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## Book Review

### **Food and Femininity**

Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston

Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 222 pages

Review by: Jennifer Braun (University of Alberta)

Driven by a central question—“why do so many women care so much about food?”—Cairns and Johnston investigate the contemporary contours and connections between food and femininity, detailing the diverse ways these two things intersect and emerge in women’s lives. Their research is done in a Canadian context where, they argue, food is used as a standard to judge a good mother, a responsible caregiver, a discerning consumer, a healthy woman, and an ethically minded shopper —standards that are not easy to achieve, particularly if time and money are scarce. Nowadays, given that food is so central in the lives of many North Americans, the increasing consumer concern over the unsustainable nature of the current food system, and the intensity with which feminine food standards are applied to women, this book is both timely and timeless, and illuminating for anyone interested in food and gender (which, in my opinion, and that of Cairns and Johnston, should be everyone).

Using data from detailed narratives obtained during focus groups and in-depth interviews with 129 food-oriented consumers in Toronto, Canada (109 women and 20 men) and a discourse analysis of popular food blogs and magazines, Cairns and Johnston outline why food and femininity remain intricately connected topics that require “open-minded kitchen table discussions as well as critical research” (p. 6). The book is organized around key sites in the performance of food femininities: shopping, mothering, health and body, politics, and pleasure. These food femininities, they argue, help us to better understand the complex ways that food and femininity are intertwined within contemporary consumer culture.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the authors’ big research questions, motivations, and study methodology, while also providing a “quick and dirty” history of food, femininity and

feminism. The next chapter eloquently lays the theoretical foundations and “conceptual toolkits” that inform the analysis. Their theoretical toolkit expertly and robustly pulls from interdisciplinary perspectives, including gender studies and feminist theory; critiques of neoliberal governmentality; and sociological approaches to culture, consumption and social change. Drawing from these theories, as well as the “living, breathing world of women and food” (p.18), they outline a social theory of *food femininities*.

Chapter three shifts focus onto their empirical research, examining the first key site in the performance of food femininities: shopping. In this chapter, the powerful feelings women have associated with the seemingly banal task of shopping for food are documented. Women, to the researcher’s surprise, often emphasized the pleasurable aspects of grocery shopping, signalling the cultural associations between consumption, femininity, and care. Importantly, though, they also highlight that, for women living in poverty, grocery shopping can be a stark reminder of the difficulty of caring for one’s family with limited resources. This contrast is an important theme throughout their book: feminine food standards, and food femininity more broadly, are both raced and classed, and profoundly shaped by access to economic and cultural capital.

Chapter four continues to explore the emotionally salient connections between femininity and foodwork, but shifts to feeding children. Analyzing diverse narratives of nourishing and socializing children through food, they again highlight the emotional potency of maternal foodwork. For this analysis, they build upon feminist scholarship of intensive mothering and social reproduction, showing how many North American mothers face a new maternal ideal: raising an “organic child” (p. 76). The “organic child” ideal is informed by neoliberal notions of individual responsibility, positioning mothers as personally responsible for shielding their children from the risks of the industrial food system.

Chapter five moves from the foodwork of child-rearing to food and the care of the self. In this chapter, the authors explore the workings of a new healthy eating discourse they call the “do-diet” (p.88), which frames women’s eating through a lens of empowerment and health, rather than vanity and restriction. Critically, though, they lift the thin veil of personal choice embodied in the do-diet, noting that this discourse still demands diligence, self-regulation, and corporeal control. This contradictory discourse, they poignantly argue, is particularly challenging for women who encounter the do-diet from marginalized locations and face heightened fat-phobia and classed barriers to the idealized practice of “choosing health” (p. 20).

Chapter six explores yet another gendered site of caring through food, namely making ethical food choices to express care for other beings and the environment. Drawing specifically from conversations with women food consumers and food activists, they investigate how women think through the politics of food choices at an individual and collective level. Significantly, they find that the food activists reveal how the gendering of foodwork may be reproduced in the public sphere, where community gardens and food security projects are coded feminine and the realms of food policy and agricultural leadership are dominated by men.

Chapter seven takes on the difficult task of exploring the complex relationship between femininity and food pleasure, focusing on the pleasures of eating and cooking. They note the

tension between socially valued aspects of femininities explored in previous chapters (care, self-control, and ethics) and the prioritization of pleasurable food experiences as described by female foodies. Again, however, they also look at the class and race dynamics that shape the performance of foodie femininities, and complicate the emancipatory potential of freely embracing food's pleasures. The second half of the chapter examines women's ambivalent relationship to cooking, specifically the gendered distinction between "everyday cooking" and "leisure cooking", as well as the struggle to find pleasure in foodwork when money and time are tight.

In the eighth and final chapter, Cairns and Johnston return to some of the big-picture issues that emerge throughout the book. Drawing on insights from their participants, they attempt to outline their own vision of a feminist politics of foodwork. This ambitious vision includes: a respect for the meaning that women find in food and a careful effort to avoid devaluing women's foodwork as retrograde, and a commitment to structural critique and collective efforts to redress enduring inequalities. Further, building a feminist politics of foodwork, from their perspective, also means forging greater connections between feminist movements and food movements both within the academy and beyond.

Overall, this book was excellent and I would highly recommend it for anyone interested in the sociological study of food and/or gender. It is scholastically rigorous, but remains firmly grounded in the everyday, real life experiences of women who care about food. In addition to its thoughtful and careful theoretical analysis of the varied performances of food femininities, the authors helpfully provide readily relatable examples and anecdotes to illustrate their ideas. This had the effect of connecting both theory and practice in a seamless and engaging way.

Further, I particularly appreciated their recurrent use of the concept of "calibration". As the authors so nicely articulate, calibration is not just about the common tendency to position oneself within the "middle ground", but is analytically and politically significant because it helps reveal the sharp boundaries surrounding food femininities and persistent gendered social pressures. Throughout this book and elsewhere, it is clear that women continue to be judged and scrutinized for their relationship to food, despite post-feminist discourses of empowerment and choice. Under the social microscope, they argue, it is not enough for a woman to simply care about food; she must hit the "sweet spot", enacting a hegemonic femininity that shows she cares about food, but does not care too much. Usefully, the concept of calibration—woven throughout the chapters of this book—draws attention to patriarchal processes that make the performance of hegemonic femininity difficult to fully enact, involving a constant balancing act of effort, restraint, and self-consciousness.

On a more personal note, I am almost certain that, at some point in this book, (particularly if you are a woman), you will feel a certain resonance with or strong emotional reaction to a story, illustrative example, or salient observation, because the topics and ideas covered are at once analytically and politically significant, but also have the potential to be deeply personal, as food often is, and this is indeed a strength of this book.