken up by consumers and the press as evidence that these nutrients were, in their essence, bad. Media reports identified which foods contained the nutrients in question, creating indexical chains between vilified ingredients and specific products. Food companies eagerly reinforced this semiotic relation on packaging,
proclaiming their products to be free of whatever ingredient was most recently declared problematic (Lepiller and Yount-André 2019).

Indexical chains underpinning these moral orders extended to consumers. In 1990s food talk, stereotypes like “junk food” and “couch potatoes” circulated in pair: the former, a meta-sign grouping object-signs like chips and candy, serving as an indexical icon of the latter, the lazy, sedentary type of person who would consume it. Obesity became a global health concern, and weight, a primary focus of food talk, organized the moral value of foods. Those who ate healthily were perceived to be of high moral fiber (Rozin et al. 1997), whereas hamburgers and soda sold at fast-food chains became emblematic of morally questionable habits (Rappoport 2010; McPhail et al. 2011).

The Big Food register marked a shift away from the nutritional language of the 1990s in terms of the scale and object of its moral discourse. The nutritional register focused on specific foods or nutrients that were endowed with moral meaning relative to their effects on the bodies of individuals. Talk critical of Big Food expanded this moral scope to highlight the impact of the food industry more broadly on societies and humanity at large, evaluating food’s morality in environmental and political-economic terms. In the early 2000s, texts critical of the food industry by nutritionists and journalists like Marion Nestle (2002), Eric Schlosser (2001), and Michael Pollan (2006) became international best sellers. A new genre of food exposés emerged in documentary films like *Supersize Me* (2004), *Food, Inc.* (2008), and *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry* (2008) as well as in books, articles, and blogs. Whether or not they explicitly used the term “Big Food,” the critiques that these nutritionists, scholars, journalists, and filmmakers leveled at the food industry have become emblematic of the Big Food register. This shift in the moral language surrounding food marked a rift between the food industry and certain nutritionists and journalists, whose specialized registers had previously facilitated industry efforts to lend value to their products.

The political and environmental themes that characterize critique of Big Food have echoes in the language of ecological activists of the 1970s (Belasco 1989) and the Slow Food movement in the 1990s (Donati 2005; Wilk 2006; Siniscalchi 2014). But the Big Food register has become relevant to a much wider social domain than the moral discourses of these earlier groups. Language once associated with activists has come to index savvy consumers. The food talk of Slow Food and Vietnam-era activists entailed explicit calls to action: devoting time to cooking and eating local and unprocessed foods, respectively. Those who voice the Big Food register, however, do not necessarily engage in politically
oriented forms of consumption. Speakers also employ the register in ironic resignation, such as in jokes admitting one’s powerlessness vis-à-vis the food industry (McLennan et al. 2018).

By characterizing large food corporations under the pejorative label “Big Food,” speakers position themselves as discerning, educated consumers and politically left-leaning, at least to others able to recognize the speech register. This register groups together a wide variety of positions in terms of food politics, ranging from people for whom the critique has little impact on consumption, to people who boycott large companies, to people who follow vegan, local, or raw food diets. The successful enregisterment of “Big Food” marks the emergence of a critical mass of speaker-eaters who concur, at very least, that the power large corporations wield is problematic because it harms the health of individuals, the environment, and local economies.

The indexicality of the Big Food register situates both speakers and large corporations in moral orders. First, it positions consumers, scholars, and journalists who are aligned in their critical assessments of the food industry relative to others who, in their view, are unaware of or, worse, unwilling to acknowledge the morally compromised dealings of large corporations in late capitalism. Second, the register locates its object, large food corporations, with respect to smaller and presumably more virtuous food producers, such as local businesses, startups, cooperatives, etc. This unflattering comparison is key to the Big Foods register, which deliberately amalgamates large corporations, treating differences among companies as irrelevant. Speakers who highlight distinctions among corporations risk appearing naïve, or worse, like politically conservative industry apologists or members of an older generation committed to brand loyalty.

**Transforming Critique into Competitive Advantage**

As large food corporations have lost market share, they have begun to take critiques of Big Food very seriously, investing in research on (mis)trust and coming together at “precompetitive” workshops in collective attempts to understand consumer suspicion (Lepiller and Yount-André 2019). The following sections focus on the ways corporate employees take up and transform moral registers critical of the food industry. Analysis of the moral language voiced by Baylone employees in France and South Africa illustrates how the language of Big Food has sparked multiple moral registers within one corporation, which differ across institutional boundaries within the same company.

