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## Feeding genders

*Nourrir les genres*

Marzia Mauriello and Gaia Cottino (dir.)

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# Feeding genders

## Introduction

*Nourrir les genres; introduction*

**Marzia Mauriello and Gaia Cottino**

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### AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this introduction, Marzia Mauriello wrote the section entitled *Feeding Genders* and Gaia Cottino the section entitled *Deep down in the context*. They wrote the conclusion together.

- 1 Juliet comes from Nigeria and has been living in Italy for the past 20 years. “*Where I come from, a woman who does not know how to cook cannot get married*”, she told me (Mauriello) when we first met during my fieldwork in Naples. Stories told by migrant women from other sub-Saharan African regions that I (Mauriello) collected in recent years describe mothers who “test” their daughters about their cooking abilities to see whether they can prepare an entire meal on their own, to be sure that “they are ready”. Thus, apprenticeship in the art of cooking becomes the measure of the passage to adulthood, and the confirmation that a girl is “ready” to be a wife and a mother. That is to say, ready “to be” a woman.
- 2 It is no coincidence that food, from production and selection to preparation and consumption, has contributed to building and confirming a “gender order” based on the division of practices and roles related to it. Furthermore, food can be seen as “constitutive” of differentiated bodies, and in fact, the sign and symbol of an embodied difference. As the French sociologist Claude Fischler argues, the incorporation of food serves to construct the notion of individual identity by individually assimilating the qualities of that food, as well as subsequently including that individual in a “culinary system” and therefore in a social group (1988). Food accordingly constitutes subjectivities in a material sense as much as in a symbolic sense: namely, socio-cultural belonging. There are, in the past as in the present, differences between women and

men with respect to who eats what: there are foods that are considered the exclusive prerogative of one gender or more appropriate to one gender than another.

- 3 In different times and places there have been and continue to be male foods and female foods (Adams 1990; Counihan & Kaplan 1998; Counihan 1999), the essence of which “forms” the subjects who eat them. For this reason, in some contexts, foods may have to be consumed separately by men and women: the intimacy of the food act, so close and in fact assimilated to the sexual act, may represent the potential dangers of gender (Counihan 1999). Gender is therefore also performed through food, becoming a sort of “quality” that can be “transmitted”, rather than an essence of the subject.
- 4 If on the one hand the consumption of food (which food, where, how, how much, when, and with whom) marks a difference in the sense of gender, on the other hand, food itself plays a pivotal role in embodying gender, from its choice to its production, preparation, and consumption. While belonging to a gender marks the modes, times, places, and roles related to food, at the same time food takes on a central importance in socializing gender, as food contributes to inserting a subject into a community, educating him/her/hir on the rules of gender, which appear to be closely related to food rules. The relationship between these two elements is therefore mutual, dynamic, dialectical, and multifaceted. As a result, over the last few decades growing attention has been given in the academic world to the intricate ways in which gender and food are connected.
- 5 The second wave of feminism in Euro-American contexts was a resource and an opportunity for the development of careful reflections about the relationship between food and gender, or, better, the relationship between activities related to domestic cooking, of evident feminine sign, and the submissive and subordinate role of women (Murcott 1983; Charles & Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991). Further reflections have broadened this perspective, identifying food as a potential source of empowerment for women, since it is a vital resource managed by them. A new gender perspective has therefore entered the discourse on food, which is no longer considered (only) another tool and sign of oppression and supremacy of the male over the female, but also a potential resource for women (Avakian 1997; Counihan & Kaplan 1998; Counihan 1999; Abarca 2006; Williams-Forsen 2006; Cairns *et al.* 2010; Allen & Sachs 2012; McLean 2013; Parsons 2015). Different contexts produce different effects on the perspective on food and on the relationship between food and the construction of gendered subjectivities, and the interpretation of concepts such as power, agency and oppression may acquire different meanings. For this reason, the intertwinement of food and gender should be framed in a perspective that includes and embraces the dimension of the self in relation to others, in both a material and symbolic sense. The relationship with food is furthermore affected by a series of factors, and actors, including the vision of the body that is harnessed in far-reaching historical, geographical, and socio-cultural processes (Foxcroft 2012).
- 6 This new gender perspective, in identifying an element of agency, creativity and power in the role of the female cook (*cuisinière*), starts from a different assumption that gives us the opportunity to question the meaning of the same practice in different contexts. It also leads to a reflection on the different gazes produced within the scientific/academic environment. A gaze that re-discusses feminism itself, decolonizes it, de-westernizes it, and thus provides a key for interpreting the construction of a female subjectivity that is not based on assumptions otherwise imagined as universal and

