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Selling the "Inca superfood": nutritional primitivism in superfoods books and maca marketing

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ABSTRACT

The trend for novel and exotic "superfoods" exemplifies the contemporary tendency to idealize "primitive" food cultures as nutritional utopias. Based on critical textual and visual analysis of superfoods books and packaging, this article shows that "nutritional primitivism" has blossomed in superfoods discourse and marketing since the 1980s, evolving into a knowledge framework for evaluating a food's healthfulness that challenges nutrition science. It demonstrates that nutritional primitivism emerges not only in response to a perceived crisis in Western health, but also social and environmental concerns about globalized and industrialized agri-food systems. However, primitivist representations of superfoods essentialize producers and production practices as traditional and timeless, obscuring their complex and changing reality. While nutritional primitivism can be understood as a popular critique of contemporary food systems and their underlying social structures, these incipient critiques thus fall short on key issues of food sovereignty.

KEYWORDS

Superfoods; maca; primitivism; textual analysis; Peru

Introduction

The trend for novel and exotic "superfoods," such as Andean maca and Amazonian açai, exemplifies the contemporary tendency to idealize "primitive" food cultures as nutritional utopias. A growing body of superfoods literature and marketing material suggests that specific foods associated with ancient or indigenous cultures have extraordinary nutritional properties, beyond those of more mundane "healthy" foods. Key ideas include the innate wisdom of ancient food cultures; that primitive peoples are (or were) "in touch" with their bodily needs; that "traditional" agricultural practices produce inherently healthier foods and environments; and a purported timelessness courtesy of an uninterrupted lineage of indigenous producers. Critics are often quick to dismiss such dietary trends as the result of clever marketing and bad science. However, this pattern deserves critical attention for two reasons. First, the extreme popularity of superfoods, "Paleolithic" diets, low-carbohydrate diets, and related trends indicates widespread dissatisfaction with dominant food production practices and nutrition discourses, worthy of further interrogation. Second, claims about the healthfulness

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and production practices of superfoods are, at best, questionable, and at worst reinforce neocolonial social and economic relations. By examining superfoods discourse, we can understand how primitivism challenges food production norms and hegemonic constructions of scientized nutrition, but also maintains notions of cultural difference and "peripheral" production for "core" consumption (Hughes and Reimer 2004).

Scholars have long explored the "cluster of ideas" known as primitivism (Boas 1974, 577) in other areas of cultural production such as art and literature, but its power in the realm of food and nutrition is an emerging area of study. We draw on and develop the concept of "nutritional primitivism," proposed by Knight in her research on the low-carbohydrate diet movement (2008, 2012a, 2015), to analyse primitivism in popular superfoods books and the marketing of Peruvian maca. Primitivism is characterized by nostalgic longing for a pre-civilized world (Bell 1972, 1), drawing on romantic and idealized representations of past societies and distant cultures to critique modern society. Similarly, nutritional primitivism refers to the promotion of ancient or indigenous foodways as a path to health. Based on critical analysis of books and packaging, we show that nutritional primitivism has blossomed in superfoods discourse and imagery since the 1980s, and consider what this tells us about the anxieties and desires beneath the surface of our food culture. We also consider what can be learned by examining nutritional primitivism in different places, spaces, and contexts.

Superfoods deserve attention because products bearing this label are increasingly widespread in health food shops, supermarkets, and pharmacies, yet are poorly understood by the public and regulators alike. The term "superfood" appears prominently in marketing, including food packaging, and the media—which frequently present tentative scientific conclusions, and studies funded by economically interested parties, as fact (Weitkamp and Eidsvaag 2014). Despite its ubiquity, the term defies precise definition; "superfood" is not a legal or regulatory category like "organic" or "fair trade," nor widely used by scholarly convention like "functional food." While no existing scholarship offers a succinct definition, Scrinis (2013) considers superfoods a sub-category of functional foods because they are marketed for health benefits.[1] Mellentin (2014) describes superfoods as "naturally functional," a category increasing in economic value. Likewise, we understand superfoods as a marketing category and discursive device rather than self-evident group of foods.[2] We contend that superfoods differ in their discursive construction from functional foods by emphasizing their "natural" nutrient densities alongside "traditional" and "exotic" qualities, and thus demand separate analysis. Here we consider how superfoods' representation as "natural," "traditional," and "exotic" draws upon a discourse of nutritional primitivism, and how this intersects with other knowledge and value claims about superfoods.

First, we discuss the features of primitivism identified in previous scholarship, notably its self-reflective nature, such that each instance of primitivism functions as a critique of contemporary society. Through analysis of superfoods books and packaging, we then show that nutritional primitivism responds not only to a perceived crisis in contemporary Western health, but also a broader sense of crisis relating to globalized and industrialized food production, and ensuing consumer alienation. We argue that nutritional primitivism is more than a marketing tool: it offers a critique, however flawed, of contemporary foodways and their underlying social structures, and operates as a knowledge framework defining "good" and "healthy" food choices that challenges

scientific models. Further, our analysis reveals a marked growth in nutritional primitivism since the first superfoods book appeared in 1987, as well as shifts in how nutritional primitivism relates to nutrition science and ethical consumption discourses. Finally, we explore possible reasons for, and ethico-political implications of, the primitivist turn.

