

Melissa A. Goldthwaite (editor)

Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics

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Reviewed by Nancy M. Williams, 2018

Nancy Williams is an associate professor of philosophy at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Her main research interests are feminist philosophy and ethical theory with a particular focus on animal protectionism and food ethics. Her most recent publications include "The Ethics of Care and Humane "Meat: Why Care is Not Ambiguous about 'Humane' Meat," (*Journal of Social Philosophy*, 2015) and "Meat Eating and Masculinity: A Foucauldian Analysis," in *Just Food: Philosophy, Justice and Food*, edited by Jill Dieterle (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015).

Historically, food and food-related practices have been relegated to the margins in the academy. Like many topics related to women and/or the body, food in male-dominated fields was often deemed unfit for serious scholarly activity. Melissa A. Goldthwaite's *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics* aims to rectify this marginalization. The book makes a strong case for the value and scholarly import of food studies and feminist rhetorical theory. In other words, the authors in this collection show how various food-related activities can be an effective site upon which we can critically examine sociopolitical feminist issues. The book consists of eighteen chapters and is divided into four parts: (1) Purposeful Cooking: Recipes for Historiography, Thrift, and Peace, (2) Defining Feminist Food Writing, (3) Rhetorical Representations of Food-Related Practices, and (4) Rhetorical Representations of Bodies and Cultures.

Part I examines the different rhetorical ways we can identify women's personal, cultural, and political identities in cookbooks, recipes, and food thrift-shopping manuals. These rhetorical forms, we learn, can be sites of historical import. Consider, for instance, chapter 1, "Writing Recipes, Telling Histories: Cookbooks as Feminist Historiography" by Carrie Helms Tippen, where we discover how a cookbook, *Sweets: Soul Food Desserts and Memories*, can act as both a treasure of delicious southern recipes (for example, grandmother MyMy's pound cake recipe) and a family memoir. We are encouraged to think of the cookbook and the accompanying commentary as a feminist narrative about the Great Migration, when African Americans left the South for the industrial promise of the North. According to Tippen, the cookbook also speaks to racial strife and nostalgia about southern familial ties. To be sure, we are not talking about historical literature in the conventional sense; instead, we point to a cookbook as an alternative way to narrate one's sense of place and one's racial and gender identity. In chapter 2, "The Embodied Rhetoric of Recipes," we are invited to think of handwritten recipe cards not as mere two-dimensional objects of instruction but as "embodied rhetoric." Many bodies are involved in its creation: the author's body (holding the pen or pencil and inscribing a culinary dish into language), the bodies that will share the card with other bodies, and the bodies that will be nourished by the recipes. Sometimes feeding bodies can be an exercise in financial finesse, especially when one's economic options are thin. The next chapter, "Understanding the

Significance of 'Kitchen Thrift' in Prescriptive Texts about Food," looks into four domestic guides (a website, a blog, a TV show, and a guide compiled of newsletters) written by women, which provide practical guidance for those who want to save money on food shopping without depriving themselves of real culinary enjoyment. In keeping with the political potential of cookbooks, I was intrigued by the last chapter in this section, "Promoting Peace, Subverting Domesticity: Cookbooks against War, 1968-1983" by Abby Dubisar. I never considered how a cookbook could act as a rhetorical platform for antiwar feminists. The chapter is replete with numerous examples and stories of how preparing and sharing food can be an effective way for politically motivated women to galvanize their local communities to become more engaged in antiwar activism. Who knew that activism begins in the kitchen and that "food is essential to revolution" (70)?

Although the authors in part I praise the progressive and creative ways these efforts speak to larger social, economic, and political issues, they are careful to avoid overromanticizing the examined works. In some cases, the accompanying commentary in some of the cookbooks fails to question the prevailing assumption that cooking is primarily a woman's duty. Heterosexism and the essentialist notion of women as caregivers also complicate any feminist advancement in the cookbooks. Nevertheless, the rhetorical force of these food-related works demonstrates a clear feminist voice, one where women's work and ways of knowing are celebrated and valued.

To think more deeply about the rhetorical elements that constitute feminist food writing, turn to part II. If you want to read a critical analysis of M. F. K. Fisher, author of many gastronomical books and a feminist autobiographer who wrote about hunger, desire, and sensuality (a form of rhetoric normally reserved for male authors), the first two chapters in this section are worthy of your attention. I was particularly fond of the chapter examining culinary travel writing. How do we avoid food appropriation or alimentary colonialism when writing about our international culinary adventures? In chapter 7, Kristin Winet examines those forms of food writing that "can stray from joyful and tantalizing and veer toward colonizing and sometimes even patriarchal" (102). For instance, imagine a food blogger in Germany posting a picture of a sausage and depicting the photograph as emblematic of the entire country and culture. This one-dimensional portrayal belies the richness of food traditions and impedes a more productive and critical relationship with other food cultures. Writing about culinary global adventures, according to Winet, should contextualize different food traditions and be more mindful about our connections to globalization so we may avoid the rhetorical entanglements of food colonialism and anticolonialism.

