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INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SELF, EMBODIED IDENTITIES, AND FOOD

Considering race, class, and gender

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Unique appetites, social cravings

When organizing a social gathering in New York City in 2016, the host almost automatically sends out an email asking guests to list their allergies, dietary preferences, and restrictions.

So I’m a vegan who will sometimes eat eggs for protein. And, you know, Bill is in recovery so I try not to cook with alcohol, but he eats everything and he is used to it if you serve wine or beer. I think Maddie is still doing Atkins, so that might be tricky with the menu, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out. And you know her son has that nut allergy.

—Response to a dinner invitation

As the above response attests, some people can be quite specific about their diets. These nutritional revelations, often couched in discourses of health and illness alongside environmental and sustainability concerns, also provide ample information about selves. Through our commonplace replies about diet, we also share intimate details of our own cultures, habits, vices, illnesses, and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, our food identifications are not stable over time but rather change with trends of food culture, migration, aging, and shifts in the marketplace. Not unsurprisingly, then, there seems to be an ever-expanding number of terms used to specify one’s relationship to food, based on ingredients, food sensitivities, geographies, religions, class locations, and trends: gluten-free, lactose intolerant, free lunch, nut-free, vegetarian, vegan, lacto/ovo vegetarian, halal, kosher, pescatarian, macrobiotic, paleo, Ayurvedic, locavore, organic, free-range, artisanal, raw food, whole grain, etc.

In this article, we examine the ways in which people come to know themselves and their bodies through their patterns of dietary consumption. This intense identification with food adds depth to the statement, “you are what you eat,” or “you are what you don’t eat,” and perhaps even “you eat what you are.” As we age, humans continuously express themselves through a socially and culturally mediated relationship with food. Although we might behave as if our relationships with food are highly personal, even unique, our food practices are also deeply economically,
socially, and culturally constructed. We come to know and identify ourselves as members of communities, appropriately gendered beings, citizens of nations, and ethically situated through our consumption of food and nutritional behaviors. In fact, the traffic between these ideas of individual preferences and the socialization of one’s diet co-constitute our sense of being in the world.

Through a survey of the contemporary social science literature about food and identity, we explore how embodiment, race, gender, class, culture, and food movements are all factors that play a part in determining what an individual will eat, how the individual will see his or her body in the world, as well as how others will perceive him or her. We examine aspects of food and bodily identity, tracing the growth of scholarship in the phenomenology of food and investigations of linkages between food and identity formation. After a brief explanation of theories of identity based in symbolic interactionism, we present a theoretical backdrop of bodies and embodiment. Moving to the palate, we describe how this body part is not merely biologically but also socially mediated. We then explore contemporary empirical studies of food and current food movements and trends to see where the discussion on food and identity issues is headed, and the continuing relevance of gender, race, class, and cultural norms for the conversation.

**Identities, selves, and bodies: expressions of social location**

In order to understand how identity is formed, it is useful to consider the work of symbolic interactionists, a group of social scientists who argue that for humans, reality is developed in interaction with others. In opposition to a sense of the human self as a stable, essential unfolding of internal drives, George Herbert Mead (1934/1962: 164) claims that “selves can only exist in definite relation to other selves.” The self emerges in this ability to incorporate the perspectives of others into one’s presentation, self-concept, and performance of the self. Mead (1934/1962: 182) defined the self as “a process in which the individual is continually adjusting himself in advance to the situation to which he belongs and reacting back on it.” With respect to our relationship with food, our shared essential need to eat is as common to our species as the need for shelter or water. However, we are not limited to a merely biological interpretation of dietary practices. It is perhaps more precise to say that while humans must consume food to live, their selves and identities are organized around the actual (gendered) harvesting, gathering, preparing, and eating of food, and thus we become selves through interacting with food. As food anthropologist Robin Fox writes, “All animals eat, but we are the only animal that cooks” (2002: 1). This supports the notion that humans construct identities organized around food preparation. Fox lists timing, setting, ceremonial eating, religious eating, and dieting as among the innumerable ways by which people separate themselves from others, knowingly or unknowingly, through their eating habits and customs.