At Baylone, the pejorative term “Big Food” is conspicuously absent. But in its official communications, the company employs moral language that strategically
takes up the critiques upon which the register is founded. Baylone employees make reference to the company’s ethical aims in their everyday language, referring to these moral goals as the part of the company’s “social” objectives. Here, “social” refers not, or not only, to CSR initiatives; drawing on Baylone-specific terms, “social” refers to part of the company’s “double project,” defined on its website as a “dual commitment to business success and social progress.”

Employees and official company texts historically locate these dual objectives in a speech the company’s founder delivered in Marseille in 1972. Inspired by widespread demonstrations in France in May 1968 for fair working conditions and environmental protection, the founder declared that the company would focus new attention on the human side of business, the lives of its employees, and its environmental impact. Widely known within the company as the “Marseille speech,” the founder’s call to treat social progress as equally important to economic success is treated as a baptismal moment marking Baylone’s ethical turn.

Indeed, “Bayloners”—a self-ascribed term for Baylone employees—commonly speak of their company as fundamentally more ethical than other corporations. In the words of one employee, “all companies have to make money. But we’re Baylone, so we also have to think about our social goals.” The company’s official reports refer to this “dual commitment” as a “distinctive” business model, and employees often highlight the company’s longstanding focus on social and environmental objectives to distinguish Baylone’s approach from more recent CSR initiatives. The current CEO is celebrated by his colleagues and in the media for promoting the founder’s ethical initiatives, having advanced through the ranks at Baylone through his work establishing a nonprofit “social business enterprise” aimed at improving children’s diets in South Asia.

Corporate uptake of the Big Food register is particularly apparent in the CEO’s language use. In public appearances, he addresses the various critiques that the register groups together: he admits to the food industry’s role in the rise of non-communicable diseases and ecological disasters, and he addresses issues of wealth inequality and corporate power. In a commencement speech at Paris’s prestigious business school, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales, he warned the audience that “wealthy and privileged individuals like us can always build up walls . . . but nothing will stop those who need to share with us.” In interviews, he has critiqued “Anglo-Saxon” business models and the inequities they produce, arguing that corporations should support those in its “ecosystem,” a term used at Baylone to refer to its employees together with the farmers, subcontractors, and vendors with whom it works.
Baylone’s uptake of the Big Food register is also evident in the linguistic form of the CEO’s ethical pronouncements. His proclamation that “each time we eat and drink, we vote for the world we want” borrows from the language of activists who advocate for politically conscious consumption by calling on consumers to “vote with [their] wallets.” Framing consumption in the civic terms of voting, this phrase was used by activists most notably as the slogan of the mobile application Buycott, which allows users to scan barcodes to see corporate kinship charts, revealing a brand’s parent companies, and highlights conflicts of interest between the product and activist campaigns users select (Eli et al. 2016, 2018).

Baylone’s official communications respond to the moral terms of the Big Food register in efforts to distinguish the company from other large food corporations. This perceived distinction—and moral high ground—hinges on fractal projections of the same axis of differentiation that speakers of the Big Food register use to criticize the food industry by distinguishing ethical producers from big corporations. Here, it is applied to differentiate among large food corporations, distinguishing Baylone from even larger or less ethical companies. Baylone’s alignment with the morals of the Big Food register is aimed at reshaping the material relations between the corporation and skeptical consumers, but it also reconfigures material relations within the corporation itself. The following section examines how Baylone employees in France used interdiscursive links to the CEO’s lofty moral claims to reposition their team within the company.

**Alimentation and Anthropology: Baylone’s Moral Register in France**

The term *alimentation*, which in French encompasses both food and the social act of eating, is emblematic of language practices in Baylone’s Paris-based Global Nutrition Department. Employees speak in French while borrowing substantially from English—the international language of business—and when using English, they commonly retain certain French terms and syntax. The team of twenty people is comprised almost entirely of French natives who live and work in Paris yet are expected to speak English fluently. Department meetings were even held in English for two years after two non-Francophone employees joined the team from branches in India and the United Kingdom. Even when speaking and writing in French, they systematically used English terms like “next steps,” “pledge,” and “conf call.”

2 Aware that their use of English borrowings surpassed that of French speakers outside the corporate world, employees often explained that certain English terms were shorter or came to them more readily.

