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Where Are the Women in Contemporary Food Studies? Ruminations on Teaching Gender and Race in the Food Studies Classroom

DESPITE WIDESPREAD PRONOUNCEMENTS from cultural pundits about the “death of the book” due to digital manuscripts and electronic readers, in the past decade, not only has the market flourished for young-adult literature of the *Twilight* variety, but books about the politics of food in the United States have become publishing blockbusters, often spawning film adaptations, related documentaries, and sequels. What has been less evident, however, is the masculinization of such books and movies, in approach as well as in content. Of equal prevalence is the perpetual relegation of female figures within the mass-media foodscape to the roles of cookbook writers, contestants on bake-off shows such as *Cupcake Wars*, or domestic workers in films like *The Help*. Women who are food activists, writers, teachers, and community organizers generally are not offered movie options akin to the film adaptation of Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, lucrative book deals such as Michael Pollan’s *Food Rules*, or consciousness-raising TV series along the lines of Morgan Spurlock’s *30 Days*. Rather, women are getting their hands dirty—both literally and metaphorically—working in the trenches while still consigned to the margins. They are funding community garden projects, building food studies programs, giving lectures on sustainability, and they are incorporating their food activism into the lectures they’re giving, the films they’re making, and the books they’re writing.

TITLES REVIEWED IN THIS ESSAY

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal.
By Eric Schlosser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition, and Health.
By Marion Nestle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals.
By Michael Pollan. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life.
By Barbara Kingsolver. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat.
By Temra Costa. Layton, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 2010.

Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society. By A. Breeze Harper. New York: Lantern Books, 2010.

By Any Greens Necessary: A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat.
By Tracey Lynn McQuirter. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010.

Good Meat. Written and directed by Sam Hurst. Coproduced with Larry Pourier and Native American Public Telecommunications, 2011.

As faculty members who teach courses focused on the politics and cultural significance of food—Psyche Williams-Forson teaches an undergraduate course, Gender, Food, and Identity, as well as a graduate-level course, Feminist Cultural Criticism of Diasporic Texts, and Jennifer Cognard-Black teaches an upper-level undergraduate seminar on food literature, *Books that Cook*—both of us have repeatedly grappled with questions of gender, race, class, and genre with our students. This essay, then, highlights some of the women (and under-represented men) who are engaged in national debates on food production and consumption and also discusses issues of visibility in the current food revolution

in the United States—a discussion we want to have with each other as well as with our students, whose voices are represented here. The questions that inform our conversation include: Why is work by male food critics such as Schlosser, Pollan, and Spurlock more popular, well known, and visible than similar work by Marion Nestle, Temra Costa, Vandana Shiva, A. Breeze Harper, or Tracye Lynn McQuirter? Why do our students view the food politics of women writers as more maternalistic and/or privileged than those of their male counterparts? Where are the voices of Latina, African American, and Asian American women in the current food revolution? And, finally, is this lack of visibility yet another instance of women and people of color being relegated to the cultural margins, or is something else going on here?

In order to address these questions fully, we start by discussing the rise of a national awareness about industrial versus sustainable eating with the publication of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* in 2001 and Marion Nestle's *Food Politics* a year later—an awareness often couched in gendered terms by reviewers. We then jump forward half a decade to reflect on the release of Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, paying particular attention to how Pollan and Kingsolver's respective narrators and organizational structures elicit gendered responses from our own students—both in terms of gendering the texts themselves as well as responding in a gendered way. From there, we once again fast forward five years, this time thinking about how Temra Costa's *Farmer Jane* serves as a kind of corrective to the masculinized food movement constructed by Schlosser and Pollan. In addition, we further consider how A. Breeze Harper in her anthology *Sistah Vegan* and Tracye Lynn McQuirter in her book *By Any Greens Necessary* interrogate the either/or paradigm of female versus male foodies, both by narrowing the focus of food politics to African American women as well as by widening the scope for more cross-racial, multiracial, and cross-gender examinations of foodways in the United States. All these discussions are, again, informed and deepened by conversations with our students. Finally, we touch on a film that rethinks the gendered, classed, racial, ethnic, and national boundaries of food-focused documentaries, Sam Hurst's *Good Meat*. We conclude by thinking about how our classrooms bridge popular and academic discourses on food, and we muse on the politics and expectations of the mass media that are complicated within the food studies classroom.

FAST FOOD NATION AND FOOD POLITICS

In both of our classrooms, students usually recognize the title of Eric Schlosser's 2001 book *Fast Food Nation*, but not that of Marion Nestle's powerful critique of the US industrial food economy, *Food Politics*, which came out just a year later. Schlosser challenges the corporate and governmental forces in the United States that make healthy eating difficult as well as expensive. More specifically, in trying to reveal national practices of consumption through the lens of food—as well as in attempting to advocate for living wages among migrant and restaurant workers—Schlosser's investigation asks where McDonald's fries and Big Macs come from. His attempt at answering his own question exposes a number of previously invisible practices in the nation's fast-food industry, from the employment of chemists (as “flavorists”) who manufacture artificial tastes for processed foods to the horrendous treatment of both cattle and workers at our nation's meatpacking plants. In his desire to interrogate national choices through the economic fact and the mass-media metaphor of fast food, Schlosser concentrates much of his study on the impact of fast-food culture on children. He writes, “Fast food is heavily marketed to children and prepared by people who are barely older than children. This is an industry that both feeds and feeds off the young.”¹

In turn, Nestle's inquiry into the role food companies play in what Americans eat reveals just how powerful food-industry lobbyists are in influencing governmental policy, from dietary and nutrition recommendations to what children consume in our public schools. Nestle's book demonstrates how the food industry's “eat more” message is in direct conflict with the advice of health professionals and nutritionists, resulting in both fatter and sicker Americans who consume a diet engineered for corporate profit rather than public health. Nestle, like Schlosser, is particularly concerned about children—specifically how food marketers target their advertising to young people, both within and beyond school. “Food marketing to children,” says Nestle, “is big business aimed at uncritical minds.”² The result of such marketing, she argues, is the

1. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 9.

2. Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 179.

staggering rise in childhood obesity in the United States. As Nestle points out, "Rates of obesity are now so high among American children that many exhibit metabolic abnormalities formerly seen only in adults."³

In the classroom, our students examine how the release of these two books initiated nothing short of a food revolution in the United States, one directly indebted to what culinary historian Andrew F. Smith has called the "countercultural food movement"⁴ of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—a movement initiated by author-activists such as Frances Moore Lappé, Edna Lewis, and Alice Waters and defined by a growing interest in organic farming, vegetarianism, seasonal cooking, and local foods. In contrast to the countercultural food movement beginning in the 1970s, however, the food revolution of the new millennium has a decisively political edge: in 2001 and 2002, readers of *Fast Food Nation* and *Food Politics* came to see big-business corporations and the government as adversaries to human health, and both Schlosser and Nestle were regarded, by their reviewers, as whistle blowers on industrial food manufacturers. Moreover, Schlosser and Nestle both urge individual consumers to take direct political action as influential participants in the national food economy. Schlosser ends his book by stating, "Nobody in the United States is forced to buy fast food. The first step toward meaningful change is by far the easiest: stop buying it," while Nestle politicizes this message even further, adopting an old grassroots slogan to encourage her readers to "vote with your fork!"⁵

Yet despite striking similarities in approach, content, and message, Schlosser and Nestle's reviewers characterize their respective authorship in decisively gendered terms. For instance, a reviewer of *Fast Food Nation* for *Publisher's Weekly* states, "Schlosser fires... hair-raising statistical bullets into the heart of the matter. While cataloguing assorted evils with the tenacity and sharp eye of the best investigative journalist, he uncovers a cynical, dismissive attitude to food safety in the fast food industry."⁶ Concocting an image of a sharp-eyed journalist firing

3. Ibid., 7.

4. Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 197.

5. Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 269; Nestle, *Food Politics*, 373.

6. The various quotations from reviewers of *Fast Food Nation* come from the numerous pages of promotional material featured in the 2012 paperback edition.

statistical bullets into an evil-doing food industry, this critic fashions Schlosser as a kind of rhetorical cowboy—the good guy shooting the bad guy right through the heart. And while this review is one of the most blatant in casting Schlosser as an iconic masculine figure, others use language that implicitly celebrates his authorial prowess. The *Washington Post* claims "his eye is sharp... his prose thoughtful but spare"; *Kirkus Reviews* calls his book "a tale full of sound, fury, and popping grease"; the *New York Observer* characterizes his story as "thorough, gimlet-eyed, [and] superbly told," with Schlosser as a kind of prophet, "offer[ing] up visionary glints"; the *San Jose Mercury News* contends Schlosser has done "huge amounts of intense, on-the-scene reporting"; the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* says he delivers "a super-size serving of common sense"; and the *Seattle Weekly* claims that the book is "enough to make a vegetarian out of Arnold Schwarzenegger." In other words, Schlosser's hypermasculinization at the hands of such reviewers is clear: he is represented as a spare, sharp writer, capable of massive amounts of intense work, who generates super-size prose full of both sound and fury to offer up visionary insights so powerful that even the Governor will forgo his hamburgers.

On the other hand, while Nestle's reviewers certainly praise her book—Julia Child called it "a courageous and masterful exposé"—her critics portray her not as a cowboy but alternately as a nag, a teacher, and a subjective writer. For instance, Professor Irwin Weintraub of Brooklyn College uses the verb "berate" to describe Nestle's critique of the food industry—a verb with synonyms such as scold, chide, and to give someone a tongue-lashing. Verbs employed by other reviewers are just as revealing: where Schlosser muckrakes, tabulates, investigates, pulls together, storytells, and reports, by contrast Nestle makes, shows, details, explains, casts light, and, according to the *Village Voice*, "dishes up." These are the actions of feminine women: they berate, they make, they cook, and they instruct. Moreover, the *New York Times* reviewer comments that Nestle combines "the scientific background of a researcher" with "the skills of a teacher," and in so doing, "has made a complex subject easy to understand."⁷ Again and again reviewers liken *Food Politics* to an

7. Quoted in the promotional material on the back cover of Nestle's *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

education — not a swashbuckling adventure through the popping grease of fast-food fry baskets — and Nestle herself is framed as a brisk schoolmarm, cutting up complex knowledge into bite-sized pieces.

Even more revealing, however, is how Nestle's reviewers couch her as a biased writer rather than an objective researcher. A telling example comes from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, where Barbara O. Schneeman writes, "Nestle tells us a series of engaging and surprising stories and gives us a lively presentation of the politics, as she perceives them, of advice on diet and health during the past century. Nestle clearly states her biases in the preface and in the introduction to each section of the book ... [which helps] separate the facts from the author's perceptions and allow[s] readers to judge whether the facts are in accord with her interpretations."⁸ Even though Schneeman strongly recommends the book, in calling Nestle's study a collection of "perceptions" and "interpretations" that must be "separated" from what she terms "the facts," she suggests that Nestle's hypotheses and conclusions are tainted by subjectivity. In contrast, Schlosser's critics construct his personal interpretations as a form of gifted storytelling. The *Boston Globe* praises his style as a combination of "folksy storytelling with solid reporting," while *Kirkus Reviews* calls the book "an exemplary blend of polemic and journalism," and the *Hartford Courant* says that Schlosser is "a talented storyteller" with considerable "reportorial skills."⁹

As Schneeman points out, Nestle herself is self-conscious about detaching her research from her own participation in the food industry as a nutrition expert — a move that might well be called best practice in the field of journalism and one that should, ideally, bolster her credibility rather than undermine it. Yet as one student, Danielle Doubt, noted after reading *Food Politics* in the Books that Cook class:

While Nestle's book is a mind-numbing account of food and consumer manipulation on the part of the U.S. food industry, and her depth of research and history of corruption on the part of food companies and the U.S. government is breathtaking, I can't help noticing that Nestle does something that Schlosser just doesn't do: Nestle

8. Barbara O. Schneeman, book review of Nestle's *Food Politics*, *New England Journal of Medicine* 346, no. 25 (June 20, 2002): 2017.

9. From the featured reviews published in the 2012 paperback edition of *Fast Food Nation*.

lays out her credentials in the field. "I am qualified! I am an expert! I have personal experience in this area of study!" I can easily see through this technique — because I have so often done the same. It is my insecurity that I will not be taken seriously, or my abilities will be doubted, that often causes me to lay out my credentials up front. It seems that as Nestle is about to criticize the actions, policies, and politics of many male actors in the food industry and the government, she feels the same compulsion.

Danielle is, in part, reading her own personal into Nestle's political, yet it is significant that Nestle's style reinforces Danielle's sense that women often feel like imposters in male-dominated professions — in this case among governmental policymakers and food corporation CEOs. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether Nestle herself actually feels like an imposter, and given her position as a professor of food studies at New York University and a policy advisor to the Department of Health and Human Services, such insecurities seem unlikely. Rather, what's important is that Nestle's attempt at journalistic honesty is interpreted as feminizing — and thereby weakening — her authorial position.

In essence, then, this juxtaposition of Schlosser's and Nestle's reception from their reviewers and readers reveals a gendered division within the US food revolution initiated in 2001–2002, where heroic cowboy-storytellers stand in stark relief against nagging schoolteacher-equivocators. Furthermore, this division inaugurated an ongoing separation between prominent male and female food-industry critics when, in 2006–2007, such critics moved from the popular page to the mass-media stage.

OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA AND ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE

Before students read Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* together in the Books that Cook class, they are introduced to the first sentence of another of Pollan's bestselling books, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, which is made up of two simple words: "Eat food."¹⁰ Students discuss how "eat food" seems, at first glance, to be in keeping with what many parents say to their children as

10. Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 1.

part of a household litany of dos and don'ts: get dressed, brush teeth, wash hands, eat food. These imperative phrases, consisting of only a verb and a noun, urge activity on the part of the listener. The point is to get someone to *do* something—to undertake a bodily action, usually one that sustains daily living. Interestingly, Pollan's phrase also adopts the voice of a recipe, that foundational food text: mix ingredients, grease pan, bake dish, eat food. As such, Pollan's first sentence is both intimate and domestic. His manifesto begins with imagery of hearth and home, family and kitchen.