Mead’s contemporary, Charles Cooley (1994), coined the term the looking-glass self to describe a process where individuals self-regulate their own actions based on the reflective evaluations of others — in other words, we adjust our behaviors and appearances to meet what we imagine is expected. Since individuals do not exist in a vacuum, we make meaning of our lives by being socialized by and within groups. Using our bodies, including facial expressions and bodily comportment, we modify our physical appearance and affect to transmit meaning to others and in turn receive feedback about our belonging. Furthermore, one’s self becomes knowable through how we identify — our publicly displayed identities. Identity is tied to some social group or social position. For example, one’s identity can be that of a father, professor, or Latino. Self is the ability to be reflexive and look back on your own behaviors and performances. So, while an identity might be that of a middle-aged lesbian, a self involves the considerations, thinking about and mulling over of these identity positions. To treat yourself as an object means you are
self-aware – “I am an Italian vegetarian” means this individual identifies with these groups and manipulates objects and symbols to signify these identifications. Just as you can manipulate, alter, reflect, and evaluate some external object or person in the world, having a self means you can manipulate, alter, or reflect and evaluate yourself as an object.

Our ability to interact in social groups and achieve desired outcomes within a specific social context depends upon the management of our bodies. One of the central themes running through Erving Goffman’s (1959) work is his treatment of appearance as a central component in mundane everyday encounters among people. According to Goffman, any successful social performance hinges on expressive control to keep inconsistent moods and signs from disrupting it. In order to achieve a semblance of reality or authenticity, one must master the art of “impression management,” a highly nuanced technique of constant reflexive self-examination. To prevent embarrassment and disruption in social interaction, we must learn to manage our embodied presentations of self, including its demeanor, noises, smells, and facial expressions. Eating and digesting involve minute management of bodily processes in addition to signaling membership in specific communities.

Embodiment is the quality of having a body and perceiving and being in the world through the body. The body is the medium through which we navigate the world, and it is also an entity that is invested with meaning conveying statuses, ranks, and relationships (Kosut and Moore 2010). Corporeality is not sui generis, even when bodies appear to have obdurate and consistent physical characteristics. In other words, as actual physical bodies exist, our understandings of these bodies, our interpretations and explanations of bodily processes, give meaning to their materiality. Body image is defined as a person’s self-perception of their own body. Internal body image refers to the way someone feels about their body, or the way we see ourselves; this is social and psychological. External body image is how others perceive and react to our bodies; this is sociological. It is important to consider the interaction between the psychological and sociological perspectives of body image. Though these two body images are inextricably linked, a person’s internal body image can be vastly different from their external body image. In other words, the way you see yourself can be incongruent with how others see and assess your body.

Among those taking up the question of bodies and knowledges as political objects is French sociologist and public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu. His notion of habitus, or a “structuring structure” of everyday knowledge about the world contained in habitual patterns of action is contingent on “a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles” (Bourdieu 1977:82). These practices, forming dispositions and inclinations, are embodied through repetition and habit, connecting the individual to both historical and social structures. Habitus is the making of the world through bodily practice and the making of the body through worldly practice. In other words, habitus is the medium for traffic between the social environment and the embodied lived experience. Habitus is the basis for performing the self in social circumstances such as generational differences in preferences for food or cultural differences in etiquette associated with consumption. Habitus is thus a crucial medium through which social status and class position are reproduced. Class becomes embodied through the deployment of certain social markers of one’s position within social structures: tastes and dispositions. One’s bodily experience is thus simultaneously understood and performed through class-based cultural markers. An individual’s diet, weight, table manners, and gait function as signs within a larger system of social positions. In some countries where food is scarce, being fat is sometimes envied as a sign of wealth or economic status.

Taken together, the foregoing concepts of the selves, identities, reflections, embodiment, presentation of self, impression management, and habitus enable us to see how food is integral to one’s perpetual socialization as an individual and member of a collective. Our relationship with food
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shapes the way we look at ourselves, how our body looks and performs, and how people perceive us. We all need to eat, or as sociologist Georg Simmel put it, “Food encapsulates . . . complete universality” (Probyn 1999). While humans do prepare foods and view their bodies in differing ways, fabricating what they think are unique identities, they are in reality reproducing patterns of dietary socialization. What follows is a close examination of the linkages of food to individuality, race, class, culture, and gender.

