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Breakfast, Biometrics, and Belonging: Eating in the Social Order

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Review of

Eileen P. Anderson-Fye and Alexandra Brewis, eds., *Fat Planet: Obesity, Culture, and Symbolic Body Capital* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2017).

Nicholas Bauch, *A Geography of Digestion: Biotechnology and the Kellogg Cereal Enterprise* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

Amy L. Best, *Fast-Food Kids: French Fries, Lunch Lines, and Social Ties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

In 1896, Wilbur Atwater discovered that food intake and labor output could be measured in units of thermal energy using a calorimeter. Atwater's efforts to specify calorie counts for different foods, as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's first chief of nutritional investigations, have since had far-reaching consequences for domestic legislation, and, in turn, the "missionizing agendas of international nutrition and health programs" (Caldwell 2014, 68). More than a mere yardstick of energy content, the calorie construes food as "uniform, composed of interchangeable parts, and comparable across time and between nations and races," entrusting nutrition to the tidy register of arithmetic—inputs, outputs—with a focus on how "personal and market behavior could be modified to square the food ledger" (Cullather 2010, 18-19). To count calories, whether as part of a personal identity management project or a United Nations food security project, is by common agreement to make conscientious strides toward some sort of healthful outcome: we are counting on our counting to hone a better body, a stronger workforce.

What lines of reasoning do we foreground, and what do we miss, when we make eating calculable and open to technical scrutiny? How do pre-theoretical commitments to particular policy instruments shape social outcomes? Anthropologists have approached the transnational circulation of agriproducts, dietary customs, and the global dialogue on "eating right" in diverse ways (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002, Coleman 2011, and Wutich and Brewis 2014 for elegant reviews). It is no longer new to point out that largescale health interventions divert critical inquiry—and responsibility—from systems to individuals. Nonetheless, as Lynne Phillips (2006, 48) reminds us, while our research community may know that "more education, more science, and more modeling" are, in themselves, poor solutions to global nutritional challenges, this is far from received wisdom in mainstream policy circles. It is helpful, then, that each of the titles reviewed in this essay grounds its approach to the above questions in specific case studies, offering essential empirical context for understanding such mainstays of American dietary life as the Body Mass Index, packaged convenience foods, and the National Student Lunch Program.

No Accounting for Taste?

Melissa Caldwell (2014, 67) has pointed out that the “prevalence of accounting metaphors” in North American nutritionism reflects a culturally particular appetite for health-related surveillance that has desensitized us to some deeply unhealthy outcomes: the yearslong anguish, for example, of disordered eating habits (Greenhalgh 2012). We see this at play in common reactions to the dieting cliché of a woman who skips breakfast to lose weight: she is monitoring her caloric intake with admirable discipline, but in a misguided way that stymies her metabolic rate and is likely to backfire, and, in any case, she shouldn’t care so much about her looks. The ideological tensions of double-bind scenarios like this take center stage in Eileen Anderson-Fye and Alexandra Brewis’s edited volume *Fat Planet: Obesity, Culture, and Symbolic Body Capital*, which complicates Western body-management wisdom with cross-cultural data from field sites in Fiji, Jamaica, Nepal, the United Arab Emirates, and communities throughout the United States and Latin America. Treating the U.S. Surgeon General’s declaration of a “war on fat” and the World Health Organization’s characterization of obesity as an “epidemic” as points of departure, the authors unsettle bio-pedagogical discourses about the perils of eating badly. They aim, among other things, to show how metrics like the Body Mass Index—a weight-to-height quotient that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) calls “a reliable indicator of body fatness for most people” (p. 88)—mask crucial determinants of health that are independent of girth and overeating, and are sometimes even congruent with them.