Primitivism forms one strand within the history of Western representations of the Other in colonial and neo-colonial discourse (Said 1978). Thus scholars have been concerned not just with primitivism as social critique, but also with the harmful effects of its inaccuracies on "primitive" people and cultures. Here we contrast textual analysis with ethnography and other accounts of maca production, finding that romantic primitivist depictions of superfoods conflict with actual production practices and producers' lives. We suggest that these discrepancies result from primitivism's binary structure, through which superfoods and their production are collectively cast in opposition to "mainstream" agri-food, despite enormous variations in practice and products in both systems. We discuss implications of this tendency to idealize and conflate spatially, temporally, and culturally distant foods and foodways, and finally consider how researchers might intervene in the politics of representation, arguing that primary producers should have a voice in global representations of superfoods.

Nutritional primitivism and food studies

The "cluster of ideas" known as primitivism (Boas 1974, 577) is the subject of scholarship dating back at least a century, spanning the history of ideas, art history, classics, and literary studies (eg, Boas 1948; Fairchild 1928; Goldwater 1938; Levin 1969; Lovejoy and Boas 1935; Runge 1946; Whitney 1934). Profoundly nostalgic, primitivism treats civilization as a process of degeneration and decline; the primitivist is—by definition—deeply dissatisfied with the contemporary state of humanity and the world. Primitivism thus tends to surface in "disaffected times," or "unsettled and uneasy times" (Adams 1998, 110, 111). For example, the primitivist resurgence in the 1910s and 1920s in modernist art and literature, and intellectual thought, may be attributed to "a sense of despair and anxiety caused by World War I, which made people ask the vexed question of how and why the West had taken the wrong path" (Torgovnick 1997, 10). As Bell writes, "primitivism denotes, or arises from, a sense of crisis in civilization" (1972, 80).

Primitivist discontent expresses itself via a symbolic contrast between modern civilized life and a putative primitive ideal, using idealized images of primitive life as a discursive vehicle to criticize contemporary society. As Torgovnick explains:

> Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as different from (usually opposite to) the present. After that, reactions to the present take over. Is the present too materialistic? Primitive life is not—it is a precapitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value, prevails. Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life—primitives live life whole, without fear of the body. . .. In each case, the needs of the present determine the nature and value of the primitive. (1990, 8–9)

By examining the specific form that primitivism takes in a given text, we may therefore illuminate the cultural moment in which it was produced: "[w]hen versions of the

primitive show specific historical and cultural variations, they expose different aspects of the West itself" (Torgovnick 1990, 193).

Primitivism thus takes little interest in accurately representing any particular human society. Rather, primitivism draws on "a vast, generalized image, an aggregate of places, things, and experiences associated with various groups and peoples: Africa, the Amazon, or the American Southwest" (Torgovnick 1997, 4). The term primitive refers to contemporary Indigenous peoples, but also "the eons of prehistoric human experience … as well [as] societies such as the Aztecs, with highly developed but now mysterious or exotic-seeming ancient histories" (Torgovnick 1997, 4). As an expression of radical discontent with modern Western life, primitivism incorporates both temporal and racial elements, seeking that which is *not* modern, *not* Western, but uncivilized, exotic, or both (Bonnett 2000, 78–80).

Finally, at particular sociohistorical moments, the category of the primitive exhibits slippage or "seepage" to other value-laden categories based on gender, race, class, or sexuality (Torgovnick 1990, 192–193). Boas (1974) notes, for example, the slippage between the Noble Savage and the Peasant (595)—importantly for this paper. These slippages between Noble Savage and Peasant, between the primitive and the ethnoracial Other, explain why primitivism appeals to a broad and generalized range of primitive and quasi-primitive nutritional ideals, as witnessed in the low-carbohydrate diet movement (Knight 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b, 2015). In low-carbohydrate diet books, natural foods, Asian and Mediterranean culinary traditions, and the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer diet (amongst others) are all defined in opposition to the "modern Western diet," symbolized by refined carbohydrates. Similarly, superfoods texts decontextualize and conflate foods from different times, places, and cultures.

Contemporary critical scholarship on primitivism (notably Torgovnick's two books) has examined cultural products, texts, and practices across anthropology, art, psychology, literature, film, and popular culture. However, direct engagement by food scholars with the critical literature on primitivism is limited. Knight explores primitivist themes and features of low-carbohydrate literature and discourse, critiquing their factual basis, logic, and racist implications. These features include the movement's reliance on evolutionary and genetic arguments (2011a); its use (and abuse) of nutritional anthropology and nutrition research with Indigenous peoples (2012a); broader themes of sociocultural and culinary nostalgia, and promotion of non-Western, "ethnic" foodways (2011b); and moralized rhetoric in relation to "nature" and "natural" food (2012b). Most recently (2015), Knight argues that the discursive features she has critiqued in the low-carbohydrate movement may be grouped under the rubric of "nutritional primitivism," defined as "the pursuit of supposedly simpler, more natural and more authentic ways of eating as part of a quest for health" (2012a, 289). Nutritional primitivism emerges in the low-carbohydrate movement in response to the perceived crisis in Western health represented by the obesity "epidemic," blaming that crisis on the "modern Western diet" replete with refined carbohydrates. Likewise, Shapin (2004) critiques Atkins's "primitive dietetics," arguing that low-carbohydrate diets draw their nutritional logic from a denunciation of late modern civilization. Mouton (2001) also notes the tendency of recent low-carbohydrate diet books to "make nutritional claims based on cross-cultural comparisons or nutritional anthropology," along with the Eurocentric and racist hierarchy on which much low-carbohydrate logic depends.

Our study of primitivism in superfoods discourse may be contrasted with this previous work on low-carbohydrate diets, illuminating shifting cultural concerns about food and nutrition.