Developing a palate

The palate refers to one’s sense of taste, and there are variations in palates across the lifespan, among individuals, and across geographies that reveal the social bases of taste. Sometimes when sampling different foods, a palate cleanser might be used to clear the sense of taste and wipe out any remaining lingering flavors. A tradition in France is to use a sorbet as a palate cleanser between courses of an elaborate meal. Furthermore, having a good palate indicates that an individual has a refined appreciation for taste or flavor. In keeping with Bourdieu’s discussion of habitus, an individual’s sense of taste signals a location in a social stratification. We judge and stratify one another and ourselves by the specificity of our ability to literally taste food.

Children also have a specific type of palate—sour gummy worms, for example, are often an age-specific delicacy, and one’s palate changes over one’s lifespan. Literary critic Samira Kawash (2013) has coined the term hyperpalatability to describe the extreme yumminess that makes junk food, like candy, so irresistible. Interestingly, she writes that candy is a tricky food to describe, because it is characterized by opposites. We know that candy is not good for us (it is caloric and practically all sugar), but on the other hand, when we eat it we feel a distinct pleasure and experience old memories: “cotton candy at a state fair, the birthday party piñata, the overflowing Easter baskets and Halloween” (2013: 8). To add to the “dangers of candy” argument, Kawash makes the point that we are taught to never take candy from strangers, and to always brush our teeth after eating candy or else our teeth will rot. Clearly, candy is a contradictory treat that defines one’s past and makes one worry about his or her future.

As a means of resisting the hyperpalatability of unhealthy foods, feminist geographers Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) call for a visceral politics, meaning that we must unravel how it is that certain people develop food preferences and tastes that might not create the best health outcomes for individuals. The researchers explore the concept of “taking back taste,” and demonstrate using an experiment of grade-school-aged Australian children being taught in school to appreciate the taste of homemade jam over store-bought jam. Expanding the palate can be done by providing individuals with food choices and an explanation of why certain choices might be preferable over others.

Men eat meat, women eat salad

Men and women eat differently, and this cannot be simply explained by biological differences. For example, in the Global North, women tend to eat less and are more likely to be vegetarians or vegans. Throughout history, women have been denied food as a way of limiting their power (Lupton 1996). Women have also limited their own intake of food to conform to the ideal feminine body type: small, thin, toned yet not overwhelmingly muscular (Caplan 1997). Oppositely, men often eat more meat and are more likely to follow protein-based diets (Adams 2004; Lockie and Collie 1999: 255–273; Rogers 2008). Men are expected to be larger than women, which results in men eating greater amounts of food. Additionally, men are shown and expected to eat more meat because of what animal flesh symbolically represents. Eating meat has come to represent humans’
superiority over other animals, specifically men’s because of its representation as a masculine food (Adams 2004). Eating animal flesh is used in the media as a display of power over other animals, supposedly proving human strength (Fiddes 1991). Though these ideas are still perpetuated daily, new research has called them into question. Meat as a representation of masculinity, power, and strength contrasts with what meat actually does to the human body. And despite the preponderance of evidence that connects the consumption of red meat to coronary heart disease, eating meat is still dominantly considered by many a path to strength, health, and virility (Lockie and Collie 1999; Nath 2011).

Originating with prehistoric ideas of men as hunters and women as gatherers (Sobal 2005), eating habits and ideas are communicated through generations. Children often mimic the performances that adults around them find favorable, and this collective imitation continues into adulthood. Within an age group, we often mimic the performances that the people around us find favorable, and we eat accordingly. These emulations include family members and friends, and may result in generations of similar performances (Goffman 1959).