Anne Becker, for instance, describes how young Fijian women navigate transnational discourses that celebrate thinness alongside local imperatives that deviate markedly from Western body ideals. For Fijian girls, moral standing is tied closely to eating heartily at family and community meals, and fleshy bodies have historically been valorized in Fiji. However, with the nation’s deepening integration into global markets over the past two decades—entailing a shift in available jobs from the agrarian sector to the service sector, and greater exposure to American mass media franchises—Fijian girls are increasingly aware that “competent navigation of a Westernizing landscape might lead to new opportunities for social and economic success” (p. 162). How to balance these countervailing imperatives? For some women, the solution lies in herbal purgatives, which allow users to fulfill communal performance obligations—eating with gusto to uphold their and their families’ social standing—without sabotaging their life ambitions. In another chapter, Anderson-Fye and her collaborators similarly explore how transnational tourism has eroded Belize’s long-celebrated status as an exception to the global rise in eating disorders. Although indigenous, mestizo, and Creole body ideals offered some amount of protection against dysmorphic body perceptions, Belizean survey respondents could not help but notice “that those who were seen as slim stood a much greater chance of winning a job—especially one in the service industry” (p. 61). In such contexts, where on the gradient between wellness and illness do overeating, undereating, and purging fall?

Daniel Hruschka offers a helpful approach to questions like this in his contribution, a meta-analysis of demographic work on BMI and household wealth. Hruschka’s core contention is that,

as an epidemiological construct, the BMI is better understood as a dimension of “body capital” than as a proxy for body fat; this reframing trains attention on how bodies fare in labor markets and marriage markets. Researchers worldwide have, indeed, long noticed an inverse relationship between BMI and wealth for women above a certain income threshold (\$3,000-4,000 USD annually), but the trend is often attributed to the common sense that the rich have the time and money to eat well and work out. Hruschka invites readers to turn more attention to the corollary of this pattern: how does being thin facilitate upward mobility? In this way, his chapter serves as a thematic fulcrum for the entire collection.

Alexander Edmonds and Ashley Mears extend Hruschka’s argument by reviewing examples of the ways in which attractiveness is “a fungible asset that requires maintenance” (p. 40). Citing ethnographic work on plastic surgery in Brazil, where patients openly link their choice of procedures to their career ambitions, as well as women’s experiences in service professions ranging from retail to the global VIP party circuit, Edmonds and Mears make it clear that disordered eating is a logical outcome of formidable, transnational market pressures. If being thin—and micromanaging oneself to achieve this—enhances professional viability and resource access, then caring about one’s looks is the furthest thing from irrational or superficial in an ultracompetitive global economy.

Understanding body management pressures as a subset of market pressures helps to demystify behaviors that might otherwise seem pathological. But, as Amy Best observes in *Fast-Food Kids*, discussed later in this essay, market pressures form just part of the ensemble of life pressures that people negotiate: all rational, but not always in an economic sense. Even in the absence of competitive imperatives, for example, many young girls will mobilize health discourses to talk about their “concerns with calories and fat without running the risk of being characterized as the type of girl who is overly concerned with such trifling matters as caring too much about what you look like” (Best, p. 9). To capture a wider range of relevant life pressures, Lester and Anderson-Fye suggest reframing the values that societies assign to compliant and noncompliant eating in terms of latent moral reasoning about “the individual’s investment in the broader social community” (p. 197). What a sculpted body signals, they argue, is “prosociality”—active willingness to gauge oneself by the standards of one’s community and ratify its gaze—and not merely the Protestant work ethic, neoliberal employability, or attractiveness, even if in some places it means all of these, too.

In a devastating chapter on the link between maternal obesity and infant mortality rates (IMRs), Monica Casper unpacks the policy myopia that can result from overvaluing prosocial bodies. In the U.S., lifestyle interventions targeting infant mortality tend to “reflect a preoccupation with numbers” that invites lengthy discussions of premature death “without ever mentioning actual people” (p. 87). This erases demographic disparities from debates about the impact of maternal nutrition on fetal development, and depoliticizes findings of high IMRs among women with high BMIs. IMRs among African American women, in particular, are nearly twice that of the U.S. national average (p. 84), but the sociohistorical inequalities that shape these findings are entirely

absent from high-profile prenatal health campaigns. Instead, “preconception care seeks not to eradicate hunger, poverty, racism, and violence from a community plagued by these problems, but rather to ensure that individual women receive counseling, prenatal vitamins, and weight-management training” (pp. 86-87). Urging African American women to eat better for the sake of their unborn children—or nonexistent children, per guidelines urging prenatal nutrient supplementation for non-pregnant women—these policy interventions erase the embodied impacts of racism, while reducing women to reproductive vessels and providing an alibi for escalating state surveillance of already over-policed communities.

