

Canadian Food Studies

La Revue canadienne des  
études sur l'alimentation

Editorial

## **Filling our plate: A spotlight on feminist food studies**

Jennifer Brady, Barbara Parker, Susan Belyea, and Elaine Power

The idea for this special issue emerged from the enthusiastic response to a day-long series of sessions on feminist food studies that were held during the joint conference of the Canadian Association of Food Studies, the Association for the Study of Food and Society, and the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, in 2016, in Scarborough, Ontario. The sessions brought together feminist food scholars from across Canada and the U.S. to share their work and to collectively claim space within the conference program to address feminist perspectives in food studies. For us, and the many presenters and attendees at the sessions, the opportunity to gather together and savour more than the usual one or two conference sessions devoted to feminist perspectives was a long-awaited pleasure that did not disappoint. The presenters and audience members illuminated many of the issues, complexities, and perspectives that an explicitly feminist lens brings to food studies. The energy and excitement that infused the room as each presenter shared their work filled our plates that day.

Yet there are many more ways that feminist food studies can and should continue to grow. For example, feminist food studies must continue to confront the complexities of oppression and privilege that are embedded in legacies of colonialism, whiteness, racism, patriarchy, and classism. Our aim for this special issue is to highlight a slice of current Canadian feminist food scholarship that addresses and redresses these legacies. As feminist food scholars we are interested in questions such as: How might feminist theory and intersectional analyses of food systems, policy, and practices enhance, enliven, and deepen critical perspectives in food studies? What might feminist food studies offer to the pedagogical, methodological, ontological, and epistemological approaches used to understand the socio-materialities of food? What work has already been accomplished by feminist food scholars? What questions have yet to be addressed? What disciplines, identities, and experiences inform or are missing from this activity? What is the future of feminist food studies? We hope that by highlighting work that sheds light

on these questions, feminist food studies will continue to grow in presence and impact in the pages of CFS, and at the annual CAFS conference, as well as in the thinking and practice of food studies scholars and activists.

## Feminist food scholarship

Feminist scholars have explored the unique relationships women have with food and written about resistance and representations of gender, race and racism, ethnicity, social and economic class, health, nutrition, bodies, fat politics and activism, eating disorders and body image, family and feeding, emotion, meat-eating, caregiving, labour, food security, and embodiment through literature and food scholarship that cuts across disciplinary boundaries.<sup>1</sup> This special issue is indebted to the work of feminist food scholars who have paved the way for us as guest editors, and for the authors who have contributed to this volume.

In their foundational text, *From Betty Crocker to a Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives in Women and Food*, feminist food studies pioneers Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (2005) note the dearth of food studies scholarship that addresses gender, especially as it intersects with other social identities, particularly in relation to race, colonialism, and globalization. Avakian and Haber set out to document the history of women's and feminist writing on food, and to "map the terrain of what we may now call feminist food studies" (2005, ix). Since the publication of their book in 2005, food scholarship that focuses on race, class, and gender has steadily grown, some of which has taken the kind of feminist, intersectional approach that Avakian and Haber (2005) explicitly endorse, for instance, work by Harper (2010) and Williams-Forson (2006). However, the uptake of feminist perspectives in addressing the scholarship, concerns, and conversations taking place within Canadian food studies has been limited. We are left wanting more food studies scholarship that attends to intersectional analyses, and other critical perspectives that theorize power and underscore the social construction of race, class, gender and their intersections. Hence, this special issue seeks to recognize the work of past and present feminist food studies scholars, and to call on the Canadian food studies community to infuse its work with the critical, theoretical perspectives that feminist scholarship brings to the table.

This special issue also raises questions that feminist food scholars must grapple with in claiming space for feminist scholarship. How are we to understand and characterize the emerging body of literature that might answer Avakian and Haber's call for a feminist food studies? What is feminist food studies, and why is it important? How might naming and claiming space for

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Adams, 1999; Barndt, 2003; Bentley, 1998; Bordo, 2004; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Caplan, 1996; Charles & Kerr, 1988; Counihan, 1999; DeVault, 1991; Harper, 2010; Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013; Inness, 2005; Julier, A, 2005; Lupton, 1996; Murcott, 1982; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Szabo, 2014; Van Esterik, 1999; Voski Avakian & Haber, 2005; Williams-Forson, 2006