Nutritional primitivism may be distinguished from other contemporary ways of thinking about and approaching food, notably "Culinary Luddism" (Laudan 1999, 2001) and "food adventuring" (Heldke 2003), although these certainly overlap with the primitivist "cluster of ideas" (Boas 1974, 577). For instance, Laudan's now-classic critique of "Culinary Luddism"—the backlash "against the foods of modern industrial societies" (1999, para 1)—highlights the inaccuracies of Culinary Luddites' romanticized version of food history. However, Laudan is concerned with nostalgia for relatively recent post-agricultural culinary traditions, often (although not always) Euroamerican—whereas nutritional primitivism hungers especially for the Stone-Age hunter-gatherer era. Moreover, nutritional primitivism looks towards temporally *and* spatially distant food cultures, often conflating the two. Similar differences exist between nutritional primitivism and Heldke's concept of "food adventuring": the "penchant" of white Euroamericans "for cooking and eating ethnic foods—most frequently and most notably the foods of economically dominated or 'third world' cultures" (2003, xv). In food adventuring, ethnic cuisines are celebrated as "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (Hooks 1992, 21), providing a safe, sanitized, and touristic "little taste of something more exotic" (May 1996, 61). Like Laudan's Culinary Luddites, Heldke's food adventurers have much in common with nutritional primitivists, especially in their "deep desire to have contact with, and to somehow own an experience of, an Exotic Other" (Heldke 2003, xvi). However, Heldke, like Laudan, is interested in Westerners' desire to experience relatively recent (ethnic) culinary traditions, rather than the primitive.

Further, in nutritional primitivism, foodways that are *not* modern and *not* Western are linked to health claims, not (just) gastronomic taste. Nutrition is not explicit in food adventuring. Laudan briefly discusses the health benefits Culinary Luddism attributes to the pre-industrial diet, "debunking" the idea that traditional foodways were healthier:

> No amount of nostalgia for the pastoral foods of the distant past can wish away the fact that our ancestors lived mean, short lives, constantly afflicted with diseases, many of which can be directly attributed to what they did and did not eat. (Laudan 2001, 40–41)

In addition to factual accuracy, we are concerned with the discursive features, internal logic, and ethico-political implications of nutritional primitivism. By analysing the superfoods trend, we show that primitivism emerges in contemporary food culture not just in response to the obesity epidemic and related health challenges, but also wider concerns about globalized and industrialized foodways, which the low-carbohydrate literature hints at but never fully explores (Knight 2012a).

Using a nutritional primitivist framing, we argue that the concept of superfoods works discursively to critique large-scale, technologically complex, chemically dependent, and ostensibly placeless modern food production practices on nutritional, socio-economic, and environmental grounds. Further, it pushes back against reductionist nutrition-science understandings of food and health by advancing nutritional primitivism as an alternative knowledge framework for evaluating a food's healthfulness. Superfoods discourse rejects the premise by which formulated functional foods and

dietary supplements are presented as "healthy," instead promoting superfoods as a "natural" source of vital nutrients. However, nutritional primitivism in superfoods discourse entails explicit Othering of food producers, as the framing relies on representations of timeless production practices in utopian settings. By favouring images of "traditional" production, superfoods discourse avoids the variety and complexity of producers and production practices. It thus entails a kind of commodity racism, reinforcing neocolonial social relations by temporally distancing "primitive" producers from modern Western consumers.

Methods

Superfoods are constructed as a distinctive group of commodities, associated with a distinctive discourse about food, health, and values. Our methodology is mindful of this duality, incorporating critical textual and visual analysis (Belsey 2005; Griffin 2011; Rose 2005) of superfoods books and packaging, each enabling us to ask different questions.

We selected four books for analysis: *The Superfoods Diet Guide* (Editors of Prevention Magazine 1987); *Superfoods* (Van Straten and Griggs 1990); *Superfoods: The Food and Medicine of the Future* (Wolfe 2009); and *Superfood Kitchen* (Morris 2012). At the time of sampling (2014), Wolfe (2009) and Morris (2012) were the two highest selling books in the superfoods category; at the time of writing (2017), they remain at fifth and sixth respectively.[3] We compared these recent bestsellers with the two earliest superfoods books (Van Straten and Griggs 1990; Editors of Prevention Magazine 1987), in order to identify discursive changes since the first book explicitly about superfoods appeared (1987). We do not claim these books are wholly representative of the genre, but their ideas have undoubtedly been widely disseminated. The theoretical framework for our analysis was a postcolonial critique of the primitive ideal, through which we explore how representations of primitive foodways function in popular nutrition culture.

Books are just one way that ideas about superfoods develop and spread. Thus we use analysis of books to frame a case study examining the way one product, the Peruvian root maca, is represented through packaging. Superfood products tend to be presented with information on their origins, production, and health benefits. Images and words on packaging can be discursively analysed to reveal the complex and (often) contradictory ways in which products are represented (Craw 2012; Kniazeva and Belk 2007). We focus on the packaging of Power Super Foods maca powder, an Australian brand available in health food shops and supermarkets. As well as being widely available, Power Super Foods packaging uses strong imagery, enabling us to consider both visual and textual representation. We focus on maca because, as a relatively new product in Australia, it entered the Australian market explicitly positioned as a superfood, thus requiring a great deal of knowledge construction by producers, distributors, retailers, and marketers. The Australian market is in many ways exemplary of developed countries: a wide variety of both domestic and imported foods are widely available and financially accessible to many consumers, and foods marketed for health benefits are a rapidly growing category.