Yet, as students point out, "eat food" is too general and too obvious to be used by most parents. After all, what else would a child eat—a bicycle tire? And surely most people, even children, don't need to be reminded that eating is necessary. It seems likely, then, that Pollan's point is precisely crafted to create a sense of recognition followed by confusion, for he goes on to explain, "It used to be that food was all you *could* eat, [but] today there are thousands of other edible foodlike substances in the supermarket."¹¹ So Pollan's "eat food" is a rhetorical and political mantra rather than a personal, homey phrase. With this seemingly innocuous expression, Pollan successfully creates a binary opposition between food and foodlike substances, thereby providing a rallying cry for those who hope to change America's reliance on industrial agriculture.

Pollan coined "eat food" in 2008, two years after he published *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*—the book that launched his career as a national food pundit. Since becoming a national figure, Pollan has co-narrated the 2008 Academy Award-nominated documentary *Food, Inc.*, was named one of *TIME* magazine's most influential people of 2010, and even made an appearance on *Oprah* in 2011. In addition, food-conscious consumers may purchase an "Eat Food" t-shirt or tote bag, and Pollan's more recent book, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*, was so successful that it was republished in a collectable edition with illustrations by Maira Kalman, a regular artist for the *New Yorker*. With such widespread media exposure and name recognition, it seems safe to say that Pollan, even more than Schlosser, has become the face of the current food revolution. Michael Pollan is now a brand name, and his brand sells an ethos of masculinity that is both indebted to Schlosser

for its sharp-eyed-maverick-fighting-the-system stance but also represents a masculinity all its own—one that is intellectual, affluent, white, and urbane.

When students take up Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*, they consider how it is broken into three main sections—"Industrial: Corn," "Pastoral: Grass," and "Personal: The Forest"—and is structured as a deductive argument, moving the reader from the general to the specific, from the global-industrial to the local-personal. This format fits the culinary story Pollan wishes to tell, one that is both simple and complex. At its most basic, he wants to explore what Americans eat for dinner and where our food comes from—the simple part. At the same time, however, he also wishes to convey the difficult dilemmas inherent in a modern food economy such as ours, where humans' biological and psychological needs for nourishment are complicated by how our food is produced, packaged, and sold. For instance, one such dilemma is this: if a consumer goes out of her way to purchase grass-fed, free-range beef in order to undermine the industrial feedlot economy of most US meat production and yet her package of ground beef has been flown in from Australia—thus metaphorically drenching it in jet fuel—how can this consumer decide what's better for her dinner: beef processed in her next-door state or beef raised without a diet of corn and antibiotics?

To navigate such catch-22s, Pollan draws on anthropological, medical, and governmental data as well as first-person interviews and personal experience to take his reader back to the origins of four meals: a corn-based industrial meal (fast food eaten in a moving car); an organic industrial meal (cooked entirely from items purchased at Whole Foods); a grass-fed meal (built around locally produced, free-range, grass-fed animals); and what he designates as "the perfect meal" (made entirely of fare hunted and gathered by Pollan himself). At its conclusion, the book refuses to resolve the gastronomic dilemmas it raises, stating that both the fast-food meal Pollan began with as well as the slow-food, "perfect" meal that ends his inquiry are "equally unreal and equally unsustainable" in our modern world. "Without such a thing as fast food there would be no need for slow food," he explains. "Food would be...well, what it

11. Ibid., italics in original.

always was, neither slow nor fast, just food: this particular plant or that particular animal, grown here or there, prepared this way or that."¹²

While *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is a thick read — students balk at the sheer weight of Pollan's data and often overly scientific explanations (the book comes in at over four hundred pages, not including sources) — it is also an illuminating one. Students are shocked to learn that we Americans eat more processed corn than anything else — that we are, in Pollan's words, "corn walking" — and they are equally fascinated by the quirky people Pollan interviews, such as Joel Salatin and his "farming ministry" at Polyface farm in Virginia, where this particular self-styled "grass farmer" rails against the "disconnected multi-national global corporate techno-glitz food system" while developing such idiosyncratic innovations on his own farm as the "eggmobil" and the "pigaerator."¹³ Pollan's book both captivates and motivates; he persuades students to question what they're putting in their grocery carts as well as in their mouths — and, even more, to act on what they come to learn about US agribusiness, industrial organic farming, local-seasonal food producers, and even ordinary gardeners. As one student, Julia Rocha, attests, "The answer to the omnivore's dilemma that Pollan gives us is more of a challenge: the more we know about our food, the less we have to think about it, and the more we can enjoy our meals The gift in this challenge is that Pollan's book has just given the reader the largest of the stepping stones: knowledge."

However, while Pollan empowers students through this "gift" of knowledge, he simultaneously masks his book's subjectivity, a subjectivity that's heavily gendered. Take, for instance, the book's structure. Although *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is built around a series of intimate experiences — four meals that Pollan either buys or cooks for family and friends — his choice to organize the text as a deductive argument obscures his personal motives and stories. Even though readers accompany Pollan as he goes through a drive-thru, shops in two different grocery stores, cooks in a friend's kitchen, kills a chicken, forages for mushrooms, and hunts a wild boar, the fact that the book begins with a premise — "What should we have for dinner?" — and then moves

12. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 410–11.

13. *Ibid.*, 241.

through a series of investigations and interviews, peppered with quotations and definitions from secondary sources, means that Pollan is trading on a basic assumption: that logical arguments must be objective.¹⁴ In choosing argumentation as the means of organizing his book, Pollan opts for logos over pathos, for rationality over emotion. By default, this choice aligns Pollan with stereotypes of masculine reason over feminine feeling.

In addition, Pollan deluges his readers with data and presents selected "experts" to support his arguments. His sources, however, are anything but impartial. Salatin, for instance, the quirky farmer, is a graduate of Bob Jones University; he is a conservative Christian, libertarian teetotaler whose children are homeschooled and whose wife does the cooking. Other interviewees are similarly unconventional, if not quite so iconoclastic: there's George Naylor, an Iowa corn farmer who testifies at farm policy hearings and gives lectures about the US farm crisis; Angelo Garro, a Sicilia-cum-Californian mushroom-and-wild-boar hunter, who calls a delectable dish one that "tastes like my mother"; and Bev Eggleston, a friend of Salatin's, who has attempted to establish a private meat processing plant based on an "artisanal model" and who claims his food is "for folks whose faces itch when the wool's being pulled over their eyes."¹⁵ In other words, these interviewees are partisan anomalies in the US food economy — and, perhaps even more importantly, they are all males with intellectually active lives. Each is an entrepreneur as well as a radical individualist who admires book-learning, actively engages in politics, and appreciates good food. In other words, within *Omnivore's Dilemma*, each of these experts embraces a rebel masculinity and are willing and proud to buck the proverbial system.

Student Nona Landis nicely encapsulates this point: "At first, what made Pollan's book seem 'approachable' and 'neutral' was actually not so neutral at all. Although Pollan does a great deal to expose and examine the problems of the food industry and the difficulty of local, sustainable eating, he does so in a way that maintains the status quo. That is, his text casts men in the leading roles on the industrial, organic, and local stages." Another student, Melanie Kokolios Moore, echoes this

14. *Ibid.*, 1.