therefore applicable to all contexts (Suárez Navaz & Hernández Castillo 2008). A delocalized and decolonized feminism, then, that takes on a much broader dimension: the inequalities that are produced and perpetuated through food – and, in the meantime, the forms of agency and power that food can and does in fact represent for women. This broader analysis has considered forms, modalities, and contexts in which food and gender have been analyzed, and ranges from the studies of Carole Counihan (1999) to those of Abarca (2006) and Avakian (1997), the latter of whom demonstrates the various meanings that cooking may acquire for women: “Though absolutely central to our survival, it is [food] [t]hat is taken for granted. If we delve into the relationship between women and food we will discover the ways in which women have forged spaces within that oppression. Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power. By reclaiming cooking we ensure that we are not throwing the spaghetti out with the boiling water.” (Avakian 1997: 6)

- 7 Placing the link between food and gender on a wide-ranging historical and geographical level helps to restore the multifaceted and processual dimension of this relationship. And that is precisely what this *Special Issue* proposes.
- 8 Cooking may be seen as a form of subjugation for women, since domestic cooking is, historically and currently, part of that invisible and unwaged female work, distinct from that (male) “paid” form of production that contributes to family growth (Renata Blumberg; Emilia Cordero Ocegüera, this volume). However, in the context of domestic work itself, cooking becomes a tool for agency, through which women give meaning and reason to themselves. In these cases, cooking is inseparable from one’s female gender, namely, not (only) a constraint – although cooking may be a burden – but one of the central elements in the construction of female subjectivity within a given community (Stephen Wooten, this volume). In this perspective, and far from the essentialism that sees the gendered division of roles as natural, cooking becomes a kind of body technique: an embodied culinary knowledge linked to the knowledge of the land (Flavia Cuturi, this volume), one that belongs to women, and which, in some cases, turns into a real strategy of resistance (Cordero Ocegüera, this volume).
- 9 Furthermore, the relationship with food involves responsibility for resources and their production and is therefore linked both to the safeguarding of food cultures and, consequently, to agroecology and agri-environmental sustainability (Cuturi; Renata Motta and Marco Teixeira; Cordero Ocegüera, this volume). Thus, through food, women protect both cultural and environmental heritages.
- 10 What this *Issue* proposes, then, is a reflection on food and gender that broadens our perspectives and rethinks the deep links between culinary knowledge, the constitution of subjectivities, and the relationship with the earth, including both knowledge of agriculture and horticulture and the preservation of land. The protection and preservation of life spaces, of the environment, of territories, are in turn part of a very contemporary and fundamental discourse on ecology and ecovegfeminism (Adams 1990; Gaard 2002; Zabanati 2012). Precisely in the wake of these studies and movements, a further reflection on the role of food in overcoming the female/male binary logic has developed, paving the way for a discourse on the relationship between the queer perspective and some food choices, with particular reference to veganism. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), Carol J. Adams highlighted the relationship between the forms of speciesism that are intertwined with those of sexism; starting from there –

and within a discourse of power and domination of (male) humans over other (female) humans and non-humans – the choice of a vegan diet, therefore an alternative food choice, becomes a political and resistance strategy against sexist, speciesist, and heteronormative logics (Simonsen 2012; Hall 2013).