feminist food studies work to include or exclude the work of scholars who may or may not identify as feminist food studies scholars? For Julier (2005), a feminist food studies must theorize women's experiences of the interconnections between food consumption and production. That is, feminist food studies must consider how women's experiences of embodiment and identity overlap with their participation and labour in food systems through paid employment and unpaid work in the home and community, as well as through representations of gender and food. Allen and Sachs (2007) echo Julier's vision for feminist food studies, which they characterize as necessarily comprising three "food domains that define women's relationships to food"; 1) the material—women's participation in the paid labour market; 2) the socio-cultural—women's roles as feeders and household food managers are connected in complex ways to their oppression, but also in some cases, access to power as the gatekeepers of others' food; 3) the corporeal—women's emotional and embodied connection to eating, body image, and the everyday struggles in the face of pressures to be thin (p. 1). To this end, feminist post-structural scholars have considered how the material, the socio-cultural and embodied experiences of food overlap and are socially constructed through material practices and shifting discourses about gender, the family, health, sexuality, and ethics (Probyn, 2000; Lupton, 1996). Yet, there is more that feminist theory brings to food studies.

Feminist theory points to the social constructedness of binary sex and gender categories, and invites us to ask how "doing food" is contrapuntally about "doing gender" (Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this vein, feminist scholars have considered how women's material and embodied experiences of food are socially constructed through the material practices and language of shifting discourses that are infused with dynamic power relations (Probyn, 2000; Lupton, 1996). In other words, feminist scholars have considered not simply how food is important in the lives of women, but how food and foodways—the everyday practices of feeding, producing, eating, cooking, procuring, and preparing food—are integral to making, or "doing", one's gender (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Szabo, 2014 and 2014b; DeVault, 1991). In this view "doing" gender is seen as a "routine, methodological, and recurring accomplishment" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pg. 126); it is the outcome of everyday acts that when performed, simultaneously produces the gender of the performer, as well those around them. One earlier example of this approach is DeVault's *Feeding the Family* in which she notes that in the context of heteronormative families, "[b]y feeding the family, a woman conducts herself as recognizable womanly", but also in being served, a man conducts himself as recognizably manly (DeVault, 1991, pg. 118). At the same time, to understand these performances feminist food studies scholars must address the ways that being "acceptable men and women" (DeVault, 1991, pg. 118) is crosscut by race and racism, class and classism, sexuality and homophobia, (dis)ability, and culture. Hence, unearthing the inherently complex power dynamics beyond "doing gender," but rather "doing difference" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995) necessitates that feminist food studies scholars adopt an intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) orientation to their work.

Last, we believe that, much like food studies has much to gain from a feminist lens, so too does feminism and feminist theory have to gain from the focused attention to food offered in

feminist food studies. Feminism and feminist scholarship has not always been welcoming of food scholarship by or about women, albeit for good reason. Doing food scholarship has often meant further marginalizing oneself from academic and/or feminist communities that did not value food as an object of research or theorization. Women writing about food have risked being further relegated to the “pink ghetto” of the academy. Although writing about food has taken on new meaning since the founding of CAFS in 2005 marked the advent of food studies in Canada, writing about food from an explicitly feminist position has remained marginal within Canadian food studies (Power & Koc, 2008). With this special issue, we echo the calls of past scholarship to strengthen, advance, diversify, and proliferate feminist food studies.

### In this issue

The papers included in this special issue highlight a range of issues, perspectives, and approaches that add to the small, but growing body of literature in feminist food studies. Andrea Collins hones in on the first component of Allen and Sachs’ framework--the material--in considering how sexism shapes agricultural practices. As Collins notes, attention to gender is rarely included in the solutions to improve local resource management by global players such as the World Bank. On a similar note Carly Fraser and Kate Parizeau highlight the materiality of gendered food practices in addressing the ways in which food waste is managed at a household level. Angela Lee uses an intersectional ecofeminist approach to illuminate new food technologies and sustainable food production. Christina Doonan’s paper addresses an issue that cuts across these three domains: breastfeeding. Doonan argues that breastfeeding must be taken up within the right to food/food security agenda in a way that underscores the constraints on women’s “choice” to breastfeed and considers how their access to other economic, social, and cultural rights prevents or enables them to do so. Natalie Doonan’s multi-media piece, “Voir le jour,” also takes up breastfeeding to challenge patriarchal notions of public and private spheres as distinct spheres that, she argues, underlie the often vitriolic silencing of women’s experiences of breastfeeding. Adding to Christina Doonan’s and Natalie’s Doonan’s pieces on breastfeeding is Lesley Frank’s work, *Finding Formula*. Frank outlines the ways in which public policy failings have created wide-reaching barriers to baby formula access for women living in poverty, thus exacerbating the issue of infant food insecurity.

Mary Ann Martin takes an intersectional approach to explore how class informs the construction of what it means to be a “good” mother, as well as a “good” community food program participant. Angela Lee uses an intersectional ecofeminist approach to illuminate new food technologies and sustainable food production. Finally, Dana Hart explores vegan blogs to consider how gender is discursively constructed in ways that reinforce, rather than critique hegemonic masculinity.