This paper is based primarily on critical analysis of superfoods representations, but is supported by data from ethnographic research with maca producers in the Junín-Pasco region, Peruvian central Andes, conducted by Loyer during the 2014 August–September harvest season. This fieldwork formed part of a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) of global superfoods production and consumption, conducted as part of Loyer's (2016a) doctoral research. We also draw upon other scholarly accounts of maca production, most notably Hermann and Bernet's (2009) extended study of its history and political economy in Peru. Following Torgovnick (1990, 20), we adopt a methodology that recognizes both the impossibility that "primitive" societies could be "represented and conceived with disinterested objectivity and accuracy," but also "the reality and multiplicity" of those people and societies (mis)represented in superfoods texts. We therefore draw attention to misconceptions and factual errors in our primary source material, because of the impact that such inaccuracies may have on producers and communities.

Superfoods books and the rise of nutritional primitivism

All the superfoods books we examined deploy nutritional primitivism, demonstrating that nutritional primitivism has been intrinsic to superfoods discourse since its inception. Over time, nutritional primitivism emerges as a knowledge framework in its own right, complementing scientific discourses about superfoods' nutritional value. Moreover (and in line with previous scholarship on primitivism), more recent superfoods books use representations of the primitive past to critique modern industrialized foodways—nutritionally, economically, and environmentally.

The two earlier books we examined emphasize the scientifically proven health benefits of familiar unprocessed foods (such as beans, garlic, oysters, and almonds), even when they also mention links with primitive people. For example, several passages in *Superfoods* (Van Straten and Griggs 1990) refer to foods used as medicines by ancient civilizations (such as "daily doses of garlic" given to "slaves who toiled to build the pyramids" to "keep them disease-free at work" [1990, 8])—but such references are immediately followed with evidence from modern nutrition science that gives "scientific validation to the instinctive wisdom of traditional medicine" (ibid.) (here, by verifying garlic's antiseptic properties). Similarly, *The Superfoods Diet Guide* (Editors of Prevention Magazine 1987) opens with an invocation of "healthy people like the Eskimos" to promote a diet of "foods fresh from the supermarket and produce stands"—but then defends this diet with "evidence from the laboratory" (1).[4] Beans, for example, are recommended because of their scientifically proven nutrient content: "high in magnesium, a good heart mineral, and the B vitamins thiamine, B6 and riboflavin" (2). Thus traditional knowledge is mentioned in a brief, cursory manner before detailed explanations of scientifically measured nutritional benefits. Scientific knowledge is constructed as more valid than traditional knowledge, via a discursive hierarchy in which traditional knowledge is only acknowledged as inspiration for scientific investigations. In these early superfoods books, primitivism thus functions as a platform for nutrition science, rather than a framework in its own right for understanding the healthfulness of foods.

The superfoods books published more recently differ in two ways: they promote foods that were not well known among Western consumers before being introduced to

the market as superfoods; and they employ nutritional primitivism as a knowledge framework. Wolfe (2009) includes novel foods such as goji berries, maca, and spirulina among his top ten superfoods; Morris's (2012) "specialty superfoods" include açai berries, chia seeds, maca, and quinoa. By privileging these "most potent, super-concentrated, and nutrient-rich foods on the planet" (Wolfe 2009, 2) over more familiar and mundane healthy foods, these authors fetishize the (food) culture of ancient or indigenous peoples; for example, 10 out of 21 of Morris's "specialty superfoods" are Latin American, far more than any other region. Likewise, Wolfe argues that such foods "help to guide us towards a more natural and aboriginal diet" (2009, 3), implicitly suggesting this is better than a Western diet.

Like much primitivist discourse, invocations of the past serve implicitly to critique the present. Past civilizations, Morris claims, ate "simpler, more natural diets"; had no need for "fancy scientific testing and medical reviews"; and knew what to eat "by simply listening to their bodies" (2012, 6). By implication, today our diets are too complex and processed; we are preoccupied with nutrition science; and are alienated from our bodies. Morris extends this critique by prioritizing "historical use" as the primary defining feature of superfoods in her chapter "What is a superfood?" (2012, 5–9), and her description of each "specialty superfood" (2012, 20–38). Although she later discusses concepts such as "functional food," "preventative medicine," and "nutrient density," it is their traditional use that delimits which foods are superfoods. Similarly, Wolfe begins each chapter with an extensive discussion of "history, facts, and legends" before elaborating on the food's nutritional benefits. In these recent superfoods books, primitivism serves as an alternative framework for knowledge about food and health, not based on scientific evidence, but because it has been passed down through generations and carries an aura of tradition and authenticity that connects modern consumers to an idealized past. This does not mean that these books ignore nutrition science: both present detailed information about the scientifically proven health benefits of various superfoods once they have established the prerequisite of historical use. Nutritional primitivism does not displace nutrition science: rather, the two complement each other and serve to doubly verify superfoods' healthfulness.

By treating nutritional primitivism as a knowledge framework, recent superfoods discourse challenges the idea that science is the highest arbiter of truth: nutrition science can offer only a partial view of the complex relationship between food and the body. Wolfe observes that "what we understand about nutrition by listing vitamins, minerals, protein, fats, and carbohydrates on the sides of packages does not give us a complete picture" (2009, 4). He suggests eating superfoods as a solution to the incomplete knowledge of nutrition science because they are natural, "provid[ing] an abundance of synergistic elements in their natural state that work together in the human body in ways that scientists have not yet begun to fully comprehend" (2009, 3). By privileging naturally nutrient-dense foods, rather than foods that have been (bio-)fortified to improve their nutrient content, superfoods discourse also critiques industrial food production, in particular functional foods and supplements. As Wolfe suggests, "superfoods help you [improve health] without having to take dead vitamin and mineral supplements" (2009, 3).