- 11 From production to cooking, the pairing of food and gender then involves a sort of circular dimension of power that from the earth reaches the kitchen. The latter, the forge where subjectivities are constituted, despite being in most cases the realm of women, can also be, as some authors in this *Issue* suggest, the place where masculinity is restored (Luisa Stagi, Sebastiano Benasso & Luca Guzzetti; Jonatan Leer, this volume).
- 12 The consumption of food can effectively turn into a real political strategy for affirming a “whole” male (here in the sense of “genuine, intact”), one that is “original” and “right”, like the construction of white masculinity through the ingestion of specific foods (Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti, this volume).
- 13 Such western white masculinity, as shown by one of the contributions (Nina Studer, this volume), has defined itself over time through food moderation and the ability to contain “appetites”, these last to be read in their dual sense of craving for food and sex drive. If food in contemporary western societies contributes to the strategical and political building of a typical male as the symbol of an essentialized idea of “nation”, food has therefore contributed to building a hierarchy of cultural differences using the male as a departure point (Studer, this volume). What “others” eat becomes in this case the symbol of a backwardness that Europeans have overcome in the name of measure, of containment, especially of sexual nature, within the cultural framework of an immoderate sexuality perceived as a form of primitivism.
- 14 Reasoning in terms of past and present, the assumption of a past of “tradition” and a present of “modernity” has significantly contributed to constructing the difference between genders, as in the case of the masculinization of agriculture through its industrialization (Blumberg, this volume). This latter, understood more broadly as a sign of modernization, seems to have led to a gender change with regard to activities related to agriculture. This would reconfirm the vision of an underlying link between women and “tradition” – as a sign not only of the past but also of immobility and passivity – and the male space/role related, on the contrary, to movement, velocity, innovation, and the future. Similarly, the transition from domestic cooking (work) to professional cuisine (job) marked, certainly in western contexts, a gender difference, as well as the perception of female cooking as reproductive work (in the sense of reproducing what has always been there, tradition) and male cooking as a creative and productive act (inventiveness, production).
- 15 Starting from the assumption that “women give birth, men create” (Ferrand 2004: 69), the binarism “reproduction vs production” returns, even in the subtle form of a type of cooking (barbecue) that is, at least in western environments, historically associated with men and which has only recently been “opened” to women (Leer, this volume).
- 16 This last case allows us to reflect on this gendered scheme; unlike women, who symbolically stay anchored to the domestic space (which symbolizes family and care) even when they “work with food” (production, preparation, cooking) outside of this space, men are instead able to dissociate themselves from “domesticity” and from all the symbols related to it, even when they perform and act inside the domestic space. (Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti, this volume).

- 17 The “places of food” therefore become symbolic spaces in which to exercise – in a more or less explicit way – power defining one’s subjectivity within a gendered frame; but they are also places in which to establish the lines of one’s range of action in a given space. It is no coincidence that food places, may they be kitchens, fields, lands, can be “taboo”, becoming strictly forbidden to the other gender.

## Deep down into the context

- 18 “*Today you cannot come to the bush with us, because we’re harvesting yams*” is the sentence that has represented a turning point in my field observations (Cottino) in the kingdom of Tonga. “*Why, if I may ask?*” was my response. “*Because if you come, yams will know there is a woman in the field, might get jealous and come out small and knotty, and we do not want this to happen*”. On that day, I understood the weight of the invisible. Because despite being a resource and organizing principle of social, economic, religious and political life, the weight of gender is invisible and subtle, yet very tangible. Not being a stable ontological property, but rather embedded in everyday interactions and diverse according to the socio-cultural and economic contexts, it sits between the lines. Even more so, in the universal yet peculiar grammar of food practices. For this reason, ethnographic and historical research, capable of diving deep into the context, is so needed; and in this *Special Issue*, the articles are a significant attempt to contribute to this advancement.
- 19 In our research experience as much as in this issue, such deep immersion in the context, whether historical or ethnographic, reveals the capacity of societies (or portions of societies) to “bite back” (Fresno-Calleja 2017) heteronormative, colonial and imperial impositions. The cases analyzed here prove that through food practices and through the development of a critical discourse of political taste, community members decolonize stomachs and food-related roles, overcome “structural indigestions” (Santos Perez 2017) and gender inequalities.
- 20 Despite addressing different geographical areas and socio-cultural contexts, the hereby contributions share, in the first place, such taste proving that universally food practices are, explicitly or implicitly, political acts and gendered acts. Through food practices, indeed, political stances are taken, ranging from nationalism to sovereignty and ecofeminism, enhancing gastro-nationalism as much as the liberation from gastro-colonialism. Food is as much a means of control over specific segments of population as a means of agency, amplifying local voices in the global community.
- 21 Secondly, this *Special Issue* articles prove that the political instances conveyed by food are entangled and inseparable: hierarchy, education, background, class, gender intersect with inequality, access to resources, power and violence.
- 22 Lastly, if on the one hand, the western masculinity crisis, brought about by contemporary socio-economic shifts, has triggered a remasculinization or reparation of masculinity process reimposing a gendered order based on male supremacy, on the other hand, the recognition of uncommodified and commodified women food work has tackled such order, proposing a new one where shared responsibilities overcome the binary order.
- 23 These threads, that sum up the “gastropolitics” (Appadurai 1981), the intersectionality, the reparation of masculinity and the recognition of productive and reproductive

women work, cut-cross the contributions in this volume, creating a navigable seaway that is shortly illustrated below.