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2. An abbreviation of “conference call” that is part of everyday corporate language in France, whereas the full term is used only rarely.
In France, English skills are a prerequisite for advancement to the upper echelons of corporate hierarchies. While most people are familiar with some English words and phrases, fluency indexes education, class, and younger generations who had English classes at school (Flaitz 2014). English skills structure one’s mobility at a company, shaping the scale and scope of the business interactions in which one might take part and determining one’s eligibility for promotions that require international travel or a move abroad. The Global Nutrition Department’s emphasis on English reflected the international scope of its main activity, using research to “add value” to the corporation through collaboration with employees at branches worldwide.

At the same time, French terms and turns of phrase often worked their way into employees’ language when they spoke or wrote in English. For example, an image called the “Alimentation Tree,” circulated widely in PowerPoint presentations and official reports, had an English caption, “impacting positively local communities,” in which the adverb placement mirrored French syntax rather than idiomatic English. French calques were likely unintentional in employees’ spoken English, but on the company’s professional website, these French-inspired turns of phrase persistently remind readers that Baylone is a French company, gesturing toward French prestige in culinary terms.

In contrast to less intentional French borrowings in English speech at the company, the use of the term alimentation was deliberate. Native English speakers at Baylone sometimes expressed annoyance with the word, which they viewed as a direct translation from French. But those who stood by the term argued that only alimentation could communicate Baylone’s position that healthy eating is about more than nutrition, encompassing “cultural (identity), hedonic (pleasure) and social (commensality)” (English and parenthetical clarifications in original), as indicated on its website. Indeed, the term alimentation is a testament to a resistance, apparent in French language practices and food culture, to utilitarian approaches to eating which reduce food to its nutritional components—approaches that are widely associated, in France, with Americans (Shields-Argelès 2008). Indeed, cross-cultural comparisons have shown that while anglophones commonly speak of food as good or bad in nutritional terms, in France, speakers are more likely to highlight foods’ value relative to flavor and commensality alongside health concerns (Rozin et al. 1999; Fischler and Massen 2008).

Baylone’s Global Nutrition Department, which houses the team that implements FoodStyles studies, was so committed to the concept of alimentation that

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3. The French equivalent is “impact positif sur les communautés locales.”
it recently changed its name to the Alimentation Sciences Department. When changes in upper management made it unclear whether the company would continue to prioritize the aims of “alimentation,” the head of the department instructed his employees to focus on the CEO as their “ultimate boss.” The department head is now called the “Chief Alimentation Officer,” charged with “accelerating the Alimentation Revolution as a driver for . . . business and credibility . . . through a better connection with people’s actual food habits and food cultures,” as stated on the department head’s LinkedIn page.

In the Alimentation Sciences Department, the concept of alimentation marked a movement away from a narrow focus on nutrition, toward a better understanding eating practices around the world and their symbolic and cultural significance. This shift aimed to foster the company’s economic development. After years of investing in research to improve the nutritional value of Baylone products, the department expanded its scope to include the “socioanthropology of food” through FoodStyles studies. Members of this department rallied around the CEO’s ethos of alimentation, endowing it with significance specific to their team in discussions of how to make alimentation central to their strategy. In so doing, they forged indexical links between company-wide objectives and the tools they were developing, as the only team at Baylone to employ anthropologists and work closely with external academic researchers in sociology and anthropology.

This movement from nutrition to alimentation at Baylone parallels an international shift away from nutritionalized language. Baylone’s register of alimentation represents an active effort to effect changes within the corporate sector parallel to those taking place among consumers, in order to create or repair material links between the company and consumers who have lost trust in the food industry. Among Bayloners, the idea that it is “no longer enough” to have a healthy portfolio is a common refrain. And the Alimentation Sciences department head explicitly characterizes alimentation as a response to a “trust crisis” among consumers.

Within the Alimentation Sciences Department, “alimentation” became a shibboleth of an in-group register that served to index and transform the team’s position in a changing corporation. As it became evident that nutrition alone could not create competitive advantage, the role of the Global Nutrition Department amid changes at Baylone was unclear. Through developing the register of alimentation and discursively linking it to the department’s signature research tools, the head of the department and his employees leveraged a move through the corporate hierarchy: the Chief Alimentation Officer now reports to the
CEO’s second-in-command. The familiarity with which members of the department spoke of the Alimentation Revolution positioned them within the company as particularly aligned with the CEO’s ethical ambitions, able to lead changes within Baylone by offering new insight into consumer mistrust rather than be left behind in the move away from nutritionally focused language and business strategies.