Primitivism is also employed in the more recent superfoods books to indict modern food production. Morris argues that we need "ancient" superfoods because "efforts to increase food production have resulted in natural food that is less nourishing," but

"most superfoods have not been subjected to this methodology, as they have never been popularized by Big Agriculture" (2012, 14). Following this logic, superfoods are made "super" by their symbolic distance from the shadowy spectre of "Big Agriculture." Similarly, Wolfe argues that "because superfoods have a high level of inner vitality and life-force energy, they can be grown organically without chemicals or artificial fertilizers" (2009, 4–5). While Morris never precisely defines the problems with "Big Agriculture," her use of a binary pitting modern against primitive hints at her critique: modern foods are produced by large corporate entities using intensive methods; primitive foods are produced by small independent farmers using traditional methods. She values the latter for their nourishing qualities, products of their temporal and spatial distance from the harmful modern agri-food system.

Marketing maca: representing indigenous labour in superfoods production

The above analysis provides context for a detailed exploration of the contemporary representation and marketing of maca. In the product packaging case study below, imagery and text communicate a sense of maca production in a timeless place by timeless people. As in superfoods books, superfoods marketing seizes upon distrust of modern food production practices, dissatisfaction with highly scientized views of food and health, and nostalgic longing for a simpler time or place. These features exemplify nutritional primitivism, and expand our understanding of its contemporary variations. Drawing on Loyer's fieldwork and other accounts of maca production, we also show that this representation is inaccurate and potentially harmful, constructing maca producers as distant Others and denying them presence in intersubjective space and time (Loyer 2016b).

Power Super Foods maca powder is part of the company's superfoods product range, more than half of which are Latin American. All these products use similarly colorful and evocative visual styles in their packaging, depicting indigenous women engaged in manual agricultural techniques. Dried and powdered maca root is sold in brightly colored plastic packaging featuring an artistic image of indigenous women plucking turnip-shaped vegetables from tan earth and placing them in woven baskets (see Figure 1). The women—uniformly plump, dark-skinned, black-braided, felt-hatted, and traditionally dressed in Andean skirts and *mantas* (shawls)—labor against a serene backdrop of snow-capped peaks and blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds. The image is stylized and does not purport to document accurately the practices, people, and places of maca production. Rather, it adopts the aesthetic of Andean painting, and therefore reads, on one level, as a celebration of the vibrancy of Andean cultural traditions.

However, the image resonates in the Australian consumer market in no small part because of the pervasive representation of the South American primitive in Western culture during the twentieth century (Berkhofer 1979; Torgovnick 1990, 1997), augmented by recent growth in Andean tourism and consequent cultural familiarity (Babb 2010; Baud and Ypeij 2009). Thus it communicates particular ideas about why Australian consumers should value maca—produced in a pristine environment using manual methods, by people with a historically grounded cultural identity. The depiction of women is significant: pictures "of women sporting 'traditional' skirts and long braids [are] a common image of Andean indigeneity" (McDonell 2015, 80). Contemporary

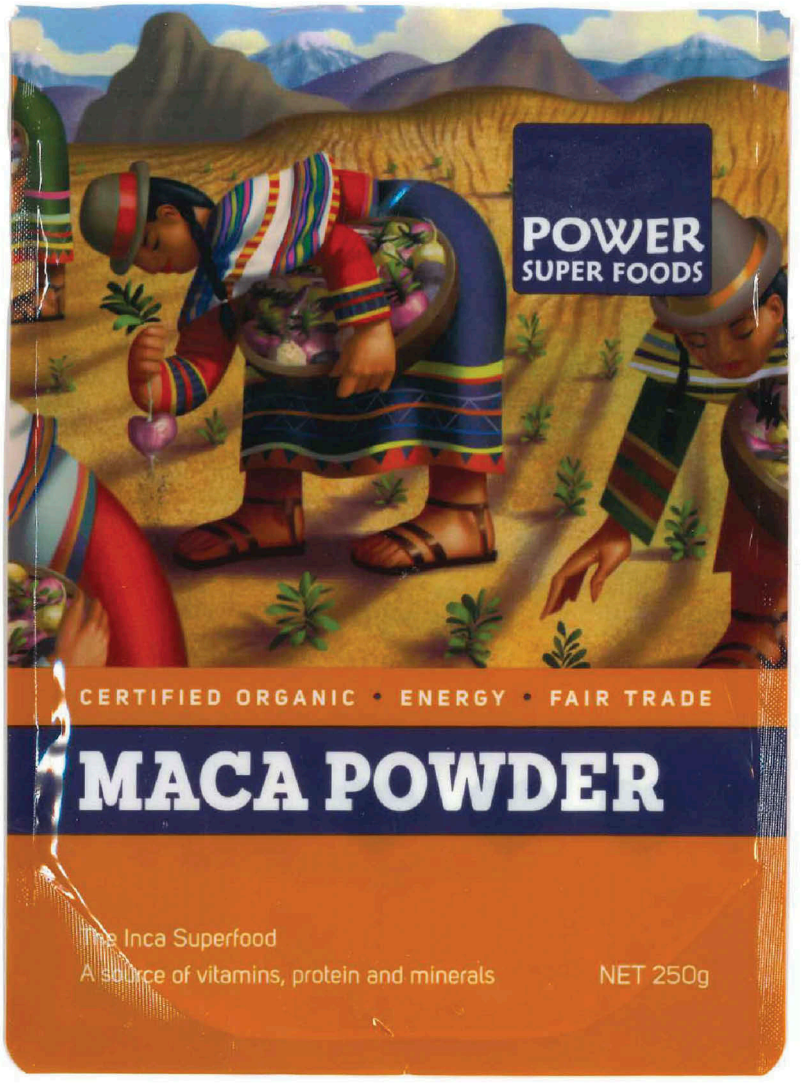

Figure 1. Power Super Foods maca powder packaging. Photo © Jessica Loyer.

