

The Rhetoric of Food

Precedent Food Texts as Inventio

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Food writing long has dominated a proliferation of books and periodicals on cooking, diet, and gardening. One recognizable genre of such texts, the cookbook, offers glimpses into ethnic, racial, gendered, and economic value systems. As Michael Dougherty (2014) says, “Our culture has put food in the position books used to occupy.” Inspired by his “addict[ion] to cookbooks,” he recalls,

For me [home cooking] is about redeeming the food of my youth, and grasping at my love of a few places ... When I was a young teenager my mother occasionally diverted a portion of our annual Maine vacation to Quebec City... I also remember the 1970s—or even ‘50s-style fine cuisine....[: the Quebecois-focused *Art of Living According to Joe Beef* cookbook is a] mythologizing advertorial dressed up as a kind of lifestyle *ethos* and sold to you for 25 bucks. It’s awesome.

In just these words, a text on foodcraft demarcates cultural boundary lines, perpetuating a food-driven grand narrative that may be perceived as representative of diversity.

Elsewhere, food has been framed as a luxurious preoccupation, a class marker, and an overdue opportunity to give attention to a key cultural artifact. Regardless of the approach taken, the presence of food as a topic, if not a heuristic, has notably increased. Scholars use food as a lens whereby, e.g., issues of agricultural production and social exclusivity are examined (Pimentel and Pimentel, 2003, Simonetti, 2012). Trade publications address acts of food preparation as craft, art, and profession. Popular texts capitalize on food as both a consumer product and a marketing technique. Even preliminary scans of current scholarly, trade, and popular writing communities reveal a swell of publications and

Calls for Papers whereby authors are asked to look at political, global, and social dimensions of food and food-related issues.

In a scholarly context relevant especially to rhetorical studies, an incident of interest is audience response to a 2008 *College English* Special Issue devoted to food. Some readers particularly focused on the Special Issue articles' approach, claiming that the texts echoed Socrates' derisive likening of rhetoric to cookery in *Gorgias* (Plato, *Gorgias* 465c) via perpetuating the common discrediting of rhetoric, despite Plato's later re-evaluation of this comparison in the *Phaedrus*. Primary among this audience's response was that the journal articles' handling of food as a topic of inquiry amounted to a survey of how certain pieces of literature display gustatory reveling in the consumption of luxurious dishes and beverages.

A dissertation published subsequently to the *College English* issue, for instance, analyzed one journal article's examination of the Slow Food movement, reviewing "some of Slow Food's major literary works using various rhetorical lenses" to demonstrate that "various types of rhetorics utilized in Slow Food's texts actually generate an identity based on exclusion" (McCord, 2011).

While the *College English* conversation is only one moment within a large and historical body of work devoted to food topics, it left a perceptible residue especially on rhetoric scholars; consequent reviews of food-focused scholarly publications displayed a heightened tendency to critique. For example, one listserv's subscribers' responses to an anthology's Call for Papers were represented by the comment that the CFP offered only an impression

[that] the current popularity of the Food Network, cooking programs and contests like *The Next Food Network Star*, indicate that writing, thinking, and speaking about food currently occupy an important place in the public imagination (WPA list, July 6, 2008).

The *POROI* Symposium on "The Rhetoric of Food," inspired by this emerging debate about what should constitute valid analysis of food, features articles examining not food-related writing *per se*, but rather how such writing, as a corpus, has served as an intellectual fingerprint on meaningful *acts of inquiry* in current food research and in *the composition process* of food-related texts. Drawn from the rich linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical power that food has wielded as a trope, each article in the Symposium describes a discernible, overall intellectual trajectory of food-focused studies over time. The considerations raised by each article

demonstrate how this trajectory has scholastically informed methods by which food is investigated and even interrogated. In a context hectic with food-focused writing and research activity, how might a given piece of work serve as a representative or indicative moment within such a trajectory? What was (and is) the influence of such works after their creation and dissemination? As their method, contributors to the Symposium consider earlier works of food writing, situating them in terms of how food writing at this point can be considered a significant scholarly phenomenon.

SYMPOSIUM APPROACH

While celebratory essays on food offer unique and important perspectives, the Symposium is a critical collection; its essays on occasion are celebratory, but do not fetishize. By challenging Socratic/Platonic disdain for rhetorical analysis, “The Rhetoric of Food” articles complicate food writing by taking their texts beyond a “gustatory or critical” binary, addressing topics such as agricultural production, sustainability, nutrition, and race relations, and asking how food writing racializes, genders, and politicizes us.