Part III looks into diversity and the fictional representation of women. In chapter 8, "Not Your Father's Family Farm: Toward Transformative Rhetorics of Food and Agriculture," Abby Wilkerson argues that the images of the traditional family farm that aim to sell food justice and sustainability movements can perpetuate heteronormative, classist, and sexist portrayals where the "typical" family farm is often portrayed as middle-class, white, heterosexual, and procreative. This biased form of visual rhetoric fails to recognize the diverse reality of today's small farms (for example, lesbian vendors and small farms operated by immigrant families). Chapters 9 and 10 consider how two novels, Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* respectively, use food practices as a literary platform for Arab-American and Japanese-American writers to explore racial stereotypes, Western imperialism, biculturalism, and national identity. If

you are considering teaching *My Year of Meats* in your gender and women's studies courses, chapter 10 may be helpful. It demonstrates how the novel can be an effective way to introduce students to the complex intersections of gender, race, global capitalism, multiculturalism, and consumption. We close part III with a question: is drinking wine feminist? In chapter 11, Tammie Kennedy looks into the drinking habits of successful women as they are depicted on the TV show *The Good Wife*. Her analysis is mixed. On the one hand, drinking wine represents female self-assertiveness and the "we've come a long way baby" anthem. On the other hand, the show seems to portray wine-drinking as a way for professional women to cope with the hardships and emotional demands of their modern lives.

The final section, part IV, examines the relationship between food and the representation of women's bodies. For instance, chapter 13 analyzes the stereotypical representations of Mexican women on Mexican food packaging to sell "authentic" Mexican products. The worry here is that these selling tactics only reinforce essentialized ideas about certain groups and cultures. Chapter 14 brings us to the aesthetics of women's bodies and their suffering. The chapter invites the reader to consider how the representation of female bodies in certain forms of Holocaust art speaks to the complex ways in which women's sense of self in concentration camps was not dependent on their horrific physical surroundings. Thin bodies as represented in pro-ana websites (sites that offer advice for anorexics or bulimics) become our focus in chapter 15. According to the author, Morgan Gresham, these sites "enable young women to transition over time from fully identifying as radically pro-ana to adopting an alternative identity" (215). Although the site in question is inactive and the related forum unavailable, the idea is that these sites represent a rhetorical "space" for a supportive community where recovery is possible. It is a controversial claim since many critics believe that these sites actually encourage eating disorders. I cannot say I was convinced of the thesis, but the essay is an essential first step in thinking about what it means to build an online community for those suffering from eating disorders.

Chapter 16 is an interesting take on a best-selling diet book, *Skinny Bitch*. According to Rebecca Ingalls, *Skinny Bitch* "seems to offer a modern-day reconstruction of the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism'" (223). That is, the rhetoric in *Skinny Bitch* incorporates "the fundamental elements of . . . decay and rebirth, shame and merriment, filth and purity" (223). It is an original analysis of a popular book, one that promises to be part of an ongoing conversation regarding feminism and the promotion of plant-based diets. The last two chapters address the relationship between women's empowerment and fat-positive discourse. In chapter 17 we learn how Jennifer Paterson and Clarissa Dickson Wright, on their thirty-minute British cooking show "Two Fat Ladies," challenge the prevailing notion that healthy eating constitutes fruits, vegetables, and the avoidance of meat. With their provocative and no-holds-barred manner, they aim to redefine what it means to have a healthy relationship with one's body and food by advocating for meat consumption and the enjoyment of sugar and fatty foods. The book ends with a chapter on how fat-positive discourse in the detective novel may be changing our views about the construction of femaleness and femininity. Of particular interest in this chapter is how it posits its rhetorical analysis of female corporeality as a way to compare the complex differences between postfeminism and second-wave feminism.

The juxtaposition of these last articles--vegan skinny bitches and meat-loving "fat ladies"--illustrates the main strength of Goldthwaite's book. Given its diverse range of topics there is

something for everyone in this anthology. The book does an excellent job of demonstrating the rich tapestry of food-related topics and feminist analyses. The attention to the intersectionality of women's lives also makes this book a valuable contribution to feminist thought. Fitting for a feminist anthology, the chapters cover a wide range of women's experiences from African, Arab, Japanese, and Mexican women, to vegan and meat-loving feminists. Socioeconomic (for example, thrifty food shopping) and body image/eating issues (for example, fat-shaming, thinness, and anorexia) are also present in the book. These essays clearly illustrate how something so ordinary (like food) can reveal the extraordinary intricacies of women's personal and social lives. The book also serves as an important reminder of how the narrative can be an invaluable source of feminist knowledge and sociopolitical critique. Telling our story can be a powerful and creative way to bear witness and to inform others of who we are and how we live. That being said, if you are looking for a feminist project that provokes and rebels, this may not be your first choice. Although the book is interesting on its own terms, it does not spearhead the next feminist revolution. For the most part, it is not controversial; it is safe. I say this with some degree of hesitation, however, because my assertion more than likely speaks to a matter of personal or scholarly preference and not to an inherent fault of the book. *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics* is an important book and certainly relevant to feminist food scholars and rhetoricians.