Andean society perceives women as "more indigenous" through the intersection of ethnic and gender hierarchies, enforced by greater urban mobility among men and higher cultural value placed upon physical (male) labor (de la Cadena 1995). Women's physical proximity to countryside, and cultural proximity to tradition, place them below men in Andean hierarchies. However, this externally oriented image inverts the hierarchy, with women signifying the virtue of connection to land and tradition.

Although not explicit in the packaging here, a significant aspect of maca marketing is its folklorically based association with reproductive and sexual functioning. Since the early 1990s, maca has frequently been marketed online as a natural libido booster,

fertility enhancer, and hormone regulator for both sexes, and many scientific studies have investigated maca's effect on reproductive and sexual health (Hermann and Bernet 2009). Power Super Foods avoids specific claims, but text on the back of the packaging cites the Peruvian "belief" that maca is "a powerful enhancer of well-being and vigor," while the front of the package promises "energy." This language—especially the suggestive word "vigor"—subtly positions maca as a source of sexual potency, supposedly possessed by primitive populations yet elusive to modern man (Torgovnick 1997, 14–15). Simultaneously, the stylized image of indigenous women harvesting maca gestures toward primitivist discourses linking femininity, fertility, motherhood, and the earth.

As noted, primitivism is self-reflective, using idealized images of primitive life to criticize contemporary society. The image thus suggests implicitly that modern food production is conducted in a polluted environment, using mechanical methods, by people with little cultural connection to their land or labor. The image is powerful in the Australian market because it taps into growing distrust of the food system (Meyer et al. 2012), as well as dissatisfaction with increasing concentration in the agricultural sector and the decline of the family farm (Cockfield and Botterill 2012). Australians also share widespread concerns globally about environmental degradation caused by intensive food production (Kriflik and Yeatman 2005).

However, the contrast between the packaging image and contemporary production practices indicates the inappropriateness of the primitivist binary, and raises questions about how such representations may affect producers (discussed further below). The image contrasts with production practices observed during Loyer's fieldwork and described in other scholarly accounts (Brinckmann and Smith 2004; CEDEP 2010; Hermann and Bernet 2009; Loyer 2016b, 2016c). In reality, harvest workers include men and women of all ages. Although some women wear traditional skirts, shawls, and hats, they are more likely to wear jeans and jumpers. Harvesting is not conducted entirely manually, but with the aid of small hand tools. Maca is collected in plastic sacks, not woven baskets. Machinery is used—such as tractors that turn over the earth prior to planting—and modern agricultural science is employed to develop more efficient production practices. Junín, the regional center of production, is indeed situated within an austerely beautiful alpine landscape; however, it is not an empty pastoral paradise but a rapidly urbanizing town, struggling to keep up with a huge and sudden agricultural and commercial boom and unequally distributed infusion of capital. Rather than the egalitarianism suggested in the stylized image of uniform workers, maca production involves stratified layers of seasonal workers earning minimum wage; farmers growing maca at vastly differing scales; landowners from whom producers obtain more or less favorable rental agreements; processors and exporters largely based in urban centers; and international agents competing for access to the maca supply. Even those growers lucky enough to own sufficient suitable land must contend with unpredictable economic cycles and climatic conditions. By favoring stylized imagery emphasizing "traditional" production practices, pristine landscapes, and stereotypical gender roles over more realistic and complex depictions, the packaging distances Western consumers from Andean maca producers, locating the latter firmly in a romanticized past.

Below the image, prominent text declaring maca "the Inca superfood" also contributes to primitivist representation through association with the legendary Inca—even though maca was domesticated by the Pumpish people long before the Inca reign, and there is no evidence outside legend that the Inca ever cultivated or consumed it (Hermann and Bernet 2009). Yet reference to the Inca warrior is powerful, and—in conjunction with the idealized depiction of maca production—creates a sense of historical continuity. Maca production is depicted as timeless—something done today as it has always been done, by people who look as they have always looked. The reasons Australian consumers should value maca, in this representation, have less to do with what maca is than what it is not—namely, modern. Production is depicted in a natural setting, using manual methods; therefore maca is not reliant on mechanized, chemically dependent "Big Agriculture." Maca is healthy because it is "the Inca superfood"—not because of scientific evidence. And it is the product of a purportedly simpler place, where people wear traditional clothing and do things the old-fashioned way—not the complex modern world.

Finally, a discourse of critical consumption, "a way of participating that renders consumption behaviour conscientious and diligent, over a multitude of political and ethical agendas" (Yates 2011, 192), now intersects with nutritional primitivism in superfoods books and packaging. Wolfe cites environmental benefits, suggesting that "superfoods are not only great for you, they also help the planet, because their consumption encourages organic agriculture and appropriate use of farmland" (2009, 4–5). Morris constructs superfood consumption as ethical, arguing that purchase of fairly traded goods benefits "our global neighbors" and "often strengthens struggling farming communities, providing stable income for women and families" (2012, 227). The maca packaging carries labels certifying it as "organic" and "fair trade," the assumption being that organic production is environmentally benign and fair trade is socially equitable. This logic portrays superfood production as an ethical alternative to mainstream food production, with its associated social and environmental problems, ignoring the varied practices across different production networks. It also casts consumers as political agents with the ability—and responsibility—to change the food system by changing their spending habits (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007). Morris, especially, issues a strong call to action, encouraging her readers to purchase superfoods "to send a monetary message to the companies who use chemicals at the expense of public health" (2012, 13).