For members of this department, code switching between French and English allowed them to demonstrate their mastery of two languages, each legitimate and powerful in its own right: English for its association with business and French for its cultural association with food. The use of both languages yielded the suggestion that Baylone can bring a fresh perspective to industrial food production. The alimentation register was similarly a linguistic repertoire forged of two codes: business vernacular and the language of ethics. Voicing the alimentation register thus required fluency in the languages of Baylone’s social and business commitments in order to code switch with agility. In this way, they could combine the two languages to “add value” to the company.

Commoditized Communication at FoodStyles South Africa

FoodStyles studies are collaborations among four parties: in France, Baylone’s Alimentation Sciences Department and the CIRAD research center; and in South Africa, Baylone’s Johannesburg branch and an ethnographer from the University of the Western Cape. To bring FoodStyles into being, Baylone’s three person “Food Cultures Team” guides local branches in identifying business questions and helps them organize project meetings and presentations.

The final presentation of the FoodStyles results is a carefully curated communicative act, the result of months of language work not only by the researcher but also by Baylone employees fighting to assure that the right people take time from their busy schedules to attend. Indeed, none of those present are paid to physically produce yogurt. Instead, their value to the company is achieved through acts of commoditized communication that Asif Agha has referred to as “mediatized practices.” Agha uses the term “mediatization” to describe institutional processes that reflexively link communication to commoditization, noting that these practices connect “communicative roles to positions within a socioeconomic division of labor” (2011b, 163). In the case of FoodStyles, this means that employees at the final presentation are of a higher pay grade than those on the factory floor, and moreover, that the ideas voiced by each person present are legitimized and constrained by that person’s position in the corporate hierarchy. The sorts of innovations imaginable are shaped by what employees
feel they have the authority to suggest and what they deem useful to the brand, category, branch, or division of Baylone for which they work.

The value of FoodStyles studies hinges on the translation of academic observations into business vernacular to inspire what Baylone calls “solutions,” that is, ideas for new products, services, communication campaigns, or educational initiatives. The bulk of the translation takes place at the two-day final presentation. The first day, the researcher gave three hour-long presentations, while Baylone employees scribbled what they call “key learnings”\(^4\) on post-it notes. During the second day, the “Activation journey for data translation,” Baylone employees and marketing consultants brainstormed ideas that the research inspired.

In Johannesburg, the FoodStyles final presentation brought together an international group of Baylone employees, marketing consultants, and academic researchers. The Baylone employees occupied a range of functions at the company. Four employees from the Alimentation Sciences Department and Baylone’s Africa Division had flown in from Paris. Charged with developing business strategies for all of Baylone’s Africa-based activities, these latter employees were among the highest-ranking corporate employees present. Among the participants from Baylone’s Southern Africa branch, employees ranged from junior brand managers, who worked on developing marketing strategies for a specific brand, to strategy and insights managers and members of upper management whose work encompassed all Baylone brands sold in Southern Africa. Employees of Baylone South Africa were diverse in terms of ethnic and national background: teams of black, white, and Indian South Africans were led by an executive committee predominantly composed of European expatriates who had spent the majority of their careers at the company.

English provided a common language among workshop participants and was used for all formal presentations. But at coffee breaks, French, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, and North Sotho were audible over the clink of spoons on the glass dessert bowls at a self-service “yoghurt bar.” Visitors and expatriates from France often slipped into French when speaking among themselves but took care to switch to English in the earshot of non-French speakers. Similarly, South Africans shifted seamlessly between English and Afrikaans or indigenous African languages when speaking with colleagues with whom they shared a language.

\(^4\) In recent decades, the term *learnings*, used to refer to “insights” or “findings,” has become popular in international business vernacular and is used not only by French speakers but also by native speakers of English.
During formal presentations, however, there was a conspicuous lack of code-switching compared to the pervasive multilingualism at break times and to the language practices in the Alimentation Sciences Department. In South Africa, where English is politically but not numerically dominant, mastery of a “neutral” or unmarked form of South African English is widely recognized as a prerequisite for professional advancement (Mesthrie 2002). Among Baylone’s South African employees, none spoke in a phonolexical register associated with Indian or Black South African English. Indeed, among people of color, if English was not their first language, their mother tongue was undiscernible in their spoken English. Instead, they spoke in accents that indexed their education and class status.