Perhaps nowhere is a strict gender divide more evident than in food advertising, which is deeply reliant upon gendered tropes to showcase its products. For example, Taco Bell claims in its latest commercial, “If you need to be told how to be a man, Taco Bell’s triple steak stack isn’t for you.” Conversely, a Yoplait yogurt commercial from early 2012 depicts a slim woman who is able to fit into an “itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka dot bikini” after eating yogurt. The presentation of self, as a normatively gendered man or woman, then involves making gender-coded food choices – yogurt for females and steak tacos for males. In addition to commercials, there are also deeply gendered television shows in mainstream American culture. The television series Man v. Food showcases a main protagonist, Richman, as he eats his way through gigantic, meaty meals, in speedy, competitive styles, often against opponents. Athleticism, fighting and conquering, gorging, toughness, appreciation of the female body – these are all prominent themes in the show, and they help their audience get a sense of what it means to eat “like a man” (Calvert 2014).

Statistically, women and children are most susceptible to hunger and malnourishment, so what does this say about their relationship to food? Hunger and food security have not often been considered in their gendered dimensions. Food advocates and researchers Carolyn Sachs and Anouk Patel-Campillo (2014) suggest that it is the United Nations’ job to implement woman-friendly solutions. As Sachs and Patel-Campillo state, “Understanding how interlocking systems of class, race, gender, and ethnicity intersect in cross-border dynamics is essential as we attempt to address issues of food security and food sovereignty,” which affirms the ongoing argument of this paper: what a person eats is always connected to how he or she identifies in regards to gender, race, etc. Furthermore, Sachs and Patel-Campillo reject the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) traditional focuses when dealing with food insecurity, availability, access, utilization, and stability. Instead, they promote feminist food justice, which would involve supporting food production at multiple scales, revaluing food work that feeds families, and providing good food for all (2014). While gender often determines the accessibility of healthy food alternatives, this is also bound up with questions of economic justice. Unequal pay for equal work goes hand in hand with women’s inability to put food on the table (Sachs and Patel-Campillo 2014).

Some scholars argue that access to healthy foods has less to do with gender and more to do with one’s environment. Anna Kirkland, a professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan, describes the current environmental approach to fighting obesity, which typically consists of shutting down fast-food restaurants that serve unhealthy food, and what she calls responsibilization, or the notion that individuals must take care of themselves so that they do not become society’s burden (Kirkland 2011). Kirkland shares British Health Secretary Alan Johnson’s view – “modern life makes us overweight” – and she urges people to first seek collective solutions
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to the obesity epidemic. Unlike responsibilizing, this requires a closer look at the bigger social and economic factors that surround obesity. In other words, shutting down a restaurant here and there is not going to address and solve a nation’s problems. To Kirkland, obesity is a purposefully hyped-up issue, whose hype hides the structural issues that need more attention. These hidden issues include poverty, lack of universal health care, and inadequate public transportation. Once solved, obesity will lessen. Clearly, the discussion over what people eat and how it affects their bodies is political as well as personal.

Cross-cultural eating: American Jews and Chinese food
How does cultural identity relate to an individual’s relationship with food, eating habits, and preferences? There are deeply held, stereotypical beliefs about how an individual eats and whether or not that calls the legitimacy of their ethnic identity into question. Delicia Dunham, author of *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, explains how she feels conflicted in her eating style. She shares:

> Our culture . . . [is] typically far from supportive of the life we have been called to lead.
> So we find our vegan selves existing in a state of duality, conflicted and torn, wearing masks over our faces as we try to fit in . . .

(2010: 42)

Dunham shares her alienation from some aspects of black pop culture: hip-hop lyrics often include references to fur coats and leathers, so she, as a black female, feels even “less black” being a vegan. Dunham’s work calls for black vegans to let the rest of the world know that being vegan is not a “white thing” but the right thing, and that a diet consisting of soul food – a mainly flesh-food diet lacking fruits and vegetables historically associated with the African-American community – negatively affects people’s health (2012: 42–46). However, to stray from a traditional soul-food diet (like Dunham) feels wrong to the majority of the African-American community. In *Black Hunger*, sociologist Doris Witt shares, “the emergence of soul food should be construed not just synchronically but also diachronically, as a part of an ongoing debate among African Americans over the appropriate food ‘practices’ of blackness” (2004). The word “diachronically” is significant here, and Witt uses it to argue that soul food is forever a part of black peoples’ twofold history: its preparation and ingredients are partially representative of what was eaten in Africa before and during the slave trade, and these same foodstuffs were consumed by blacks living in America after their emancipation. Clearly, by this view, because veganism is both a trendy lifestyle in many predominantly white communities today and a contradiction to a historical soul-food diet, veganism challenges authentic black identity.

