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## Book Review

**The Politics of the Pantry: Stories, food and social change**

Michael Mikulak

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013: 268 pages

Review by Jennifer Braun (University of Alberta)

There is no shortage of books, magazines, lifestyle shows, and academic texts that have something to say about what, where, how, and with whom we should eat. In his book *The Politics of the Pantry*, Michael Mikulak critically engages with this *storied food*, a genre of literature, film, and new media that attempts to reveal the “truth” behind the veil of food and the hidden worlds of agriculture. He does so in order to take up key issues and ideas related to food, global warming, and the future of the economy that has been examined in popular texts and mainstream media. His book is “an attempt to understand how we got here, where we are going, and how we can get somewhere else” (24). Throughout the book Mikulak weaves personal stories and anecdotes related to his journey with local food that informs and enlivens his academic theory and analysis, attempting to rupture the literary boundary between prose and academic inquiry. He knits together an optimism about the power of pantry politics with a more reflexive and realistic picture of the major stumbling blocks the alternative food movement often faces.

In the most theoretically dense first chapter, he provides a survey of environmentalism over the last four decades, specifically focusing on the tension between economic and non-economic representations of nature. The tension between these two value systems is viewed as a crucial site of struggle in the coming decades, as humanity attempts to restructure production and consumption along less socially and ecologically destructive paths. Using the examples of industrial organic agriculture, vertical farming, and ecological economics, Mikulak considers the different stories about “how we got here and where we are going” (23). Particularly interesting

is his discussion of the wide ranges of responses to the environmental crisis that these stories animate—ecological modernization, techno-utopian, and apocalyptic—and the relationship between capitalism, growth, and economic arguments.

Chapter two enquires into the stories that get told about food, popular accounts that attempt to ‘lift the veil’ on the industrial food system. This includes works by Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, Jamie Oliver, Robert Kenner, Carl Honore, and other popular authors and filmmakers. Interestingly, he breaks down the food literature genre into sub-genres—the commodity biography, nostalgic pastoralism, utopian pastoralism, and the foodshed memoir—to consider what each of them brings to an understanding of production and consumption, knowledge, and agency in relation to capitalism. Mikulak pays special attention to the role of food experiments and life writing, and the autobiographical nature of many of the texts (including his own), arguing that they can serve as a navigational tool that allows the authors to traverse the space of what he calls “the utopian leap” (23).

In the third and final chapter we see Mikulak work through his own embodied attempts to become a locavore in his foodshed located in Hamilton, Ontario. He does this in an effort to demonstrate how food can become both a subject and object of knowledge. This chapter is the most experimental as he tries to reconcile his own experiences while looking “squarely at some of the contradictions of scale and scope, class, gender, and access” (23) in the alternative food movement. One of the most important aspects of this embodiment and enchantment that he experiences—like some other food writers—is the ways in which it opens up time and space for alternative value practices and utopian thinking to germinate. Referring back to the different storied food examples from the previous chapter, along with his own, and their contribution to new ways of imagining and embodying alternative food practices, Mikulak expertly weaves together a story of tremendous hope that falls nothing short of inspiring—upon first reading. “Without hope for a better world, without the small moments of micro-utopian practice that build upon the pleasures of everyday life, the soil will not be ready for future harvest” (23).

To his credit, Mikulak undertakes a very difficult and tenuous task by trying to bridge elements of the popular imaginary on food and academic analysis, by showing how the two combine to contribute to a more robust, hopeful and sustainable future. He draws strong connections between responses to the environmental crisis articulated in chapter one, and their effect on popular writing and media on food articulated in chapter two. His writing has an almost enchanting quality to it; everything is written with an expressive and inspiring flare, lined with rich descriptions and articulate observations. It is not hard if you are a middle class, well-educated, and burgeoning “foodie” to be enthralled and inspired by this book. On the surface, it makes sense; it is a thoughtful and earnestly written narrative that conveys the tremendous value of storied food, personal experience, embodiment, and imagination in rewriting and re-envisioning a better future for food.

On the flip side, however, there are some substantial gaps that left his analysis somewhat wanting. Mikulak makes several references to the social justice side of alternative food as part of pantry politics. While he does an adequate job of naming mainstream critiques of the food

literature and alternative food movement on issues of race, class, gender, and scale, for example, his analysis never moves beyond that descriptive position. He skirts these issues without directly engaging with them and the implications they carry for thinking about the future of food. Similarly, in the third chapter, Mikulak claims to squarely address issues of scale, class, gender, race, and access in his own food experiments and in the larger food context, but in many ways does not really accomplish this goal in any substantive or compelling way. He acknowledges that they exist, but does not include an indication to the reader how they fit within the larger 'politics' of the politics of the pantry. These are political issues that require a new 'utopian imaginary' because they continue to haunt scholars, policy makers, and activists alike. This is not to say that he should have come up with some sort of prescriptive set of guidelines or policies to address the very gendered, classed, and raced nature of the alternative food movement. Rather, as part of the task of reimagining and traversing utopian terrains of alternative food, it would have been fitting to see more of a struggle and direct engagement with the very real barriers and impassés impeding the 'utopian ideal' to the food system that he so eloquently describes.

It is difficult to accurately pinpoint the audience for which this book is intended and well suited, an indication that it was probably meant for a diverse set of readers. In one stream, it leans more toward a lay person or popular readership, as it requires a substantial knowledge of pop culture figures in the food arena. However, it provides a substantial theoretical bent in its analysis, moving it more towards the academic crowd. This might be an excellent undergraduate text to introduce concepts like ecological modernization, green capitalism, greening of capitalism, and their relation to the food movement. It provides an excellent basic analysis and mainstream critique of food writing, which would also be well suited for an undergraduate setting. His book is an interesting and creative attempt to bridge some of the narratives of the popular food literature genre with a more thorough theoretical and analytical base, bringing into conversation two diverging sets of readership in an effort to imagine and inspire a different vision for the future of food.

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