Nutritional primitivism as knowledge framework, cultural critique, and commodity racism

Our analysis demonstrates that primitivist discourse is increasingly prevalent in superfoods publications, and coincides with an emphasis on novel and exotic superfoods. In later books, nutritional primitivism evolves into a framework for validating a food's healthfulness, as well as critiquing contemporary food production and provisioning practices. A case study of maca packaging further demonstrates that nutritional primitivism is integral to superfoods marketing. Packaging imagery and text resonate with longstanding Western tropes for the representation of South American indigenous peoples, and (like superfoods books) seize upon distrust of modern food production

practices and nutrition science, coupled with nostalgia for a simpler time and place. However, representations of superfoods production romanticize and simplify contemporary practices, implying responsibilities for researchers and food marketers, which we discuss further below.

A key contribution of this paper is to show how nutritional primitivism functions as a knowledge framework through which consumers are encouraged to understand food and make judgments and choices based on a particular set of values and logic. This extends Knight's work on nutritional primitivism, based on the low-carbohydrate diet movement, in which she identified and explored nutritional primitivism as a discourse, and conceptual framework for food scholars. Nutritional primitivism as a knowledge framework is inherently ideological, challenging the dominant food/health knowledge framework of nutrition science. Although the two often appear together, the use of nutritional primitivism as a complementary knowledge framework to nutrition science suggests that adherents find nutrition science alone to be insufficient to explain the relationship between food and health. Nutritional primitivism does not displace nutrition science, but challenges its epistemological dominance.

Nutritional primitivism in superfoods discourse adopts a broadly nostalgic tone and a moralized emphasis on "natural" qualities of foods, as well as celebrating non-Western and "ethnic" foodways, consistent with Knight's previous work on low-carbohydrate diet discourse (2011b, 2012a). However, in contrast, superfoods books and packaging do not rely heavily upon the evolutionary and genetic arguments that are prominent in low-carbohydrate diet books, nor is there more than passing reference to nutritional anthropology (Knight 2011a, 2012b, 2015). In addition, our analysis suggests that "primitive" dietary ideals may be drawn from diverse periods and locations. Superfoods discourse focuses heavily (though not exclusively) on South American indigenous peoples and their foodways. In the case of maca packaging, historical distance and a sense of primitive origins are constructed by virtue of the Central Andes' social and geographical distance from Australian consumers. This nuances Knight's previous work (2008, 2015) based on the low-carbohydrate diet literature, in which she suggested that historical appeals to the pre-agricultural diet of "our primitive ancestors" (Paleolithic humans) form the core of nutritional primitivism. Nonetheless it is consistent with previous research on primitivism within Western culture more broadly, highlighting the conflation of contemporary indigenous groups with prehistoric hunter-gatherers (Torgovnick 1997).

Further, whilst primitivism in the low-carbohydrate movement represented a response to the "obesity epidemic" and related public health "crises" of the 1990s/early 2000s, primitivism in the superfoods trend responds to a broader sense of crisis in global industrialized food production, including health but extending well beyond. This includes the concentration of corporate agriculture; high use of processing and "chemicals"; techno-fixes to make formulated health foods; general distancing from "nature"; nutritional and environmental consequences; and associated global injustice and inequities. Although different superfoods production–consumption networks employ different practices and actors, these are collectively cast in opposition to "mainstream" modern agriculture. Nutritional primitivism blossoms in superfoods discourse only relatively recently, coinciding with increased public awareness of climate change and environmental sustainability concerns. In superfoods discourse, the "wicked problem" of declining Western health dovetails with these "big global challenges" of the present day.

Whilst nutritional primitivism in superfoods discourse remains "a quest for health through diet" (Knight 2015), the notion of "health" broadens. As well as being healthy for the individual, food must support the physical and social health of humanity and the planet. Arguably, this wider critique of globalized and industrialized foodways becomes explicit in superfoods discourse due to the increasing cultural prominence of environmental and global justice concerns over the last decade. However, because primitivism is self-reflective, its application necessarily casts superfoods and their production as "good" because they symbolically oppose "bad" modern foods and production. Contemporary discourses relating superfoods and indigenous producers are complex, and engage with ideas about responsible consumption in the context of global inequalities. Yet the simplistic binary structure of primitivism works against critical engagement with production practices, let alone understanding the effects on producers and others of the development of these foods as global commodities (Loyer 2016c). Our focus on superfoods produced for Western export markets differs from McDonell's concern (2015) with "miracle foods" as a purported solution to malnutrition in developing countries. Nonetheless, there are strong parallels with McDonell's finding that while "culture and traditional knowledge have replaced the scientist as the source of authority and procurer of the curative," this by no means subverts "the plot and underlying logic" of "dietary colonialism," nor necessarily benefits indigenous producers (2015, 82).

Our analysis highlights that nutritional primitivism takes different forms in different contexts, with some features from one setting being less prominent, or even absent, elsewhere. We suggest that these differences are fundamental to primitivism and its inherent reflexivity or circularity, and part of what makes it useful to analyze: by examining how it manifests in different instances we reveal the particular concerns of that place and moment. As food scholars, our challenge is to offer a range of perspectives on a phenomenon that is inherently shifting, changing, and varied, based on careful empirical analysis. The use of multiple research methods, cases, and sites is required for a detailed picture and thorough understanding of this phenomenon. Thus this analysis highlights the need for broader research on nutritional primitivism in contemporary food culture, including different local and national contexts. This might include Paleo diets, the raw food movement, vegetarianism, anti-sugar discourse, Slow Food, and local food campaigns.