If being vegan is a “white thing” to many, what is the cultural identity of a Jewish person who loves Chinese food? Symbolic interaction applies to food and identity because specific foods can mean something to one culture and something completely different to another culture. In her study, food historian Hanna Miller (2006) sets out to discover when and where American Jews began eating Chinese food, and how the affinity became an aspect of Jewish identity. Miller begins by explaining how kosher foods, or foods that conform to the guidelines set out by *kashrut*, are “endlessly symbolic, representing the human relationship to God” for Jews. She then describes *kashrut* as an intricate set of dietary restrictions and food preparations codified in the Torah that Jews slowly drifted away from after immigrating to America. One explanation that Miller explores for the affinity of American Jews for Chinese food is historical location. American Jewish neighborhoods in New York, such as those located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan,
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were historically close to many cafes and restaurants. Additionally, low prices made many American Jews fond of going out to eat frequently. Furthermore, while Chinese food was consumed by members of every class, racial, and religious group, Miller claims that American Jews ate it and still eat it the most because they wanted to “identify down.” This means that because Jews had a history of oppression, they inherently felt like outsiders, and wanted to participate in something that made them feel different from the rest. According to Miller, American Jews love Chinese food based on a combination of reasons related to location, economic status, and cultural desires, revealing a culturally rich and cross-pollinated Jewish identity.

Another noteworthy example of cross-cultural eating is Japanese sushi made in America. Paige Edwards, a cultural anthropologist, explores how globalization can be examined through foods. She addresses the question of how sushi, associated with Japanese cultural heritage, has become Americanized. In some cases, adding regional flair creates comfort for individuals to try different types of food. Certain rolls, like the Philadelphia roll, received their name after being created by a Japanese sushi chef who was trying to satisfy the Philadelphian taste buds by adding cream cheese. Changing the size or shape of a portion also creates more familiarity with foods. Sushi rolls are typically a lot larger in America than in Japan, and before being rolled up in seaweed and rice, fish is fried more frequently in America, too. Finally, Edwards interviews American sushi “virgins” to see what they think of the cuisine: some interviewees feel a sense of culture shock when served sushi and refuse to touch it, while others want to experience what they (wrongly) believe to be pure Japanese culture and cuisine (2012). When one culture manipulates another culture’s food norms, the former culture’s identity transforms the cuisine. When African Americans become vegans, Jewish Americans eat Chinese food, and Americans in general see sushi as an integral part of their diet, it becomes clear that people create an identity by participating in culturally contrasting patterns of dietary consumption.

Immigration and eating

The familiar expression “home-cooked meal” brings to mind a feeling of belongingness and peacefulness when a favorite meal is prepared and consumed in the comfort of one’s own home. But when people emigrate from one country to another, cooking and serving what is, to them, a home-cooked meal is a bit harder than one would think. Psyche Williams-Forson (2014), professor of African American Studies and Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland, uses participant observation, food narratives, and interviews to discover how Ghanaian immigrants strive to maintain their cultural identity amidst the diverse foodscapes of America. Williams-Forson defines foodscapes as “spaces defined by the intersections of geography, environment, ethnicity, economic status, gender, social organization, and various cultural practices . . .” and stresses how food has emotional and psychological meaning no matter where you are from and where you are immigrating. Ghanaian immigrants’ tips and strategies for maintaining a Ghanaian identity through food in America include: shopping at ethnic grocery stores, substituting foods like peanut butter for fresh groundnut, and buying vegetables from discount food stores, since many immigrants do not have a farm or garden like they did in their home country. Feeling out of place because culturally symbolic foods are unavailable is a struggle for many immigrants, and the pursuit of finding substitutes or having spices shipped from home affirms the notion that food is a part of one’s cultural identity.

