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A Radical Journal of Geography

Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston, *Food and Femininity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015. ISBN: 9780857855565 (ebook); ISBN: 9780857856647 (paper); ISBN: 9780857855527 (cloth)

Julie M. Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN: 9781137476418 (ebook); ISBN: 9781137476401 (cloth)

Megan A. Carney, *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780520959675 (ebook); ISBN: 9780520285477 (paper); ISBN: 9780520284005 (cloth)

The Feminist Kitchen After DeVault: Three Fresh Books on Gender and Food Reviewed

Nearly 25 years ago, Marjorie DeVault (1991) provided critical insights into the gendered work associated with “feeding the family”. Building upon feminist theories of caring (Smith 1987), her seminal study documented how the tasks of food provisioning and preparation have both rewarding and oppressive implications for women. While satisfaction may be derived from reproducing the family and one’s own identity, the emotional and physical labours of foodwork, disproportionately borne by women, may reinforce hierarchical gender schemas—namely, that the provision of service is a “female” duty (see also Fisher 1992). The themes raised by DeVault, such as the links between food and feelings, kinship, and subjectivity, have been explored by other authors in recent decades (e.g. Bordo 1993; Bugge and Almas 2006; Counihan 2004; Lupton 1996; Probyn 2000; Van Esterik 1999). Despite this, a relative lack of attention to women persists within food studies literature (Allen and Sachs 2007), and repeated calls have

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been made to cultivate an explicitly feminist outlook within this burgeoning field of scholarship (e.g. Avakian and Haber 2005; Sukovic et al. 2011).

Three thought-provoking and empirically-rich books published in 2015 make important inroads in addressing these research gaps, all while acknowledging the ground-breaking work of DeVault (1991). In *Food and Femininity*, sociologists Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston skillfully reflect upon the gendered nature of food practices in contemporary Canada—a time and place in which men often appear on television sets as professional chefs, yet women continue to perform the majority of household foodwork. Weaving discourse analysis of newspapers, magazines, and food blogs with narratives obtained from interviews and focus groups with 129 “food-oriented” consumers and activists, Cairns and Johnston explore: [i] how feminine subjectivities are formed, strengthened, or challenged through shopping, cooking, feeding, and eating; [ii] how these femininities intersect with class and race to produce enduring inequalities; and [iii] what a feminist politics of food might look like. Over their book’s eight chapters—written in highly-accessible language with excellent examples of intersectional analysis—Cairns and Johnston persuasively argue that femininity is still signified through food today. Although the “1950s housewife” may largely be an archetype of the past, women continue to face pressures to conform to idealized feminine roles as they carry out foodwork. Performing these “food femininities” can be both emotionally-enjoyable and exhausting; moreover, comporting to the narrow range of “acceptable” femininities—as someone who cares about food, but not *too much*, for instance—is itself a challenge, one that is intensified for women who lack economic or cultural capital. Should a woman fall short in this quest, Cairns and Johnston suggest, she risks being viewed not only as “failing” at food, but also at femininity. Accordingly, the ideas of DeVault are seen to still hold much weight today: while food may provide women with meaning and

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identity, it may also be oppressive. This, the authors contend, speaks to the continued need for a feminist food politics, one that acknowledges the value, joys, and struggles of foodwork; considers gender's interlocking nature with other systems of oppression; and recognizes that cooking, while infused with multiple meanings, can indeed be a political act.

Issues of femininity, access to material resources, and the articulation of identity through food resurface in Julie Parsons's aptly-titled book, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*. Concerned with examining food "memories" and the socio-cultural contexts in which these are formed, this British sociologist employs a qualitative method not often seen in food studies: computer-mediated communication. Using email correspondence with minimal prompts in an attempt to avoid structuring the stories of her participants, Parsons solicits and analyzes 75 auto/biographical food narratives from individuals residing in the United Kingdom. The lengthy yet impressively-detailed accounts she obtains reveal five primary arenas in which food functions in everyday life. Food operates within the *family*, critical to its reproduction (as DeVault [1991] similarly argued) and to the socialization of its members, who acquire at an early age knowledge of what, when, how, and with whom to eat. Food is central to ideas of good *mothering*; the meal cooked at home from scratch is widely read as a sign of caring and "proper" femininity, as women continue to shoulder the responsibility of "feeding the family". Food can be used as a "treatment" to manage medical conditions and achieve purported *health*; in a related vein, it may also be key to attaining "ideal" forms of *embodiment* through careful weight management—although participation in these "foodways", Parsons notes, is frequently coded as feminine. Finally, *epicurean* food practices may be engaged in to express status and taste; however, the opportunity to view food as "play" tends to be limited to men, who are seldom saddled with the routine food "work" of social reproduction. In arguing that through these five

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“everyday foodways” people in the UK position themselves as “responsible neoliberal citizens” (p.2), Parsons admits to surprising herself; despite the present-day rhetoric of an “age of individualism”, gender and class still act as constraints upon choice when it comes to food.