Europeans and white South Africans, however, did not go to similar lengths to conceal ways of speaking associated with their native languages. French, German, and Afrikaans accents could be heard in formal presentations and discussions. The audience accommodated Europeans’ non-native pronunciation and syntax, offering up suggestions when foreign speakers could not think of a term in English. The voices of African nationals from West and East Africa were also audible at the FoodStyles Workshop. Given South Africa’s strict immigration policies, the accents of professionals from elsewhere in Africa convey prestige in academic and business settings, pointing to the significant effort employers made to hire them. These varied ways of speaking thus framed the ways participants’ contributions were construed, reflecting speakers’ statuses in the company and society. They also shaped the forms of mediatized language to which speakers were held responsible and the credibility with which they might voice potential “solutions.”

**Business Ethics in Johannesburg: The Language of Purpose**

At the start of the FoodStyles workshop in 2018, the head of the Alimentation Sciences Department addressed participants by video, expressing his regret at being unable to attend. After acknowledging that many Bayloners present might not know exactly what the Alimentation Revolution was, he assured them that they were taking part in this important mission simply by trying to understand people’s eating habits in order to “use that to be more relevant for the people we are serving every day.” He thus established the workshop’s aims in the register of alimentation: to use on the researcher’s findings on the cultural significance of eating practices in South Africa to inspire “solutions” to make Baylone’s products and brands more relevant, thus adding economic value to the company.

Aside from these opening remarks, the language of alimentation was almost entirely absent during the two-day event. Instead, Baylone’s ethical aims were
expressed in terms of “purpose.” The language of purpose is not specific to Baylone; rather, it is part of a broader international business vernacular that became fashionable in recent years with the growth of a marketing model that promised to “put humanity back into business” (Reiman 2012) by reorienting brands, companies, and marketing from “product-driven to purpose-driven” (Tate 2015). The notion of “purpose” alone does not specify any ethical ambition but merely suggests that a company is, or ought to be, driven by objectives greater than profit.

At Baylone Southern Africa, employees used the language of purpose to link branch activities to company-wide ethical ambitions. On the website for Baylone Southern Africa, a page titled “Our Purpose & Values” highlighted the multinational’s stated mission of “Bringing health through food to as many people as possible.” At the FoodStyles workshop, Baylone employees made regular reference to the importance that its brands be driven by “purpose.” And a presentation on “purpose-driven” marketing was delivered by an outside consultant who had been working with a team at Baylone to reposition one of its brands.

The consultant encouraged Bayloners to use the FoodStyles data to develop “solutions” in which the brand’s ethical purpose transcends the goal of selling a product, such that they do not appear to encourage consumption at all, but rather appear to invite people to “take a pledge” and join a “community.” She explained that purpose allows brands to create an emotional connection with consumers, aligning with their belief systems, unlike campaigns that try to use ethical issues to create “sexy” advertisements that lack “authenticity.” Like the register of alimentation, the consultant’s message of purpose encouraged Bayloners to use ethics to give legitimacy to the act of consumption, making their brands and products more relevant, that is, authentic, to consumers in South Africa.

Resonant with widely held perceptions that morality exists separate from, if not in opposition to, economics (Brown 2009), Baylone’s discourses of the company’s “dual” project reinforce the idea that the “social” and “business” are distinct ambitions that require active work to combine. In practice, this means that the mediatized language for which employees are paid requires Bayloners to combine “social” and “business” registers, creating what Gal has called “graftings.” Gal argues that in these combinations of speech registers, “linguistic, social, and material practices that are indexical of existing authoritative personae and organizations . . . in one arena . . . provide the sap (authority) for the graftings (practices) added to them from another arena” (2018, 4).

The register of alimentation makes clear that it is the “social” that renders Baylone’s economic activities relevant, providing the “sap” (authority) for their
business goals (Gal 2018, 4). This was similarly the case in the consultant’s description of “purpose-driven” marketing. But other in iterations of the language of purpose at Baylone Southern Africa, it was less clear which ambition—social or business—lends authority to which. The following section examines three examples of the ways speakers in South Africa took up the FoodStyles data, drawing attention to subtle differences in employees’ use of moral registers which reveal key distinctions in their approaches to combining ethics and economics.