## Feminist food studies: Looking forward

A key tension for feminist food scholars is the divergent epistemological and methodological approaches that comprise feminist food scholarship, including the work that makes up this special issue. We urge feminist food scholars to wrestle and work with, rather than try to resolve, the tensions between needing to address women's roles and experiences within the food system as eaters, feeders, and (re)producers, and exploring gender as a constructed aspect of identity. The articles in this special issue, like the previously published work discussed above, are situated within these divergent approaches: a modernist approach that seeks to explore women and their roles and experiences, and a postmodern approach that understands masculinity and femininity as performances, a “doing” of identity that is accomplished through everyday practices, including foodways (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This tension provides fruitful ground on which feminist food studies can foster new theoretical and methodological approaches to elaborating critical perspectives of food in relation to gender and other intersecting socio-material categories, such as race, class, ability, sexuality, and so on.

What is the Future of Feminist Food Studies? Undoubtedly, there is much work to be done. Cairns and Johnston remind us that the *personal is political* when it comes to the distinct relationships between women and food, and remind us that “there are many—too many—examples of gendered food injustice, creating multiple opportunities for mobilization at the intersection of food and femininity” (2015, p. 173). Similarly, Sachs and Patel-Campillo (2014) argue that “feminist food justice” is necessary for moving toward the goals and visions of the food and food justice movements (pg. 404). We are pleased with the contributions in this special issue, and feel that the papers included move feminist food studies one step closer to scholarship and action for food justice, which necessarily demands feminist analysis. We look forward to the work that follows and that continues to grow feminist food studies!

**Acknowledgements:** The guest editors would like to thank the *Canadian Food Studies* editorial team for their collaboration with initiating and developing this issue, and for guiding each manuscript through the process of review, revisions, copy-editing, and layout. We also thank the University of Waterloo for providing the OJS online platform, plus essential library staff support.

## References

- Allen, P., & Sachs, C. (2007). Women and Food Chains: The Gendered Politics of Food, *International Journal of Sociology and Food*, 15(1), 1-23.
- Brady, J., Gingras, J., & Power E. (2016). Still Hungry: A Feminist Perspective on Food, Foodwork, the Body and Food Studies, in M. Koc, J. Sumner, & A. Winson (eds.), *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies*,(pp. 185-204). Toronto: Oxford University Press.

- Cairns, K., & Johnston, J. (2015). *Food and Femininity*, London: Bloomsbury Academic Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, 139-167.
- Julier, A. P. (2005). Hiding Gender and Race in the Discourse of Commercial Food Consumption, in A. V. Avakian & B. Haber (Eds.), *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (pp. 163-184). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Harper, B. (2010). Social Justice Beliefs and Addiction to Uncompassionate Consumption, in A. Breeze Harper (ed.), *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health and Society*, (pp. 20-41). New York: Lantern Books.
- Hayden, D. (1982). *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Hayes-Conroy, A., & Hayes-Conroy, J. (2013). *Doing Nutrition Differently: Critical Approaches to Diet and Dietary Intervention*, Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Heldke, L. (2013). Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism. In C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (Eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*(pp. 394-408). New York: Routledge.
- Hooks, B. (1992). *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press.
- Inness, S. A. (2006). *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender & Class at the Dinner Table*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Power, E., & Koc, M. (2008). A Double-double and a maple-glazed doughnut. *Food, Culture, and Society*, 11(3), 263-267.
- Risman, B. (2004). Gender as social structure. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 429-450.
- Sachs, C., & Patel-Campillo, A. (2014). Feminist Food Justice: Crafting a New Vision, *Feminist Studies*, 40(2), 396-410.
- Sachs, C., Allen, P., Terman, R. A., Hayden, J., & Hatcher, C. (2014). Front and Back of the House: Social-spatial food inequalities in food work. *Agriculture & Human Values*, 31(1), 3-17.
- Szabo, M. (2014). Men Nurturing Through Food: Challenging Gender Dichotomies Around Domestic Cooking, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(1), 18-31.
- Szabo, M. (2014b). "I'm a real catch": The blurring of alternative and hegemonic masculinities in men's talk about home cooking, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 44, 228-235.

Tipton-Martin, T. (2015). *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

Thompson, B. (1996). *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: American Women Speak Out on Eating Problems*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D.H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 12, 125-151.

Williams-Forsen, P., & Wilkerson, A. (2011). Intersectionality and Food Studies. *Food, Culture & Society*, 14(1), 7-28.