Supporting this idea are the findings of anthropologist Teresa Mares, who studies Latino/a immigrants living in Seattle, Washington, and claims, “There is a rich tradition in the humanities and social sciences of exploring connections between food and cultural identity, especially for racial and ethnic minorities living in the United States” (2012). She defines foodways as “the
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eating habits or food practices of a community, region, or time period.” Mares conducted several interviews – thirteen with people who work in food policy, and forty-six with first-generation immigrants – which led her to conclude that immigration disrupts one’s foodways. Mares asked interviewees about their favorite foods and the availability of them in America and found that although only four interviewees were tending home gardens, thirty-seven had grown food before migrating to the United States. Most interviewees were not growing their own foods because of their job constraints; many worked in service-sector jobs, as domestic workers, or as day laborers in construction and landscaping projects (Mares 2012). As with the Ghanaian immigrants, this community testifies to the ways in which immigration disrupts one’s foodways and, therefore, their cultural identity. This research reveals the importance of sustenance and its impact on the self.

Ethnographer Megan Carney’s work examines how state practices around food affect the minds and bodies of migrants (Carney 2013). Carney spends time with twenty-five unauthorized migrant women who had spent anywhere from three months to thirty years living in the United States and who had been detained at some time in their lives for being undocumented citizens. Pilar – Carney’s key informant – shares that while she was in a detention center on the border of Mexico and California for four months, the food served to her was contaminated with maggots and/or mold, or that she was not fed at all. Unfortunately, detention centers use feeding rituals as a key instrument to elicit compliance; food is a tool employed to obtain social control. Carney argues that this institutionalized abuse can lead to disordered eating for life, and that detention centers must revisit and abide by the food service standards outlined by the Immigrant Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). After all, access to food and water is a human right. Being unable to eat foods one is used to preparing in his or her home country, or not being able to eat substantial food in the case of detainment, robs migrants of a central part of their cultural identity. In the absence of culturally symbolic foods, immigrants find it hard to connect with their own selves (the persons they were in their home country), with others, and with their new environments.

Food and identity: singularity or pluralism?

Singularity in eating

Most humans in the Global North have a choice about what they put in their bodies once they enter adulthood, and with this choice comes a sense of individuality, power, and pride. When a teen reaches a certain age, his or her mother or father may finally give up on the “eat your vegetables” fight; however, for those young adults with disabilities, a different set of norms is followed, or even enforced. Welsh sociologist Charlotte A. Davies (2007) conducts ethnographic fieldwork in group homes and private homes with young adults with disabilities to see just how much their palate and eating choices are affected by those around them. Davies interviews young adults with learning disabilities and finds that much of what they do and do not eat can be attributed to their parents’ authority – candy and cakes being the ultimate taboo. Interestingly, some parents wanted their adult son or daughter with disabilities to drink alcohol, because it is an adult drink, while other parents did not let their of-age children drink alcohol, for fear of how their children would react. Davies finds that a lot of young adults with learning disabilities eat a simplistic, restricting diet, resulting in stunted adult identities (2007). Stunted adult identities are the result of restricted eating habits because, as the aforementioned social science literature attests, what you decide to eat says a lot about who you are. Hence, when a person does not decide on his or her own what to eat, knowing oneself can be difficult, an individual’s identity becomes damaged, and he or she is likely to feel powerless.
On the other hand, some people feel that their eating habits make them powerful and unique. Sociologist Joanne Finkelstein (2014: 62) writes, “The idea of self-identity is paradoxical; it supposedly encapsulates individuality, of how we feel different and separate from others, but it also inserts us into a collective identity that provides a sense of belonging.” This myth of individuality applies perfectly to one’s eating habits because, while a person may feel unique in his or her new eating style – becoming a vegan, for example – the person has just joined a group of people like him or her; other vegans. Furthermore, Finkelstein explains that restaurants, as businesses, must keep up with “fashion trends” in the food world to compete in the cutthroat consumer culture currently underway. Clearly, people ingest certain foods to construct what they perceive to be an individualistic identity for themselves.