- 24 While some of the articles are more socio-historical and others solidly ethnographic, together they provide an important and timely contribution to what we hope will become a distinct field in the anthropology of food, merging environment relations, gender relations and food production.
- 25 Jonatan Leer shares with Sebastiano Benasso, Luca Guzzetti and Luisa Stagi the masculinity crisis' analysis, which triggered a twofold reparation process -an exaggerated masculinity and search for exotic and horrific flavors on one side, and a de-chefization in search of domesticity, escapism and national taste on the other. They also share the analysis of media as the new space for gendered narrations. Here Benasso, Guzzetti and Stagi take a step forward in proposing a third reparation process, embodied by the right-wing party's leader Matteo Salvini. Finding in media a powerful means of representation, he offers a different reparation scenario "in Italian sauce": through the mediatic rejection of sophistication, intellectual and classy tastes, the exposition of a body far from concerned of cultural pressure towards a healthy and fit metrosexual body and the preference for regional food products, he restores the traditional gender order (proposing a hegemonic consumerist masculinity) and affirms, at the same time, political ideals of sovereigntist and nationalist taste.
- 26 The restoring of different gender profiles in order to avoid gender contamination is also addressed by Jonatan Leer, who, through a meticulous analysis of the Netflix series *Chef's Table BBQ 2020*, proves that "women as barbeque chefs are not culturally unthinkable, but female barbeque chefs differ from their male peers". In his analysis of the four chefs' profiles and their mediatic (re)presentation, Leer shows the extent to which, despite sharing some values such as the ethos of manual working and an anti-modern attitude, women possess desirable values, such as the gatekeeping of tradition and authenticity, which in contemporary times' prestigious and fine dining are nevertheless overruled by individualism, cosmopolitanism and culinary audacity, distinctive male chefs' features. Such "negotiation of various discursive repertoires that are gendered differently, making room for distinct gender identities while excluding others" as illustrated by Leer, summarizes the rich contribution of Nina Studer. By illustrating medical and travelers' accounts of colonial Maghreb in order to unveil the cultural construction of the colonized Muslim men, she works on two levels of identity distinction: that internal to the Maghrebi cultural setting and that which exists in relation to the French colonists. *Studer* indeed navigates through historical sources that reflect a western gaze and portrays the Maghrebi people in two ways: as excessive and insatiable, and as noble and healthy savages, yet more primitive and more robust, and suited for the consumption of spices. Studer traces a link between spice, sexuality and primitive masculinity drawing from accounts which describe the foodscape as over-spiced as the result of a sexual insatiability of both Muslim men and women. The author shows that in the Maghreb context the orientalism framework has been "reversed": men were over-masculized and sexualized while women de-passivized and described as agentively helping their partners revitalizing their virility through the use of spices. French, through such cultural construction, distinguished themselves as moderate, fought assimilation through the ingestion of the others' food and framed their fears for numeric inferiority in colonial settings.