15. *Ibid.*, 283, 247.

comment: "When I first read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, I wasn't thinking much about gender, but in reflecting back on the book, the main thing that jumps out at me is the complete lack of women in Pollan's narrative. Every important person he talks to—whether it's Joel Salatin or the Italian who helps Pollan hunt wild boar or the corn farmer in Iowa—is male. They are all active figures: hunting and gathering and debating food policy, trying to shape the world around them." Melanie goes on to say that she remembers only two women from the book: "Pollan's own wife, and the wife of a friend for whom he cooks, both of whom are remarkably passive. They simply eat whatever it is Pollan has put in front of them, whether it's McDonald's or a chicken dinner from Whole Foods." For both Nona and Melanie, women are not actors on Pollan's stage; they are extras, waiting in the wings.

Not merely a function of the book's logical structure or his all-male sources, Pollan's authority and seeming neutrality is also a matter of his own authorial voice, one that reproduces the tone and stance of the public intellectual in the United States. And while "omnivore" is a genderless classification that distances Pollan from his own investigations, his perspective throughout is inflected by personal experience. To take but one example, after Pollan has spent time at Polyface farm with Salatin, he decides it's time to prepare a grass-fed meal, one created around chickens that he himself helped to kill. Pollan writes,

Before I left the farm Friday, I gathered together the makings for that evening's dinner, which I'd arranged to cook for some old friends who lived in Charlottesville....

From the walk-in [at Polyface], I picked out two of the chickens we had slaughtered on Wednesday and a dozen of the eggs I'd helped gather Thursday evening. I also stopped by the hoop house and harvested a dozen ears of sweet corn....

On the way into Charlottesville, I stopped to pick up a few other ingredients, trying as best I could to look for local produce and preserve the bar code virginity of this meal. For my salad, I found some nice-looking locally grown rocket. At the wine shop I found a short, chauvinistic shelf of Virginia wines, but here I hesitated. How far could I take this local conceit before it ruined my meal? I hadn't had a sip of wine all week and was really looking forward to a decent one. I'd read somewhere that wine-making in Virginia was "coming into its own," but isn't that what they always say? Then I spotted a

Viognier for twenty-five bucks—the priciest Virginia wine I'd ever seen. I took this as a sign of genuine confidence on somebody's part, and added the bottle to my cart.

I also needed some chocolate for the dessert I had in mind. Fortunately the state of Virginia produces no chocolate to speak of, so I was free to go for the good Belgian stuff, pangslessly. In fact, even the most fervent eat-local types say it's okay for a "foodshed" (a term for a regional food chain, meant to liken it to a watershed) to trade for goods it can't produce locally—coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate—a practice that predates the globalization of our food chain by a few thousand years. (Whew....) ... One of the reasons we cook meat (besides making it tastier and easier to digest) is to civilize, or sublimate, what is at bottom a fairly brutal transaction between animals. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described the work of civilization as the process of transforming the raw into the cooked—nature into culture. For these particular chickens, which I had personally helped to kill and eviscerate, the brining would make a start on that transformation even before the cooking fire was lit.¹⁶

Here Pollan is at his best as a convincing and affable author. It's almost impossible not to like him—and students do. On the one hand, he's informative: he explains a bit of culture-making theory according to Lévi-Strauss and defines the term "foodshed," yet does both without being pedantic, largely because this section reads a bit like a novel, with a first-person "I" engaged in specific actions. Indeed, this novelistic approach works beautifully with the other crucial aspect of Pollan's narrative voice, for he's not just informational—he's also semi-confessional. Pollan reveals his insecurities over "ruining" his meal by adhering too strictly to his own rules; he invites us to watch him shop for rocket, wine, and chocolate; and he is conversational, even intimate, with his "whew" (delivered in parentheses, that ideal device for suggesting that a narrator is being confidential with a reader).

At the same time, however, Pollan is making assumptions about dinner-party food that reveal the shaping of his perspective by his class, race, ethnicity, and gender even within this good-humored and intelligent persona. Only someone of cosmopolitan taste would distinguish Belgian chocolate from American, and only someone of affluence would

16. Ibid., 262–64

have read up on the Virginia wine scene—and believe that paying twenty-five dollars for a bottle must mean that this wine is necessarily good. Pollan also makes sure to remind the reader of his masculine prowess—having killed and eviscerated those two chickens himself—and genders the world of his own creation, dubbing the Virginia wine shelf “chauvinistic” (which means aggressive patriotism as well as prejudiced support of one gender) and his non-barcode meal “virginal” (which intimates a sexual encounter in the eating of it). Moreover, with word choices such as “sublimate,” “eviscerate,” “panglessly,” “liken,” and even “rocket,” Pollan expresses his erudition and, again, his worldliness—for it is Europeans who call this leafy plant “rocket”; Americans call it “arugula.” Clearly, Pollan’s voice is not impartial. Rather, it’s a voice students perceive as impartial because the US mediascape repeatedly offers up masculine, white, educated, clever, and cultured personas as public intellectuals whose knowledge and experience are axiomatic.

Pollan is not a tabula rasa—an objective journalist merely gathering information and passing it along to his readers. Rather, he is a character within his own books, and this character is a constructed one; his neutrality is illusory. Again Julia, from the class: “Pollan’s investigative approach makes his book read like, well—a scientific investigation.” Yet a true investigation wouldn’t trade on personal experience, would represent opposing viewpoints much more fully, would strive to find objective sources, and would eschew the use of narrative scenes.

Narrative scenes built around highly personal experiences, however, are precisely what novelist Barbara Kingsolver uses as the basis of her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, which appeared in 2007, a year after Pollan’s. It’s instructive to teach Pollan and Kingsolver together, for both books are concerned with similar issues: both attempt to raise the consciousness of their everyday reader-eaters, both embrace local-seasonal and organic eating practices as the best solution to our nation’s food problems, both admit the limitations of their inquiries, and both are told from a first-person point of view using intimate moments as the springboard for more general arguments. There are even specific parts of the two texts that lend themselves nicely to comparison-contrast discussions, for both Pollan and Kingsolver learn how to go mushroom hunting, tutor their readers on the environmental devastations brought about by industrial agricultural practice, cook a number of dinners for

families and friends, and must slaughter birds on their own for the first time (for Pollan it’s chickens, for Kingsolver, turkeys).

Yet there are significant differences between the two texts. One key difference is how Kingsolver structures her book. Rather than making an extended, deductive argument, she and her family live out a year-long experiment: they decide to take a “food sabbatical,” meaning that they “step off the unsustainable food grid” by spending an entire year eating only foods that they either grow or raise and meat that they buy from farmers within a hundred-mile radius of where they live. As a result, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* follows the cycles of a year, beginning with asparagus in March and ending with the birth of a brood of turkeys the following spring. Almost every chapter discusses the food Kingsolver and her family harvests each month as well as the hardships—and the delights—they experience trying to put together meals that are entirely seasonal.

In addition, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is a cookbook and also a series of short informational articles. Unlike Pollan, Kingsolver writes her text collaboratively. She herself authors all of the chapters, but her daughter Camille offers recipes for each season, and her spouse Steven Hopp produces boxed inserts throughout that contain the “hard facts” Kingsolver is covering within her descriptive prose. Even the book’s cover conveys this choice of a more domestic, intimate, and stereotypically feminine structure: whereas the cover of Pollan’s book is a recreation of an Italianesque still-life painting of grapes, egg, bone, and mushroom against a smooth black background, the cover of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is sage green with a nubby texture like linen, a pair of hands offer gorgeous Christmas lima beans to the reader, startlingly red and white, and stenciled vines curl out from around the wrists.