**Plural eating: food movements and trends**

While food can be used to express or frustrate a sense of individuality, food also offers an opportunity for shared group membership through social movements. Eating has become more of a lifestyle than an inclination, particularly among those considered part of an urban hipster community. James Cronin et al. (2014), of the Department of Food Business and Development at University College Cork, have studied how hipsters – urban 20-somethings who reject parts of mainstream culture – express their identity through their food choices. The researchers found that the following themes emerged in regards to hipsters’ eating behaviors: (1) de-commodification practices, (2) brand choices and brand avoidances, (3) vegetarian or vegan choices. In detail, de-commodification practices refer to stripping corporate food of its labels and packaging, so that you cannot see the brand or price; but rather, a simple box or jar of food. Next, hipsters practiced brand avoidances because they felt that popular global brands and businesses did not serve their community, especially those corporations who mass-produced ready-to-eat meals which involved no true cooking or preparation. Finally, vegan and vegetarian choices were frequent among the hipster community because hipsters sought to reject mainstream tastes – tastes they feel the meat industry successfully trained consumers to have (2012). Interestingly, the researchers found that if a hipster did buy something cheap, of low quality, and/or name-brand, they ripped the label off or added ingredients from farmer’s markets to make it their own. Maintaining a sense of DIY, or “do it yourself,” culture communicates people’s distaste for mass-produced products, and their desire to bring creativity and individuality back into the kitchen.

More often than not, when transgressive subcultures, such as vegan hipsters, emerge, the biggest concern is the cooptation of their mission. Sociologist Alison Alkon (2014) states that a major struggle shared by many food justice movements involves making sure neoliberal and capitalist motives do not arise, take over, or dilute the strength of movements resistant to corporate food ownership. In other words, leaders of food justice movements must make sure that small-scale projects with good intentions do not become large-scale projects with capitalistic motives. Alkon writes, “Supporters of local/organic food mainly seek to create and support market-based alternative food systems, and community food security and food justice activists work to make these alternatives accessible to low-income communities and communities of color,” but she also discloses that there are “bad actors,” or people primarily interested in accumulating profit, rather than providing fresh food (Alkon 2014: 34). Alkon urges that instead of merely critiquing neoliberal cooptation, food justice activists can look to restructure food projects so that they can resist being a part of the capitalist market. Worker cooperatives and food workers’ movements are positive programs where people can work together. Most importantly, Alkon calls for food and its multifaceted connection to culture, identity, personal and public health, environmental issues, education, and more, to be further explored in these food justice movements – a call that captures the essence of the social science literature we have explored throughout this article.
A larger movement that still stays true to its small-movement motives is the Slow Food Movement started by Carlo Petrini (2003). In his book *Slow Food*, Petrini describes the movement he started in Bra, Italy, dedicated to making sure food was good, clean, and fair. Petrini discloses the four main themes of the movement: (1) to get to know the material culture of food (for example, the smell of good bread), (2) to preserve the agricultural aspect of food production, (3) to protect and inform the consumer about what he or she is eating and its quality, and (4) to research and promote the pleasures of gastronomy. This movement towards reclaiming good taste did not directly arise in opposition to a McDonald's being built in Rome; but at the same time, the movement does not agree with the standardization and taste of McDonald’s foods. Those who support the Slow Food Movement, veganism, and the resistance of neoliberalism through food co-ops and farmer’s markets, come together and share something of a group identity. The careful selection of what the collective eats, and the valorization of how it is produced and grown, says a lot about how certain people want to love and nourish their bodies, and respect the world they live in – all through meditated food choice.

**Conclusion**

Eating is necessary, but eating habits are rarely coincidental; and for most people, the palate is not very malleable. In other words, what one chooses to eat is typically a part of one’s personal history that has persisted through time, and was either introduced by a family member, or in the above cases of detainees and those people with disabilities, forced on them. On the other hand, eating trends and the birth of new movements and communities such as Slow Food and hipster veganism can suddenly emerge to have immense influence over people’s eating habits.

While eating is a biological process needed for survival, it is also a social process: people usually eat together, and what you eat is then interpreted by those around you. To be a woman and eat salad, to be a man and eat meat, to be an African-American vegan, to be a Chinese-food-loving American Jew, to be a disabled adult denied sweets and permitted alcohol, to be a Ghanaian immigrant who no longer has a garden, to participate in the Slow Food Movement – all of these voluntary or involuntary food choices foster emotions that allow people to get to know their self-constructed and socially constructed bodies on a deeper, more intimate level. Food is a meaningful and observable form of self-expression.

**Note**

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**References**