“Key Learnings”: Grafting Ethics and Economics

In South Africa, the ethnographer’s findings centered on how inequalities of race, class, and gender shape eating. She gave an insightful presentation on the ways single mothers describe using food to compensate for material deficiencies, such as purchasing chocolate for their children because they could not afford the new sneakers or clothing items the children desired. She also showed that food is a means through which people of color strive for social mobility, while white South Africans use it to illustrate their solidarity with disadvantaged populations, through expressions of self-consciousness about practices associated with privilege, like vegetarianism (see Yount-André and Zembe, forthcoming).

Her findings resonated with Baylone’s South African employees, one of whom thanked the researcher, saying, “You’ve liberated me!” Her presentations were followed by animated discussion, and Baylone employees professed to have experienced many “wow moments.” When the time came to brainstorm business ideas, however, Baylone employees struggled to grapple with the researcher’s reflections on inequality. The moderator noted that some of what they had heard was a little “gloomy,” and most of the proposed “solutions” centered on details in the presentation on yogurt’s gender- and age-specific associations.

Tracing three examples of interdiscursivity from the emic values the ethnographer presented to the “solutions” that Bayloners proposed draws attention to how employees’ positions at the company shaped the ways they combined moral registers with business vernacular. Examining these graftings reveals speakers’ assumptions about how ethics and economic can or should mutually inform one another in the corporate context. These metasemiotic frames, in turn, shape the innovations proposed and the more general uptake of Baylone’s ethical aims at the branch level.

Example 1: Masamnandi Heritage Day Packaging

One innovation inspired by the FoodStyles study took the form of limited-edition packaging for the product Masamnandi in celebration of South Africa’s
annual “Heritage Day.” Masamnandi is Baylone’s brand of maas or amasi: a sour-milk product, also sold by smaller, regional brands, which some people prepare at home, especially in rural areas. The product, consumed predominantly by lower-class Black South Africans, is considered stereotypically African. In recent years, Masamnandi has lost market share, becoming a liability in the company’s portfolio. Prior to the FoodStyles presentation, employees in Johannesburg had been working to reposition the brand and expand its customer base by highlighting positive associations with African heritage and mitigating the product’s link to poverty, a goal they summarized as needing to “modernize tradition” relative to Masamnandi.

The Masamnandi team found inspiration in the ethnographer’s observations that individuals view foods as positioning them in hierarchies of race and class. One Bayloner found a quote the ethnographer highlighted to be particularly illustrative: a Black man from Cape Town explained that he does not like sushi, but he “would like to like it,” because when eating it, one’s Blackness would “be numbed . . . it won’t be visible.” The employee wrote that one of her “key learnings” was that “Masamnandi makes my blackness visible,” to which she proposed “modernizing the artwork on the package.” In stating what she learned, this Bayloner established a linguistic parallel between the man’s sentiment and issues she struggled with regarding the brand she was paid to promote. Transforming her observation into a “solution,” she drew on the terms of marketing, proposing a solution within her skill set that fulfilled the forms of commodified communication for which she was responsible.

The Heritage Day packaging featured the brand’s brown cow logo on a geometric pattern like those of African fabrics, in bright red, yellow, green, and black, replacing the usual packaging’s pale yellow and brown color palate, reminiscent of the 1980s. The Heritage Day packaging was endorsed on Instagram by a popular South African musician known for performing in Zulu regalia. His followers commented that he was a “true African,” and noted that it was “perfect brand alignment.” Other Instagram users shared photos of themselves holding the colorful new package, wishing their followers a happy Heritage Day.

Baylone employees characterized this “solution” as contributing to the company’s social objective of attending to cultural identities, promoting the Heritage Day packaging as a celebration of African culture, aimed at encouraging the consumption of this often-denigrated food. John and Jean Comaroff note that commodification of cultural products and practices has become an increasingly common means by which corporations attempt to position themselves as morally responsible and culturally sensitive (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).
Baylone’s terms, this packaging change was grouped alongside more ambitious social initiatives as “solutions,” capacious language that obscures the question of “solution for whom?”

Example 2: “Walk the Talk”

One proposed solution that grappled directly with the researchers’ arguments about inequality was voiced by the external consultant who had spoken earlier that day on purpose-driven marketing. After brainstorming with the Baylone team, she had been consulting on the Nutridrink brand, and she presented the group’s idea in the following exchange:

Consultant:5 So we have a provocative one, are we up for it? OK, so we’ve been talking a lot about Nutridrink today and about purpose brands. One of the biggest, I think, insights for all of us over the last two days was the inequality of single motherhood. And you know that there’s a pay gap in South Africa. So we were saying, as part of our repositioning for Nutridrink we are trying to empower women in South Africa, and build remarkable communities and show women how they are pushing the nation forward, so::: we thought, how about, as Baylone, we walk the talk (1.1) and we put our money where our mouth is and we say that we are going to close any pay gap that exists across Baylone, across our entire value chain . . .