Kingsolver’s narrative voice is distinct from Pollan’s. Again to bring in students’ observations, Julia remarks, “Where Pollan is methodical and almost scientific, Kingsolver is didactic; where Kingsolver is familial, Pollan is reserved.” And, in fact, students react to these two narrators in powerfully contrasting ways, often enjoying Pollan and disliking Kingsolver. Nona explains this dynamic more fully:

Kingsolver... turns local eating, hunting, and growing into a domestic affair. Her stories of life outside of the industrial food chain all emphasize the familial and, quite often, the feminine aspects of this

lifestyle. Even a day of slaughter is referred to as “harvest day” and becomes an event of celebration in which the whole family participates rather than a bloody necessity.... [T]his more blatantly gendered style made Kingsolver’s book a bit difficult for me to read. I wondered, why did Kingsolver have to offer up a prayer on “harvest day”? Why is it that her daughter contributed recipes to her book, while her husband included facts and information related to agriculture and natural science? It seemed that Kingsolver ... was carving out a specific place for men and women, parents and children, within her community of sustainable consumption. And although Pollan’s text is oftentimes decidedly masculine, I found *Omnivore’s Dilemma* to be an easier, more approachable read because it did not make the same obvious, gender-related choices as *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

One significant way in which Kingsolver’s book is “obvious” in its gendering is in how it presents Kingsolver herself—every bit as much of a character in her text as Pollan is in his. One clear example of this gendering is how Kingsolver handles her own lactose intolerance as part of her narrative. She writes,

It’s fair to admit, I wasn’t a complete novice [at cheese making]. I had already been making cheese for a few years.... It wasn’t only a spirit of adventure that led my family into this line of cooking, but also bellyaches. Lactose intolerance is a common inherited condition in which a person’s gut loses, after childhood, its ability to digest the milk sugar called lactose. The sugary molecules float around undigested in the intestine, ferment, and create gassy havoc. The effect is somewhat like eating any other indigestible carbohydrate, such as cardboard or grass.¹⁷

Even in this brief quotation, the tools of the novelist are evident. Starting with a first-person, conversational tone, Kingsolver admits something to the reader in order to gain trust—in this case, after many pages of discussing cheese-making, she confesses that she already knew how to do it before her year of living off the food grid. Kingsolver also invokes her family and their bellyaches, which brings the domestic into her discussion, and her way of explaining the workings of lactose intolerance is

17. Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 136–37.

detailed and funny: she gives her reader the analogy of eating cardboard or grass, which would, in the reader’s own gut, also create “gassy havoc.”

What puts off students, however, is when Kingsolver transitions from these sorts of informal, chatty explanations about food and foodways to a more strident, overbearing, and—yes—maternal tone. Kingsolver follows her revelation that she is lactose intolerant with the following: “This is not an allergy or even, technically, a disorder ... a gradual cessation of milk digestion is normal. In all other mammals the milk-digesting enzyme shuts down soon after weaning. So when people refer to this as an illness, I’m inclined to point out we L.I.’s can very well digest the sugars in grown-up human foods like fruits and vegetables, thank you, we just can’t *nurse*. *From a cow*. Okay?”¹⁸ It’s not hard to see how this tone is condescending and bossy. Kingsolver employs italics for emphasis, which sounds like chiding. She also implies that those of us who continue to drink milk into adulthood are actually suckling infants—even worse, infants breast-feeding from another animal’s teats. And by calling herself and her fellows “L.I.’s,” she posits an us-versus-you defensiveness, a we-know-better-than-you stance, aimed once again at the vast majority of her readers who are milk drinkers. There’s no denying that this attempt to shame a reader for imbibing milk as an adult is akin to a stereotypical mother emotionally manipulating her child to “do the right thing” (e.g., not poop on the floor, not smear dinner all over the kitchen table, etc.). Again and again, students say that Kingsolver is a “nag,” a narrator they find “preachy” and “privileged,” and when it comes time to sell back their texts to the bookstore, they often keep the Pollan and return the Kingsolver.

That said, another student, Adrienne Milner Hieb, suggests an alternative way to approach reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*:

What intrigued me about reading Kingsolver was how she reclaimed the idea of a “woman in the kitchen” as a powerful concept. Rather than merely working for the food or feeling contained by the task of food preparation, she took control. First, by shaping herself and her family to fit the foodways around them, knowing their food in a radically different way; and then, even greater, crafting this food to work with their own ideals of sustainability, health, and even inventive

18. Ibid., 137, italics in original.

creation.... We are not constrained by the food around us, but, rather, we let it create us and shape us, so that we too, in turn, can create it into something that sustains us and also delights us.

Although Kingsolver's is a privileged household (for how many of us have the resources to spend a year on a private farm growing our own food — and then another year writing a book about this experience?), the domesticity that informs her book — both its form and its voice — is one that makes the act of creation central: creating a garden, a meal, a family, a community. And her focus on creation is collaborative. Not only does Kingsolver foster community by asking her daughter and spouse to contribute to her book and by including recipes within her text, she also suggests that a reader may cocreate meaning by cooking these dishes and entering the narrative. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* isn't merely consumed with the eyes; the reader is also invited to consume the book literally — to participate materially and bodily in Kingsolver's great experiment.

This collaborative approach is one that may also be reflected in the fact that Kingsolver isn't a mass-media diva. She hasn't overtly capitalized on the success of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*: she's published no subsequent books on food, she doesn't give lectures on this topic, and even when she does give a creative reading, she refuses to take reading fees. You won't see Kingsolver on *Oprah*; *TIME* magazine hasn't anointed her as woman of the year; and she's not participating in the making of any films or TV series based on her book. So while her approach is sometimes domineering and her text is clearly gendered, there is also a way in which her authorial method is deeply communal. Even her *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* website speaks to this impulse: it includes recipes from the book in a downloadable format and provides a virtual tour of the Kingsolver-Hopp family farm.

In applying this discussion to the food studies classroom, then, what is important is to make legible for students how Kingsolver and Pollan both assume a self-consciously gendered structure for their respective books — one constructed around the cycle of the seasons and the conventions of a cookbook, the other around a logical argument. In addition, it's crucial to examine the primary and secondary sources of Kingsolver's and Pollan's information, asking who is included as well as who is left out in this national discourse about the costs, both environmental and social, of agribusiness. In addition, when students read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, a teacher might push them to see that Pollan's seeming gender

neutrality is a function of lifelong reading practices that equate his academic, elitist, and white perspective with normativity, whereas Kingsolver's femininity may seem reductive but is also strategic.

This conversation is all the more critical now as college students are reading much more of Pollan than Kingsolver, which further legitimizes his voice and the approach of the "public intellectual" as one valued by professors and administrators alike. In a *Mother Jones* article about groups of students who are actually fighting against Pollan's condemnation of agribusiness — particularly the US beef industry — Wes Enzinna reveals that "more than 35,000 college students were assigned one of [Pollan's] books last year; *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is one of the most widely read titles on US campuses."¹⁹ Moreover, Pollan's book has been adopted not only in courses across many disciplines, but it is often the choice for a university's common reading — that is, a book read by the whole of an entering class. There's no denying, then, that the Pollan phenomenon is powerful on college campuses, both politically and culturally: as a result of reading his work, college-age students are now more savvy consumers, considering the origins of what they eat and some even becoming farmers or food activists in their own right. Yet such students also remain mostly blind to how Pollan, and Schlosser before him, have turned the broad-based workings of the food revolution in the United States into relatively narrow cults of masculinized food heroism.