Is the prosocial body a tenable aim for those whose bodies are *defined* as antisocial? Charlotte Biltekoff (2013, 139) has elsewhere shown how the proposition that obesity is “largely a problem of minorities and those with low socioeconomic status...was integral to its emergence as a medical and social problem in the 1960s and 1970s,” and how, to this day, health programs urge special intervention for overweight women of color. The fact that concerns about BMIs are often more about cultural aesthetics than health is underscored by the fact that there are no high-profile campaigns about the risks of being skinny and pregnant, despite ample biomedical evidence that low body fat can harm fetal viability (as Casper notes here, p. 90). The primacy of cultural aesthetics becomes even clearer when we consider two events in the history of the BMI. From Best (p. 190), we learn that the U.S. National Institutes of Health redefined BMI thresholds in 1998, lowering the BMI definition of overweight for women from 27 to 25. From Biltekoff, we learn that a contemporaneous study found a BMI of 25 as precisely “the starting point” at which “white women began expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies”—even while “black and Hispanic women did not express such dismay until they reached a BMI of 30” (Biltekoff 2013, 141, referring to Fitzgibbon et al. 2000). The matter is far from abstract for racialized individuals already disadvantaged by aesthetic norms with long colonial pedigrees—skin color, hair texture, nose shape, eye shape—that make them “uncompetitive” in so many of the markets that Hruschka and Edmonds and Mears examine. To lengthen this list with ever more body norms calibrated to a “white” physiognomic standard is to erode the likelihood that a young, racialized person will ultimately enter the job market with interview-ready confidence. And if a lifetime of self-doubt and unease hinders the arc of a career, is that hiring discrimination? It isn’t, but we can see how colonialism has still shaped the game. Not everyone can point to health to legitimize every bodily misgiving, and, as Casper reminds us, it is essential to keep history front and center when pointing instead to very real market pressures.

The flattening of historical violence through market evaluations is brought into sharp relief in Stephanie McClure’s poignant chapter on the othering of African American body norms, in which a shapely African American teenager recounts the pain of overhearing male classmates assign her an attractiveness rating of two. “I try not to think about it,” the girl affirms, “I try not to let it get to me,” as she makes the case for her worth through other criteria, physical and nonphysical (p. 114). McClure’s informant has little choice, in a neoliberal culture that equates complaint with fragility, but to react stoically to the trickle-down colonialism that puts teeth into adolescent ridicule. Her stoicism also invites us to pay closer attention to how the metropolitan

North calibrates its barometers of health and prosperity. Who profits from ordinary people's studious management of their calories, bodies, and BMIs? Edmonds and Mears (p. 43) point out that, in the service industries, "much of the value of women's bodies benefits men, who make up the majority of owners and managers in these industries." This is true, too, of other industries—and we should not neglect how race, geopolitics, and generational wealth also pattern who gets to own businesses and helm companies today. The idea that worker self-scrutiny and the resources we anxiously pour into "self-improvement" redound to the benefit of the owning class has a long history (Hochschild 1983, Rose 1996, Allan 2016), but is worth recalling anew each time the headlines offer up another story about the economic costs of obesity.