Audience: [applause, tittering, laughter] Whoo!

Consultant: Between men and women in the same role, anywhere in Baylone South Africa, across our value chain, we commit to closing that gap.

Female voice: Yeah, yeah!

Male voice: How about single dads?

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5. Transcription conventions are as follows: “:” indicates that the sound immediately preceding has been noticeably lengthened; “(0.0)” indicates a pause measured in seconds and milliseconds.
In suggesting that Baylone close the pay gap across its value chain, the consultant put forth an intentionally provocative suggestion. Indeed, she explicitly characterized it as such. Pausing dramatically after suggesting that the company "walk the talk," she drew attention to the possibility that, for all its talk of ethical ambitions, Baylone could fail to enact any real change. Using the inclusive pronouns "we" and "our," she positioned herself as part of Baylone’s team in order to challenge the company to put its “money where [its] mouth is.” But as an external consultant, she ran none of the risks a Baylone employee might in making such a suggestion, which was effectively a call to action aimed at managers much higher than her pay grade. Hired to guide the company in purpose-driven marketing, she made a daring suggestion that was particularly “on brand,” an example of precisely the sort of mediatized language she was there to develop.

Her suggestion appeared to provoke the desired response, inciting an audible response much louder than the previous presentations. Bayloners cheered, laughed, asked questions, applauded, and cracked jokes, unsure how seriously to take the suggestion. The interaction closed with a Bayloner asking how they might carry out the idea, to which the consultant responded by deferring to a marketing manager. After the FoodStyles workshop, however, the idea failed to gain the traction necessary to be taken up by those positioned to bring it to fruition, and the consultant’s suggestion ultimately fell by the wayside.

These two examples of proposed “solutions” illustrate how the forms of commodified communication for which speakers were held responsible fundamentally shaped the sorts of suggestions they made. The final example examines subtle differences in speakers’ use of the moral register of “purpose” at Baylone Southern Africa, which draw on and disseminate divergent perspectives of the relationship between the company’s social and business goals.

Example 3: Business at the Branch Level
To speak “Bayloner” requires mixing speech registers associated with ethics and economics to carry out the company’s “dual commitments.” But how one
combines (grafts) these registers varies. This final example of the uptake of the FoodStyles data highlights an iteration of the register of purpose which reverses the grafting relationship proposed in the consultant’s talk of purpose-driven marketing, treating economics as if it legitimizes social initiatives, rather than the other way around.

In an interview with a member of upper management at Baylone’s Southern Africa branch three months after the FoodStyles workshop, the manager’s economic orientation became clear immediately when he preempted my introduction of my research to inquire about my institution’s business model. My explanation that the CIRAD was predominantly funded by the French government, and that individual researchers supplemented this public support with external funding, did not appear to satisfy him. He informed me that even with public funding, it is important to know why the research interested the government.

This manager, a European man who had worked at Baylone for most of his career, having transferred to South Africa two years prior, frequently drew on the language of purpose to describe the changes he had made in Johannesburg. He explained, for example, that in the past, the branch’s vision had been to make yogurt a product consumed daily in South Africa, a goal he described as lacking purpose. He contrasted this to a contemporary declaration, emblazoned on an image called “The Strategy House” which now graced posters and PowerPoint slides at Baylone’s offices and factory in South Africa, that the branch’s “inspired team” creates “meaningful food solutions for a sustainable & healthier future for as many Southern Africans as possible.” “Meaningful,” he specified, “is FoodStyles,” asserting that the ethnographic data made purpose-driven solutions possible.

When asked whether he found the ethnographer’s data on inequalities relevant for Baylone, he responded that “you need to decide as a company . . . how far . . . to address this,” and gave the example of possibly adapting Masamnandi for cooking, having discovered that this is how Indians in South Africa consume it. He then suggested they could offer nutrient-enriched products for sporty consumers, and for those politically active youth he called “wokes,” he proposed a contest to redesign the packaging. For him, “inequality” referred to social differences among consumer groups independent of ethical considerations. The unethical discrimination the ethnographer had highlighted was lost in translation to business vernacular.