*FARMER JANE, SISTAH VEGAN,
BY ANY GREENS NECESSARY, AND GOOD MEAT*

After juxtaposing Pollan's and Kingsolver's books, a meaningful shift in the food studies classroom is to turn to books and films that have been produced in the past four years — works which are, by and large, more diverse. One significant corrective to the Pollan phenomenon is the 2010 publication *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* by Temra Costa, a book that spotlights thirty American women who are engaged directly in growing food in sustainable ways. As Costa makes clear in her introduction, her motivation to interview these "Farmer Janes," as

19. Wes Enzinna, "Big Meat vs. Michael Pollan: A Beef Industry Group Crusades to Stop the Pollan-ation of America's College Students," *Mother Jones* (Nov/Dec 2010), <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2010/11/michael-pollan-backlash-beef-advocacy>.

she calls them, and record their stories is to show “the women behind the ‘delicious revolution’ that’s changing how we eat and farm in the United States.” When Costa was asked why she didn’t include male farmers in her book, she explains, “It’s not that men *aren’t* changing how we eat. Men are definitely involved—it’s just that they’re really good at getting all of the press.”²⁰

Costa’s interviewees represent a demographic that is the fastest growing group of new farmers in the United States—farmers who tend to grow their food through diversified, more sustainable means, who experiment with organic growing methods, and who are interested in direct farm-to-table initiatives such as farmers’ markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, where consumers sign up for regular deliveries of boxes of fresh produce straight from the farmers. Costa’s Farmer Janes also manage community gardens and co-op kitchens, run local-seasonal restaurants, advocate for better pay and treatment of migrant farm workers, network farmers in the same geographic region, and head up national nonprofit organizations that support sustainable agriculture. These women are both experienced and relatively new to farming; they hail from Oxnard, California, to Newark, New York; and they are not only white and middle class but also Latina, Native American, Asian American, and African American as well as coming from working-class backgrounds. In other words, Costa palpably represents diversity within our national food movement beyond mere gender.

Moreover, Costa approaches her project in a way that isn’t merely a series of honorifics. She humanizes the thirty representative Farmer Janes within her book—giving them both voice and identity as she recreates the character of each individual farmer within the context of her particular story of struggle and sustenance. Such chapters borrow the best elements of both Pollan and Kingsolver: Costa draws on the power of storytelling to recreate the individuality of each farmer; she adopts a friendly, knowledgeable tone; on her book’s website, she invites readers to contribute their own Farmer Jane narratives, thereby initiating their own farming network; and she incorporates “recipes” throughout

20. Temra Costa, *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* (Layton, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 2010), 6.

her book, although this time the recipes aren’t for seasonal dishes but for collective action—for what a consumer, a farmer, or a food-business owner can do to make food safer, healthier, and more accessible. In this way, Costa’s book moves beyond thinking through the economic and philosophical dilemmas of our national food economy or explaining how a single family was able to live off the US industrial food grid for a year. Rather, *Farmer Jane* becomes a how-to manual, empowering readers to participate in the food revolution in their own locales and through their own means. Costa moves her readers from their own kitchens and gardens, their own supermarkets and restaurants, into a foodscape that is both collective and national.

Three other texts produced in the past two years help to counteract the overexposure in US media of largely white, affluent, and erudite males as the primary faces of the food movement. Such visibility is often the product of resources and privileges that come with access to certain networks and social capital. Asking why these faces seem to be the authorities for advocating food changes is a good question, but whether it is the most important question is a query taken up by students in the undergraduate course Gender, Food, and Identity and in the graduate level course Feminist Cultural Criticism of Diasporic Texts. In both these courses, students consider if we are better served by considering sets of questions guided by intersectionality that encourage us to examine also the implications of race, class, nation, and region on the food movement. To foster thinking along these lines, students are assigned two books and a film that have all appeared in the past two years: *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, edited by A. Breeze Harper; *By Any Greens Necessary: A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat*, by Tracye Lynn McQuirter; and the film *Good Meat*, written and directed by Sam Hurst.

Edited by A. Breeze Harper, a staunch advocate for vegetarianism, environmentalism, and social justice, *Sistah Vegan* is the first book of its kind to privilege the written voices of women of color who abstain from eating or using any animal products. Yet, this is virtually the limit to the commonality among the contributors because most of the authors self-define veganism. The contributing authors have varying reasons for why they have adopted a non-meat lifestyle. For some, the motivation is concern for animals; for others, environmental injustice ties them to this way

of living; and others still are concerned with a more holistic awareness of their physical health. Geared toward a mixed audience of nonacademics and academics alike, the book incorporates reflections, poems, personal narratives, and some critical essays. Perhaps it is the *mélange* of writings by already marginalized voices that has kept Harper's works from gracing the *New York Times* bestseller list. Maybe it is the book's cover artwork illustrated by black vegan visual manipulator Janine Johnson and simply titled *Yum*. Using earth colors, the cover illustration depicts a brown-skinned, full-hipped woman, eyes raised to the sky, adorned in a green dress that curls around her like the recipes on the page that "swirl reminding her of the multiple delights she experiences while consuming natural foods."²¹ More likely, however, it is that Harper and those who contributed to the volume are devoid of the kinds of notoriety that would win them acclaim and fame. Even more plausible is the fact that the book's intention is to analyze how "whiteness, racialized consciousness, and ethics manifest in vegan culture"—the larger goal of Harper's *Sistah Vegan* project, which "focuses on how plant-based consumptive lifestyle is affected by factors of race, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other social injustices within the lives of black females."²²

Using the thoughts and experiences of North American black-identified vegans, a group heretofore rendered virtually invisible in the food movement, Harper reminds audiences that many African Americans (and people of color more generally) are and always have been vegetarians and vegans. Although contemporary interest was heightened by Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad and comedian and activist Dick Gregory in the 1960s, black vegetarians have existed since the period of enslavement. Far from the myths that persist, African American diets are not monolithic, reducible to the descriptor "soul food." Rather, this cuisine has been honed by migration, transnationalism, and sociocultural periods in history. Harper—along with Washington, DC, activist Tracye McQuirter—have chosen to focus their food messages within black communities. By framing her anthology with discussion of the

21. Janine Jackson, quoted from copyright page, A. Breeze Harper, *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2010).

22. A. Breeze Harper, The Sistah Vegan Project website, <http://sistahvegan.com/about>.

Afrikan Holistic Health Movement and the pioneering work of Queen Afua, among others, Harper marries eco-justice with the fight against racial injustice using a black feminist perspective. Healing herself and others in her community is part of her central mission.