Enlarged to Show Texture

Casper closes her chapter in *Fat Planet* by asking us to consider how problem framings can imply or deny their own solutions: if "the problems to be fixed are not weights and rates" but qualitative social indignities, there are obvious shortcomings in urging individuals to eat better without considering their other life imperatives (p. 94). Taking a step back to consider the bigger picture—restoring historical depth and geographic breadth to ideas about eating badly—lets us see how certain interests have converged to make salty/sugary snacks not just strategic staples for households that cannot access fresh produce, but cherished parts of the cultural iconography. Nicholas Bauch does exactly this in his fascinating *A Geography of Digestion: Biotechnology and the Kellogg Cereal Enterprise*. A geographer by training, Bauch proceeds from the Latourian premise that humans are but one part of a multistage food processing apparatus—ingestion, mastication, digestion, evacuation—whose organs include industrial kitchens and city sewers. Digging deep into the archives to paint a lively picture of gastroenterologist John Harvey Kellogg's work at southern Michigan's Battle Creek Sanitarium at the turn of the twentieth century, Bauch shows that many neglected factors led to the invention of flaked cereal: therapeutic ideologies (and granola recipes) that Kellogg inherited from his upbringing and employment in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the expansion of sewage infrastructure into the Michigan hinterlands, and the then-emerging sciences of nutrition and agriculture.

Bauch's aims are twofold. He embeds the invention of flaked cereal in a specific sociocultural moment to illustrate what makes it archetypically American. In so doing, he inserts Kellogg—long trivialized as among his era's fringe "vegetarians and iconoclasts...who judged diet by moral and aesthetic criteria rather than the objective, numerical standards of an industrial age" (Cullather 2007, 342)—into mainstream histories of nutritional science. To this end, Bauch builds a case that what it means to "eat American" is to align one's diet with a "rational formula based in the calculation of fats, carbohydrates, proteins, and calories" (p. 100). The modern "obsession with getting food right" (p. 79), moreover, arose in parallel with anxieties about nature's unseen perils and the need to make the American wilderness "safe" through ongoing technical mediation. Having pointed this out, Bauch unfortunately does not address the colonial lineage of these preoccupations, or link them to manifest destiny and settler designs to "transform America into something civilized and consumable" (Dawdy 2010, 402). This is somewhat disappointing, given that imperial projects have routinely drawn legitimacy from the

alleged failure of locals to properly sow and harvest their lands, attesting to a longstanding role for ideas about “getting food right” in the self-fashioning of the West (Moore and Vaughan 1994, Elias 2014, Bouchard-Perron 2017; see also McElhinny 2006 on the rise of ideas about the frontier as something available, rather than constructed, for settler enjoyment and management). Nonetheless, Bauch’s contention that what makes American cuisine distinctive has historically had less to do with traditional foods and more to do with a continual worry about what is in the food is compelling and instructive.

Bauch works hard to trace the national concern with eating right, and the conviction that technology can help us do it, back to Battle Creek. Kellogg, he argues, was a conscientious empirical investigator cut from the same cloth as other scientists of his era, and, although ridiculed by his contemporaries and some historians today “because of the association commonly made between Kellogg and the greater health reform movement, a Protestant-based, pseudoscientific social movement that promoted simple, bland, unadulterated tastes in food, sex, and dress” (p. 17), Kellogg’s contributions to American health ideologies extend well beyond the widespread availability of cereal in supermarkets. By creating prototypes for today’s health-food mainstays—granola, cereals, soy milk, peanut butter—Kellogg, along with his wife and brother, innovated early prosthetics for the gastrointestinal system: the outsourcing of digestive strain to steel dough rollers and sterilizing oven temperatures. By advocating the installation of sewerage in and around Battle Creek while serving on Michigan’s state board of health, Kellogg championed the notion that displacing excreta from the civil landscape would displace disease vectors, thereby “protecting the digestive system from itself” (p. 112).

Patients at Battle Creek were subjected to a battery of stomach fluid assays to quantify the proteins, carbohydrates, fats, and acids in their digestive tracts, and prescribed special diets (and enemas) to ensure the timely evacuation of their bowels. Like many of his era’s bacteriological theorists, Kellogg suspected that the putrefaction of food inside intestinal canals was responsible for a multitude of diseases, and he saw a solution in stimulating the evacuation of stagnant gastrointestinal content. His belief in the healing powers of “sparkling clean intestines” guided a little too much of what he sought, and saw, when examining patients: clinical records that attest to the successful elimination of all bacteria from some patients’ guts would seem to point to “dubious methods of measurement” at Battle Creek (pp. 115, 57). But even if Kellogg was wrong about what constituted healthy digestive chemistry, his underlying “digestive reductionism, presenting ailments and diseases of all kinds as curable through the proper consumption and digestion of foods” (p. 1) was, in some ways, a century ahead of its time; today’s probiotics fads have a direct ancestor in Kellogg’s confidence in the etiological centrality of the gut. By pioneering and commoditizing a new type of digestive health food—hermetically sealed cereal “doses” that promised to cleanse consumers from the inside out—Kellogg “popularized and nationally exported the concept that science could make better foods than nature” (p. 17). He did so, moreover, at precisely the time when the technology to develop and distribute such foods was converging with the pragmatic needs of empire: feeding workers and