The notion of “constraint” pervades the feminist ethnographic research of anthropologist Megan Carney, whose doctoral work is impressively featured within the pages of *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Security Across Borders*. Drawing on life-history interviews, focus groups, dietary surveys, and participant observation, Carney presents the compelling narratives of 25 mostly undocumented women who have used food assistance programs since migrating to Santa Barbara County, California, from Mexico and Central America. Seeking to illustrate how food “insecurity” affects the lived experiences of women, how food “security” is promoted by the state and non-governmental organizations, and how female subjectivities are implicated in the process, Carney takes Foucault’s biopolitics as her theoretical starting point. She advances a two-part argument. First, the author suggests that food insecurity functions as a mechanism through which a contemporary biopolitics is enacted. It compels impoverished Latina women, many of whom feel a maternal obligation to “feed their families” (DeVault 1991), to leave their home countries for the purported economic opportunities of the United States. Yet, once there, structural vulnerabilities may resurface; low wages or a lack of work induced by their precarious status may again expose these women to food insecurity. As this occurs, some individuals try to seek recourse in food security programming; however, such programs, Carney claims, also operate as gendered biopolitical projects. Evident in the discourse used by service providers like the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County, the responsibility for care—eating *enough* and eating *well*—is shifted from the state and onto the implicitly female body. Constrained in her ability to perform this compensatory caring labour as a result of economic, temporal, and legal

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barriers, the migrant woman may face *la lucha diaria*—the daily struggle brought about by the biopolitical processes that create an “unending hunger”.

While the concept of biopolitics acts as an explicit framing device in Carney’s work, each of the texts reviewed here productively illuminates how language of “health” and “the body” can be operationalized to render foodwork a gendered and neoliberal “technology of the self” (Foucault 1991). Cairns and Johnston gesture to this project in their highly-original chapter on the “do-diet discourse”. Critiquing logics of healthism that appear in the pages of Canadian magazines such as *Chatelaine*, where food restrictions are reframed as choices, the authors reveal how readers, predominantly women, are assigned the responsibility of disciplining their bodies by exerting control over consumption (e.g. “*Do eat smart after dark*”) to achieve supposed empowerment and health (p.93). Similarly, Parsons shows how individuals engage with and internalize discourses in the UK that promote self-restraint in order to alleviate burdens on the state (see also Guthman 2011). She notes that participants, primarily women, wishing to avoid the stigma of making a “bad choice”, feel compelled to strictly monitor their personal foodways, just as their own bodies and body-shapes have been surveilled by their mothers. In the United States, Carney explains that health outreach and nutrition education programs associated with existing food security initiatives construct an ideal of the “disciplined ‘health-conscious’ consumer” (p.133). Through these programs, a largely-female clientele are consistently told that they must take responsibility for their diets and those of their children, must educate themselves in order to eat well, and should volunteer to support the services that they benefit from. Many are ultimately willing to buy into this nutrition discourse; after all, it is more accessible than the routine health care otherwise out-of-reach for undocumented migrants. Taken together, Cairns and Johnston, Parsons, and Carney thus effectively showcase the potent connections between

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foodwork and bodily discipline, the ways in which dominant discourses are appropriated and embodied as part of one's habitus in consumer society, and the highly gendered effects of the neoliberal "downloading" of care.

The theme of discipline and self-regulation can be approached from another perspective: as indicative of boundary-work (Gieryn 1983). Indeed, a second key thread that weaves together the texts of Cairns and Johnston, Parsons, and Carney is the pervasiveness of gendered cultural scripts that erect symbolic or moral "boundaries" around the performance of foodwork (Lamont and Molnar 2002). As these authors convincingly note, whether in the US, UK, or Canada, women are confronted with messages that legitimize some ways of doing food as "right" or "proper" while, at the same time, pathologizing others. Out of this arises a pressure—one that is physically, intellectually, and emotionally laborious—for women to act in accordance with idealized gender roles. They must conduct themselves as good mothers, steering their families clear of junk food (Carney), making "healthy home-cooked meals from scratch" (Parsons), and socializing their children's palates while also protecting them from the health risks of the global industrial food system (Cairns and Johnston). Yet, simultaneously, these women must not be "overbearing". To take another example, women encounter repeated pressures to make informed and acceptable food choices to attain appropriate embodiments. Oftentimes, this means carving out a "middle ground" that avoids the denigrated poles of supposed "fatness" and "thinness", undue indulgence and restraint (Parsons), out-of-control eating and being extremely health-conscious (Cairns and Johnston), and spending too little or too much time in the kitchen (Carney). A fine line is thus walked as women navigate the perceived moral boundaries between overly abject and excessively perfect foodways.