- 27 Another account breaking the stereotype of women passiveness is provided by Renata Blumberg, whose analysis of Eastern European, and specifically Latvian female farmers, prove that women have not been excluded nor have faced obstacles in taking up farming as a livelihood activity. Just as Leer proves the thinkability of women barbequers only when it is associated with the reorganization of gender hierarchy, Blumberg illustrates the thinkability of Latvian women as farmworkers only if combined with their “double burden” of social reproduction and production for profit. Even when engaging in alternative food networks (AFN), which allows them to set their own prices, women are disadvantaged unless they belong to the “normative family farm” where men are responsible for specific tasks. This occurs not because women cannot do men’s work, but rather because of the opposite: indeed, the fall of the Soviet-Union has re-shaped the farming sector and farm work, pushing women back into the social reproduction role of mothers of the nation. Therefore, despite representing half of the farm working population, “the happy marriage between the neoliberal economic framework and the neoconservative gender ideology is in reality the restatement of women political, social and economic disempowerment” argues Blumberg quoting Irina Novikova. It leads to the marginalization of contemporary Latvian women.
- 28 The social reproduction role is addressed, in different yet similar terms, also by Emilia Cordero Ocegüera, who illustrates the complex interplay between oppression and agency among Mexican farmworkers in the US. She introduces a distinction between “food work”, carried out at home and “food labour”, which includes both home and professional work. According to Ocegüera indeed, when carrying out food labour “working class women challenge the binary division of male-provider and women-caregiver, since they serve both tasks”. Mexican migrant women working in the American farming sector are an eloquent example of this process. They express resistance to gender marginalization in three ways: firstly through the awareness of the importance of their labour at home and in the field; secondly, by reproducing home food and food practices from their country of origin, namely metaphorically manipulating and making edible and digestible the oppressive setting they moved into; and lastly, by engaging in moments of pleasure and joy while working in the field, which serve the double function of providing their work with meanings beyond the strenuous tasks and of alleviating the home/caregiving daily task.
- 29 Acts of resistance to marginalization and invisibility are also addressed by Flavia Cuturi, who illustrates the process of deshadowing and empowerment that the Afro-descendant women in the Colombian region of Guapi went through, thanks to the care of the “azoteas” herbal gardens. These gardens, spaces of resistance where an in-verse counter-language, namely a poetic situated language, is spoken, fall under women’s sphere of influence: they provide food; liberate from dependence on industrial products; allow for women’s autonomy, independence and provisioning which safeguards them from gender violence in the domestic setting; strengthen inter-generational cohesion and matrilinear knowledge transmission; legitimize the right to difference and rootedness and decolonize taste. Indeed, the Fundacion Chyangua, evocatively named after cilantro (a herb part of the region’s cuisine), has achieved the manifold objectives of making this practice fashionable, de-colonize the local gastronomy, and more importantly rebuild the community body through the recovery of the azoteas. The living dimension of these gardens, which as part of the family act as

subjects and not only tools of resistance, reaffirm the Afro-colombian community rootedness to both the space and the farming practices.

- 30 Renata Motta and Marco Teixeira share with Cuturi the reference to a connection between women and landscape by underlying that women “breathe life into territories” not only because of their botanical expertise, but also because their relationship with the environment promotes social, biological, cultural diversity and regeneration. After distinguishing the contemporary popular feminism from the historical one - the first one being a working class mobilization against 80s and 90s neoliberal economic reforms and the second a white middle-class activism coming from political exile in Europe - the two authors argue that pivotal in the struggles of the popular feminism is the idea that the transition to agroecological farming entails a shift in gender relations. The 100.000 people walking the *Marcha das Margaridas*, followed and observed by Motta and Teixeira through the years, argue that “without feminism there is no agroecology”. This popular feminist movement has built new inclusive agendas, diversified feminist struggles and created space for participative democracy. Through the analysis of the five themes of their discourse (food is a right and a commons; women are central in food production; uncommodified food is valuable; agro-ecological consciousness must be awakened; class and gender affect working women, creating power asymmetries) the two authors clearly show the refined contribution of the *Marcha das Margaridas* to the anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, decolonial and ecological struggle carried out in many other contexts of the world. These key issues all merge in food sovereignty, defined by the authors as “the right of people to decide their own food and production system, based on healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced in a sustainable and ecological way, which places those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, above the demands of the markets and companies, while also defending the interests and insuring the inclusion of future generations”. Food sovereignty emerges from numerous articles of the Special Issue as the vehicle for transforming environmental relations and gender relations in a new regime of shared responsibilities.
- 31 Such shared and collective dimension, as well as the women’s role beyond the nurturing one as cultural weavers, are two aspects of the deep ethnography proposed by Stephen Wooten, result of a decennial fieldwork in the Niamakoroni settlement of the Mande Plateau (South Central Mali). His observation of the unified consumption units of the households, where women produce food “for sauce” (inter-cropping) and men “for life” (staple crops), both provides further data on shared responsibility models and responds to the need for more ethnography on “cooking as cooking”, as David Sutton quoted by Wooten has argued. The shared production of food, the cooking process carried out by women, the commensality and act of sharing food coming from the same hearth, strengthens and promotes, according to Wooten, kinship values. Women, here again carrying the double burden of production and reproduction, become crucial agents of kinship netting.

## To conclude

- 32 The contributions collected here, which we have briefly summarized and intertwined in this introduction, allow a multifaceted and variegated analysis of the relationship between food and gender. This dynamic relationship, analyzed in specific times and

places, highlights a number of central issues in the contemporary world, including ecologism, cultural and social differences, land rights, resistance processes and strategies, and usages of (mediatic) representation. It comes to be the “litmus test” for reasoning on differences and inequalities, which despite being constituted and expressed in very different ways depending on the context, produce very similar results.

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