As noted, nutritional primitivists are concerned with nutrition and health, in contrast to culinary Luddites' and food adventurers' focus on gastronomic experience (Heldke 2003; Laudan 1999, 2001). We have also noted that primitivism responds to a sense of "crisis in civilization" (Bell 1972, 80), evident in a distinctive form in superfoods discourse. Nutritional primitivism is not primarily about pleasure or taste; nor is it simply about longing for the past. There is an urgency and deep-seated discontent in primitivism that is not evident in culinary Luddism or food adventuring. Moreover, the critical literature on primitivism beyond food studies proves useful in tying our observations to the history of Western primitivist representations of Latin America.[5] Over the past several decades, the longstanding trope of the animalistic "wild Indian" (Taussig 1987) has been re-mythologized into the "noble savage" deeply connected to nature and spirituality (Gómez-Barris 2012; Slater 2000), and made prominent through rainforest conservation campaigns and burgeoning eco-, ethno-, and spiritual tourism in Latin America (Babb 2010; Baud and Ypeij 2009; Davidov 2011). It is not coincidental that many products marketed as superfoods come from Latin America (including quinoa, maca, açai, chia, and cacao), and their representation and marketing tap into

longstanding patterns of representation of the Inca and Aztecs, in particular, that foreground a sense of primitive "lifeforce" lost to Western culture—but which may be accessed via superfoods. These include notions of "natural" energy levels and sexual appetites; masculine virility, represented by the Inca warrior; and fertility, of female bodies and the earth as mother.

Our analysis of primitivism in relation to superfoods reveals how easily "slippage" occurs between the primitive (or ancient) and the ethnoracial Other. Romanticized representations on maca packaging conflate contemporary Peruvian maca producers with a historical primitive ideal. This representation draws upon "geographies that conflate notions of historical [and spatial] distance with social distance" (May 1996, 63), and a set of comparative tropes used in discourses of the Other that "attempt to assimilate the site being represented to the site from which the representation emanates by arraying both sites along a temporal continuum" (Duncan 1993, 40). Such tropes have a long history in European discourses, in which distant places and their inhabitants have often been seen as occupying earlier, less evolved times. Previously used to justify imperialism, today such tropes serve to create desire to visit, or buy products (including food), from remote places: "places where one can escape the social and psychological pressures of modernity and retreat into a 'simpler', more 'natural' place and time" (Duncan 1993, 46). Those products that were not already known in the West and have entered the Western market explicitly positioned as superfoods (such as maca), as well as books promoting these "novel" or "exotic" foods, rely most heavily upon primitivist discourse to communicate their healthfulness to new consumers. There is certainly a commercial element to this association: Morris and Wolfe are both closely associated with companies that sell superfood products.

The purpose of marketing is not to match the lived experience of maca producers. However, we contend that marketing should neither mislead consumers nor harm producers, symbolically or materially. Nutritional primitivism is not simply a matter of how Western consumers justify their purchasing: diverse contemporary individuals and communities are involved in producing superfoods around the world, and the differences between primitivist representation and lived experience are vast and varied. Thus nutritional primitivism has potential consequences for producers, who are rendered discursively invisible by denying them "coevalness" (Fabian 1983) and placing them outside of intersubjective space–time—outside the contemporary global food system. Within such representations, there is little room for discussion of issues related to increased maca production, such as soil degradation, loss of native animal habitat, and decreased livelihood opportunities for women (CIP & Schubert 2015; Loyer 2016b, 2016c). That superfoods books and packaging are beginning to engage with notions of critical consumption, beyond individual health benefits, is promising—notwithstanding a large literature critiquing the relationships between organic and fair trade certifications and environmental and ethical concerns (e.g., Besky 2008; Guthman 2004). Yet reductive and nostalgic promotional strategies represent a missed opportunity to develop and pursue more critical, holistic, and equitable solutions to serious problems with the contemporary global food system. This includes key issues of food sovereignty: the recent declaration of a denomination of origin for maca Junín-Pasco is one way in which producers are struggling to determine the value of this product on their own terms (Perúbiodiverso 2011).

This paper thus suggests the need to bring the voices of primary producers into popular representations of superfoods in the global marketplace. As food scholars, we arguably have

an obligation to work with producers, distributors, marketers, and retailers to progress more accurate, equitable, just, and progressive modes of marketing, wherever nutritional primitivism comes into play. Scholars might also consider playing a broker/mediator role between producers and distributors in the West to encourage modes of marketing that will progress community-defined goals, such as economic development or environmental sustainability. Moreover, we can work to raise public awareness amongst Western consumers of the romanticized marketing of superfoods; real modes of production; and environmental, economic, and other local impacts. Finally, by attending to the particular concerns expressed through each iteration of nutritional primitivism—in this case, anxieties about insufficient nourishment from foods produced via modern industrial agriculture and food processing, and their associated ecological and social impacts—we can spark conversations about what a truly healthy, sustainable, and fair food system might look like.

Notes

1. "Functional food" frequently refers to foods that have been nutritionally fortified, enhanced, or genetically modified and are marketed using health claims.
2. Although we avoid "scare quotes" for readability, we use the term "superfoods" throughout to refer to the discursive construction.
3. Sales rankings were drawn from Amazon.com.
4. Similar references to the Eskimos (Inuit) feature in low-carbohydrate diet books (Knight 2012b, 2015).
5. We use the term "Latin America", encompassing Central and South America and the Caribbean, to emphasize similar colonial and socioeconomic histories, and a shared space in the Western geographical imagination.

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