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Cairns and Johnston provide readers with the terminology to describe this process of boundary negotiation, a balancing act that they call “calibration”. This is arguably the most significant theoretical contribution of their text. The concept of calibration usefully summarizes the tendency of individuals to position themselves away from divergent “extremes” (or symbolic boundaries) in their quest to be framed as reasonable or moderate. As an innovative analytical tool, calibration enhances existing understandings of boundary-work, gender performance, and identity construction more broadly. In this way, Cairns and Johnston’s book is sure to be of interest to a wide range of academics—critical geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists alike—not merely those who have a distinguished taste for food research.

While the three works examined here must be praised for their treatment of boundaries and biopolitics, this is not to say they are without limitations. Although an intersectional analysis was identified as a priority by all of the authors, both Parsons and Carney fall somewhat short in this regard. Parsons says little about ethnicity or race in her text, though this is likely to impact how “everyday foodways” are performed (see Slocum 2011; Slocum and Saldanha 2013). Future research on food memories could thus explore the salience of race on the practice of “doing food” and the realization of “ideal” femininities. Similarly, while Carney draws needed attention to food as a prompt for relocation, more could be said about how the decision to move is a product of intersecting crises and desires in addition to, or beyond, the need for sustenance (see Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Mills 1997; Silvey 2004). This extra nuance, perhaps demonstrated through the inclusion of additional migrant narratives, would have only strengthened what is an already thoughtful book.

Narratives were, of course, a central component of each of the reviewed texts, and indeed functioned here as, in Carney’s words, a “powerful medium for interpreting one’s own

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subjectivity” (p.100). Through them, readers encounter fascinating stories of “becoming”, windows into how class identities manifest through food (Parsons), glimpses into how women navigate a host of pressures surrounding foodwork (Cairns and Johnston), and accounts of marginalization and resistance (Carney). While both Carney and Cairns and Johnston used a range of physical methods to solicit these narratives, Parsons was much narrower in her focus, resorting to email exclusively.

Although credit is merited for the uniqueness of this approach, and the riveting accounts that it produced, its potential drawbacks do warrant consideration. Instructing individuals to write the story of themselves—with minimal input from the investigator, few opportunities to probe, and the anonymity made possible via the web—carries with it a possibly amplified risk of social desirability bias (Grimm 2010). Though Parsons contends that people present themselves as “responsible citizens” through their personal *foodways*, one cannot help but wonder whether the use of *email* partially fuelled these self-representations. Additionally, the email method limited Parsons’s ability to critically analyze the varied meanings that individuals attach to particular foods and forms of foodwork. While discussions of the “healthy meal” were frequent, for instance, comparatively little attention was given to distilling participants’ precise conceptions of “health” in this context. A coupling of electronic communication with more traditional qualitative research techniques might have thus added a layer of robustness and exploratory depth to this text. Despite this critique, however, Parsons’s book remains striking for its parallels to the research of Cairns and Johnston in Canada and Carney in the United States. It, like the others, is an important and timely read, a noteworthy contribution to the research trajectory set by DeVault (1991).

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Indeed, as this review has suggested, recent scholarship on gender and food speaks to the ongoing relevance of DeVault's (1991) foundational work. While new discourses have emerged—like “do-dieting” (Cairns and Johnston), “omnivorousness” (Parsons), and “illegality”, the latter of which provokes much anxiety in the United States (Carney)—women continue to “feed the family”, tying aspects of their femininity to food. Cairns and Johnston, Parsons, and Carney all draw attention to facets of this persistent linkage, just as they masterfully contribute to discussions of biopolitics and boundaries. In so doing, these authors—whose texts would certainly be welcome additions to undergraduate or graduate courses on the food system, consumer culture, and gender studies—also spark new questions. How does the fear of “failing” at food play out over the life-course, as children age and household dynamics evolve? To what extent is food-related identity calibration engaged in by those who do *not* have serious culinary interest? In households where the responsibility for foodwork is shifted onto domestic labour migrants as part of what Carney calls a “transnational transferring of the burden of care” (p. 70), how, if at all, is the food/femininity connection altered? In taking up these queries, homage should be paid to DeVault. Although a quarter of a century has passed since *Feeding the Family* was first published, the kitchen remains a site of gendered rewards and oppressions.

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