On this point, most students—graduate and undergraduate—agree. Several graduate students, however, found themselves wanting more clear definitions of some of the terms that were often used, but seldom unpacked, in *Sistah Vegan*. For instance, Harper's authors use words and phrases such as "colonization" or "colonial mindset" without a clear sense of their context. Other students found phrases such as "people make choices" problematic because at times such phrases read as statements of fact, while at other times they seem to be deployed as an indictment. Equally frustrating, in their opinion, is the proselytizing tone of the anthology without a direct interrogation of individual authors' varying class positions and the ways in which class affects their change in consciousness. For example, one student writes, "I like Breeze's work but I kept wondering how do you have the time to prepare [many of those foods], who has time to think about food throughout the day? What circles must you move in to interact with other vegans consistently?" This latter question in particular is an important one because often what is elided by those who advocate "good" eating, local eating, vegetarianism, and veganism is knowledge of and familiarity with a new food lexicon, which is often correlated with particular sites of social capital and socioeconomic status in general.

Another woman of color and author who is entering the mainstream discourse with the goal of educating consumers, but especially African American women, is Tracye McQuirter. While they are reading *Sistah Vegan*, students also study McQuirter's health and nutrition guide *By Any Greens Necessary*. This volume is an ideal introductory text and also remarkable for its packaging. Knowing that many readers in her target audience enjoy foods such as pork that are considered unhealthy, McQuirter begins the book with her own journey to veganism. She details her numerous false starts before finally transitioning to fully becoming a vegan, with the benefits of feeling healthier and experiencing a sense of greater clarity. Of critical importance to McQuirter is her awareness of the strong black woman myth, pervasive in African American com-

munities, that holds that a large woman is a strong woman.²³ Seeking to clarify and debunk this myth, McQuirter writes that Black women “are living large, and it’s killing us. We have the highest rates of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer — the top four killers in the nation.”²⁴ References to “living large” and her subtitle, *A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat*, suggest that McQuirter is closely connected to her audience. In this era of “comin’ correct” and “keepin’ it real,” she employs the lingo needed to capture the attention of the women (and men) in her community. But more than just lingo, “phat” in its current form has been heavily associated with the world of rap music, often to describe the sexiness of a woman — “pretty hot and tempting.” It is also a term that means “the essence of cool,” according to hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, who previously owned the Phat Farm clothing conglomerate. The division designed for women and girls is Baby Phat, which has as its logo a demure-looking cat with an elongated curled tail.

Akin to Costa’s *Farmer Jane*, McQuirter’s book is clearly a how-to workbook, with photos of enticing vegan foods, menus, and recipes. She is not only inclined to lead the proverbial horse to the well, but to entice her/him to drink. To this end, McQuirter seems less interested in the socioeconomic aspects of the vegan lifestyle. Rather, she suggests in her introduction that, according to the Hartman Group, a leading market research firm, “blacks are 25 percent more likely than whites to buy organic foods.”²⁵ Her statement begs the question as to why the other 75 percent are still on the fence. Undergraduate and graduate students alike

23. For more on this phenomenon see Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “The ‘Loves’ and ‘Troubles’ of African American Women’s Bodies,” *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 232–49; and Margaret K. Bass, “On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture,” *Recovering the Black Female Body*, ed. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 219–30. See also Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and Psyche Williams-Forson, “Still Dying for Some Soul Food,” *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

24. Tracey L. McQuirter, “Introduction,” *By Any Greens Necessary* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), xxiii.

25. Ibid.

would have liked to see McQuirter grapple a bit more with why some black people are reluctant to buy organic foods and/or even to adopt a vegan lifestyle, but answering that question is not the goal of McQuirter’s book. Rather, McQuirter’s goal is more pointed — to attract African American/black women who want to maintain what their community prizes (curvy bodies) but in a healthy way. In this aspect, both McQuirter’s and Harper’s books are interesting for their packaging and marketing. The cover of *By Any Greens Necessary* features a picture of McQuirter herself with a cheerful smile, a short natural hairstyle, and her body tastefully adorned with bangles and rings suggestive of an ethnic flair. She looks slyly at the camera with one hip to the side, indicating a woman with sass and grace. Her red shirt and the bunch of kale in her hand are nice contrasts to the white background. She looks fresh and alive. Just at the curve of her hip is the phrase “and look Phat,” underscored by a vertical carrot, which separates her title from her name, which is followed by her credentials, MPH (master of public health). These are subtle elements that are noticed by students and seen as drawing on the intersections of gender, race, and class.

Similar to the other authors reviewed in this essay, Harper and McQuirter are spreading a message of healthy living and eating. Although McQuirter is considered a public health nutrition expert, she is not trained as a physician and in this she is similar to the other authors discussed here. However, the copyright page of Harper’s book goes so far as to offer a notice of disclaimer, reminding readers that hers is a reference book and that people are urged to seek “competent medical help.” Yet unlike California-based vegan chef and activist Bryant Terry, whose work has received widespread media coverage in popular outlets, Harper and McQuirter have yet to receive such exposure. A quick Google search reveals that the *Journal of Critical Animal Studies* reviewed *Sistah Vegan*, as have several bloggers and readers who have posted thoughts on Amazon.com. Eco-activist Majora Carter (author, producer, and wife of Spike Lee), Tonya Lewis Lee, chef Bryant Terry, and several medical professionals are among those who have read and reviewed *By Any Greens Necessary*. Most, if not all, reviews focus on how people can empower themselves and make a change for the better. Few, if any, place their emphasis on the credibility (or implausibility) of the author’s voice, as we saw with Schlosser or Nestle.

While the media still privilege men’s voices as authoritative and most knowledgeable about the food landscape, women are nonetheless leaving their mark. And having several different kinds of representation in

the food movement—grassroots, top-down, political, popular, international—encourages students to enter the discussion at the place(s) where they feel most comfortable. Also, such plurality of representations simultaneously induces students to ask questions about whose voices are still not represented.

This latter question led students to conduct searches for Native American people who are engaged in the fight to combat obesity and other health challenges that their communities face. Two sources were of particular interest: Margaret Robinson's article "Indigenous Veganism: Feminist Natives do eat tofu" and the documentary film *Good Meat*, written and directed by Sam Hurst and coproduced by Native American Public Telecommunications.

At issue in both of these works is the authority of Native peoples to speak for themselves. Robinson—a vegan Mi'kmaq scholar living in Toronto—argues that an eco-feminist reading of Mi'kmaq legends reveals that veganism is rooted in indigenous culture. She writes, "Portraying veganism as white erases world majority vegans and their dietary choices from the ethical and religious landscape and depicts whites as the only people who care about health, or the ethics of animal consumption. When veganism is constructed as white, First Nations people who choose a meatless diet are portrayed as sacrificing cultural authenticity."²⁶ In reality, however, most global peoples have access to less meat than we tend to assume. As Robinson goes on to point out, Native peoples living on reservations suffer from the same food concerns as other racially and economically oppressed people—lack of access to nutrient-rich foods. Robinson cites three primary causes for poor diets among Mi'kmaq communities: low income, lack of access to transportation, and reservation land that is unsuitable for agriculture, fishing, or hunting. This has led to the consumption of highly processed foods such as peanut butter, hot dogs, and bologna. For students approaching these issues through texts and documentary film, observing the experiences of the central figure in *Good Meat*, Beau LaBeau, visually reinforces these problems. The film, which contains the tagline, "A look at one man's struggle to maintain a traditional Native diet on a modern reservation," follows the experience of a formerly slim basketball player and South Dakota Lakota who now finds himself at thirty-five years old, weighing in at 333 pounds.