The manager’s ideas about how ethics and economics should be combined became clear in an example of a “purpose-driven” initiative to make Baylone products more accessible in townships. He described a pilot project in which
the branch had hired cyclists to deliver small quantities of their products to shops in impoverished areas, explaining that after a year it became clear that it had not been profitable for Baylone, nor the shop owners, nor the cyclists. “If you are going only social,” the manager explained, “probably we would continue, and you lose money . . . but that’s not the way we do it.” Yet, the manager explained, driven by the belief that “our purpose has to be fulfilled . . . these people need health and nutrition,” they were committed to finding another solution. The manager framed this example as working toward Baylone’s social goals by attempting to provide poor populations with “health and nutrition” by making their products more accessible in townships. But they could only work for this goal, he explained, if it was economically advantageous.

In this manager’s version of “purpose,” economics are a condition of possibility for ethical ambition. This position is realistic, in that all forms of corporate ethics ultimately hinge on a company’s continued ability to turn a profit, but it certainly does not foster social commitments that transcend economic goals, as the consultant had encouraged. The manager’s approach to moral initiatives as contingent on economic success reflects his role at the company. Having transferred to Johannesburg to help the branch reverse its recent losses, this manager’s success or failure was measured, for his bosses and employees, by Baylone’s sales in South Africa.

Both the manager and the consultant were speaking in terms of “purpose,” but the two iterations of this concept diverged in key ways. The moral register of purpose voiced by the external consultant treated ethics as lending legitimacy (the sap, in the grafting analogy) to the company’s business efforts (the trunk), whereas the manager emphasized profit as authorizing ethical ambition. This distinction, although easily overlooked in spoken interaction, presumes and entails divergent understandings of Baylone’s “dual purpose.” These divergent understandings, in turn, have a significant impact on the sorts of innovations that may be achieved at the branch level, shaping which initiatives are made possible and which ideas fall by the wayside, or are never voiced at all.

**Conclusion**

Value production, contingent on uptake, depends on political-economic context and on the goals of those who might “buy” what one is “selling,” whether literally or figuratively. Long before a consumer can purchase a new product at the supermarket, employees must sell their ideas to their colleagues and bosses in the repeated acts of mediatized language through which corporations emerge. In this multinational, employees’ efforts to add value to their company or brand
are located at the intersection of multiple potential audiences: bosses, upper management, consumers, and shareholders. Baylone employees are caught in the tensions between the company’s ethical and economic goals, as the CEO’s calls for social justice coexist with pressures from branch managers scrambling to reverse recent losses. Baylone employees in South Africa noted that it was not by chance that the most daring idea at the FoodStyles event came from an external consultant. Branch employees were more hesitant, struggling to guess which “solutions” would please their superiors.

The example of Baylone demonstrates how the international emergence of a Big Food register has triggered parallel moral discourses within the corporate sector. Baylone employees work to develop ethical stances that demonstrate alignment with consumers’ concerns, in efforts to repair material relationships with suspicious consumers. Moral registers in the corporate arena are reconfiguring the material organization of multinationals themselves, and employees’ skillful use of moral language to reflect both business acumen and ethical motivation can provide a means to move up in corporate hierarchies.

The example of Baylone also illustrates how moral registers surrounding food are taken up in multiple ways within the same company. The multiplicity of moral register uptake described in this article reveals Baylone’s ethical ambitions to be the result of struggles between the diverse value projects of employees located in various geographical locations, who occupy vastly different positions in their company and society. This demonstrates that the creation of coherent and credible moral discourses within a global corporation is a formidable challenge. Multinationals’ global reach presents practical challenges to these efforts, particularly as “big” is increasingly construed as an index of unethical business tactics and excess power.

Analysis of the moral language of food within and about corporations reveals transformations currently taking place in global capitalism, as multinational corporations increasingly struggle to grapple with consumers’ moral critiques of industrial food. A far cry from scholars’ findings that capitalism writ large is exceptionally able to incorporate critique, examination of the moral registers that circulate at Baylone demonstrates how consumer criticism is reconfiguring the language and material practices of multinational corporations. The future of ethical discourses surrounding of food is bound up with ongoing enregisterments of critiques of neoliberal capitalism and a parallel search for credibility in the corporate arena. Food, which is directly linked to environmental issues and endowed with culturally specific moral meanings through language, makes these moral struggles particularly palpable, in ways that will likely become increasingly obvious as climate change continues to affect food supplies.
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