The Symposium’s focus resembles that of other texts, accordingly, only insofar as it focuses on food topics. The cohesion of this symposium, consisting of rhetorical approaches to arguments regarding invention and criticism, adds intrigue to examinations of social constructions of food when compared to literary or sociological approaches and publications focused on food, food writing, and food studies generally.

Current activity in rhetoric scholarship suggests the timeliness of such an approach. Melissa Goldthwaite and Jennifer Cognard-Black’s *Books That Cook* examines food through gender and other rhetorical frames (Goldthwaite and Cognard-Black, 2014). The recent *Banquets and Borders in Language and Literature* Conference specifically point to the “rhetoric of food” as a preferred topic for presentation proposals. The latest edition of the textbook *Food Writing on the Rise* addresses how rhetoric and composition curricula may utilize food as a lens to guide students’ academic composing process. A panel at the 2013 Pacific and Ancient Modern Language Association Conference addressed the topic as well.

IN THIS SYMPOSIUM

Contributors to this issue cover food texts’ rhetorical impact on literary pieces, political ideologies, and gender and race relations. In their examinations, these pieces represent the liminality of

converging ideas that previously appeared in differing contexts—conventional fiction pieces, inflammatory social media, and advocacy web presences.

Each contribution queries historical and current topics insofar as they are refracted by a food frame: How emerging media have defamiliarized conventions that urged expression of scholarly inquiry to be largely textual in form; how *inventio*, a fuel of creation, offers guidance when custom proves insufficient to guide sense-making; how, in recognizing rhetoric to be as much about a communicative act's context as the act itself, scholars demonstrate rhetorical analysis to be a mindful craft more than a manipulation of audience.

In “Finding Ourselves in Our Food: M.F.K. Fisher’s *The Art of Eating* for the 21st Century” Max Despain, U. S. Air Force Academy, argues that Fisher’s publications illuminate texts by current historians, cookbook critics, and memoirists in a manner that reveals how these works promote ties between “our relationship to food and a multitude of other hungers.” Despain’s analysis of personal dietary choices as demonstrating identity construction to be kairotic is the result of her innovative sweep across at-first seemingly disparate genres—an exploration of rhetorical performance.

“To Meat Or Not to Meat?: An Analysis of On-line Vegetarian Persuasive Rhetoric” by Elizabeth Jorgensen, Saginaw Valley State University, utilizes four decades of influence emanating from Frances Moore Lappé’s, Peter Singer’s, and Ancel Keys *et al.*’s publications on meatless diet as frames to analyze current multimedia texts promoting veganism and vegetarianism. By invoking Lappé’s, Singer’s, and Keys’ influence, the research methodology used in Jorgensen’s study of multimedia artifacts challenges the assumption that, “Our words for *demonstrations* and *evidence* insist that these [are the best tools for] show[ing] us what is available for *seeing*” and understanding human experiences.

In “‘Out of Her Safety into His Hunger and Weakness’: Masculine Communities and Feminine Space in Eudora Welty’s ‘The Wide Net’ and ‘Flowers for Marjorie,’” Victoria Bryan, Cleveland State Community College, describes how Eudora Welty’s depictions of food preparation and consumption mark her characters’ communities as feminine or masculine. More to the point, Bryan demonstrates how her analysis of Welty’s food-focused publications more largely complicates gendered readings of literary texts. The author’s approach underscores not just the food men

and women eat, but the spaces where foods are prepared and consumed and how these locations become gendered.

“Racialized Rhetorics of Food Politics: Black Farmers, the Case of Shirley Sherrod, and Struggle for Land Equity and Access” by Eileen Schell, Syracuse University, examines food from its production side, which the author shows is still a comparatively rare topic in rhetorical studies. Schell’s reconsideration of Kenneth Burke’s four master rhetorical tropes focuses on racial disparities in U.S. agriculture and on a nuanced explication of fraught race relations within our social media landscape. The fallout, as the author reveals, is profoundly financial, political, and personal.

In its exploration and strategic studies of rhetorical invention, mediated analysis, and performance, the *POROI* Symposium on “The Rhetoric of Food” is meant to place another chair at the table of an evolving and energizing topic of inquiry.

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