26. Margaret Robinson, "Indigenous Veganism: Feminist Natives do eat tofu," *The Scavenger*, Nov 13, 2012, <http://www.thesavenger.net/animals/indigenous-veganism-feminist-natives-do-eat-tofu-237794-504.html>.

The documentary, which provides a wonderful lens through which students learn about ethnicity, class, gender, and nation, follows LaBeau as he struggles to switch his diet after learning that he has type 2 diabetes. The disease places LaBeau firmly alongside many other diabetes sufferers on the Pine Ridge Reservation, including his mother, whose diabetes, LaBeau believes, contributed to her untimely death from cancer at fifty-two. A staple of LaBeau's new diet is the "good meat," a two-year-old buffalo from the Oglala Sioux tribe's Parks and Recreation range. With the aid of his doctor, LaBeau is able to purchase a buffalo for four hundred dollars and to raise another four hundred dollars to have it butchered and cut into burgers and steaks. With this change in diet and by starting an exercise regimen, LaBeau is able to shed roughly one hundred pounds. Even so, the traditional Lakota diet his ancestors ate for hundreds of years is not sustainable today. Not only is he unable to purchase buffalo (and obtain the permission needed from the Native Council and National Park Service) on a continuing basis, but also he does not have access to other nutritional foods needed to support his efforts. At one point in the documentary, LaBeau and his sisters, with whom he lives, discuss an all-too-familiar scenario for many who are food insecure: if they take government assistance and buy the fresh fruits and vegetables that are offered on the reservation, they are depleted of food by mid-month. Alternatively, by using their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cards and driving ninety miles to Rapid City to purchase food at a Walmart, they are able to buy more, even if less healthy. LaBeau's sisters admit they are heavily influenced by television commercials and the cries of their children who want highly processed sugary foods.

Instrumental in helping to foster changes in their communities are nutritionists from Native communities, and on some reservations there are exercise rooms and events and educational programs organized to promote awareness. Critical here is that these programs come from within the community rather than from "authorities" who know little or anything about those whom they want to "reform."

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the current food movement has resulted in some powerful corporate and policy-based changes in how food is produced and consumed in the United States. Eric Schlosser's insistence that fast food, migrant, and meatpacking workers be treated with more fairness has resulted in more visibility for these populations as well as better food safety protocols from the Food and Drug Administration. Thanks to the

efforts of Michael Pollan, processed food producers are starting to take high-fructose corn syrup—what Pollan has dubbed a “food-like substance”—out of their crackers, cookies, cereal, and sodas. And widely celebrated documentaries such as Pollan and Schlosser’s *Food, Inc.* have raised public awareness about the most recent US Farm Bill as well as the environmentally bankrupt practices of seed companies such as Monsanto. There is much to celebrate in the work of Pollan and Schlosser, and it’s important for food studies students to read their books and watch the documentaries that they have helped produce.

However, although the most popular faces of the current food movement should be lauded for their efforts, too often these well-known individuals are uncritical of their own inherent biases and problems. This is a movement that is largely guided by the media spotlight on white male authorities and middle-class, mostly white lifestyles—with an overreliance on a few talking heads such as Pollan and Schlosser. Moreover, the movement is one that focuses heavily on organic and locavore mantras without examining the feasibility of these choices for different communities, much less some of the more pressing issues such as a living wage that allows people to purchase the recommended foods. It is also a movement that seeks to “reform bad eating,” which in its phrasing suggests a dangerous binary between “good” and “bad” practices of consumption. This revolution that we in the United States (and elsewhere as well) are in the midst of calls not for a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather methods that are culturally sustainable and feasible. Teaching this movement in the college and graduate classroom necessitates both a wide selection of written and visual texts as well as a serious interrogation of the gender, race, class, and ethnic food discourses that inform them.²⁷

27. Beyond the works we’ve reviewed in this article, there are even more that deserve attention for how they continue to complicate and extend discussions around the food movement and diversify the discourse beyond those few talking heads the media have anointed. Those who wish to read further on this topic should look to Alison Hope Alkon’s *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and the Green Economy* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Alkon and Julian Agyeman’s *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); and Psyche Williams-Forsen’s coedited anthology with Carole Counihan, *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World* (New York: Routledge, 2011). There are also many food documentaries in addition to *Good Meat* that deserve viewing such as *King Corn* (2007); *Dirt! The Movie* (2009); and *Forks Over Knives* (2011).

MELANIE DAWSON

Constructing an Interdisciplinary Course on Literature and Environmental Feminism

IN HER RECENT BOOK, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*, Elizabeth Ammons describes her investment in environmental literature, a subject matter that is appealing to her in part because of its roots in what she casts as tangible realities. Ammons positions ecocritical work as a corrective to her perception of academic abstraction. Creating contrasts between environmental writing and a literary emphasis on what she terms the “‘inexpressibility’ of language,” Ammons views the former as privileging real-world consequences that ground the text and, with it, the discipline of literary study.¹

While I understand the intersection of world and text in somewhat different ways and have no wish to suggest that ecological criticism is valuable because of its referentiality alone, there is in ecofeminist writing a real-world application that helps students both probe literary texts and confront theoretical complexity in ways that are enhanced by the kinds of tangible realities Ammons highlights. Powerfully organizing the ways that students imagine their personal and collective pasts as well as their material, corporeal, and familial futures, environmental writing offers various avenues through which to address feminist concerns—those situated in the colonial past, the present day, or the

1. Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2010), 5.

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Contents

2014 | VOLUME 40 | NUMBER 2

- 244 **Laura Anh Williams**
Gender, Race, and an Epistemology of the Abattoir
in *My Year of Meats*
- 273 **Mecca Jamilah Sullivan**
The Anvil (*Short Story*)
- 277 **Arlene Avakian**
Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs (*Review Essay*)
- 304 **Psyche Williams-Forson and Jennifer Cognard-Black**
Where Are the Women in Contemporary Food Studies?
Ruminations on Teaching Gender and Race
in the Food Studies Classroom
- 333 **Melanie Dawson**
Constructing an Interdisciplinary Course
on Literature and Environmental Feminism
- 353 **Lauren Camp**
Lighten; Anyone Else; Woman's Body with Birds (*Poetry*)
- 356 **Barbara Sjoholm**
The Art of Recalling: Lapland and the Sami
in the Art of Emilie Demant Hatt and Johan Turi (*Art Essay*)

- 394 **Kelly Conroy**
WWII Factory (*Poetry*)
- 396 **Carolyn Sachs and Anouk Patel-Campillo**
Feminist Food Justice: Crafting a New Vision
- 411 **Eileen Boris and Jennifer N. Fish**
"Slaves No More": Making Global Labor Standards
for Domestic Workers
- 444 **Debarati Sen**
Fair Trade vs. *Swaccha Vyāpār*: Women's Activism
and Transnational Justice Regimes in Darjeeling, India

News and Views

- 473 **Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein**
The Fate of Care Worker Unionism and the Promise
of Domestic Worker Organizing: An Update
- 480 **Nivedita Menon**
A Uniform Civil Code in India: The State of the Debate in 2014
- 487 *Notes on Contributors*
- 494 *New Publications in Women and Gender Studies*
- 