administrators in colonial territories, as well as the growing populations of prisons, poorhouses, factories, and armies (Neill 2009).

The imperial politics of American dietary thinking are sidelined in *A Geography of Digestion*, leaving readers to wonder how Kellogg's worries about digestive hygiene were informed by his worries, documented elsewhere, about "avoiding race degeneracy through personal hygiene" (Markel 2017, 316) and the belief of his Church's co-founder that dietary reform was central to racial betterment (Biltekoff 2013, 28-29). Bauch does not pull on these threads. He does, however, allude to the cultural evolutionism in Kellogg's thinking, noting that his quest to heal people through their stomachs and colons rested on his belief that eating unprocessed plants and animals was not merely unhealthy but "savage" (p. 93). And in an important chapter that illuminates how nutrition fell under the purview of foreign policy, Bauch examines how the rise of agricultural chemistry laid lasting foundations for interventionist agendas at home and abroad. Expressly "funded with the intention of maximizing the health of the working class and increasing the productivity of the nation," Wilbur Atwater's nutritional guides had a major impact on Kellogg, who felt that Atwater's work validated his own concern with food's makeup and metabolism (pp. 137-138). In 1896, the same year that Atwater began publishing his calorie tables, two other things happened: the USDA's chief chemist began to promote agricultural science as a remedy to the spreading economic distress of the "dying, independent, autonomous, yeoman farmer" (p. 127) and Kellogg received a patent on his preparation process for flaked cereal (p. 90). These innovations—the commensuration of nutrition and work through the calorie, the state's endorsement of standard soil management techniques over local farming lore, and a revolution in the manufacture of portable, palatable, imperishable food—brought into being a sophisticated toolkit for managing the productivity of land and of bodies, dissolving the "metrical handicap" that had once "excluded food from the turn toward statistical reasoning that was altering social debate in the United States" (Cullather 2010, 17).

Kellogg's meticulous stomach chemistry assays, his exacting schedules "for exactly how long food should remain in the body" (p. 164) and his "commitment to food as a quantifiable medicine" (p. 138) were firmly embedded in his era's scientific paradigms, but, as Bauch explains, he was never quite accepted by his peers (p. 75). Caught between his church and his profession, "Kellogg perpetually walked a tightrope between these two worlds" (p. 18) and faced continual pressure from the American Medical Association "to avoid excessive commercialization, a warning that he took seriously since he was already under a watchful eye due to his 'unorthodox' practices of hydrotherapy and massage" (p. 157). Kellogg's reluctance to take cereal to the mass market was a source of mounting frustration for his brother William, who founded a competing company in 1906. It was William who, in a final, defining flourish, added sugar to his newly christened Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flakes—an enhancement that John opposed for both "moral and medical reasons"—thus severing cereal from the Adventist injunction on pleasure, and hitching it to an emerging proletarian staple and cornerstone of the European colonial enterprise (p. 159; cf., Mintz 1985).

Things We Long For

Cheap, high in calories, and marketed with wholesome imagery, the rise of breakfast cereal in the twentieth century reveals something of the sinuous pathways that ideas about health can take when traveling from the clinic into daily life. It is no coincidence that many iconic images of both abundance and hunger—the brightly lit supermarket aisle, the cluttered food drive bin—share a common ingredient: the sealed, shelf-stable package labeled with specific nutritional values and an expiry date. That the U.S. Army contracted the Kellogg Company during the Second World War to produce millions of individually wrapped daily combat rations reminds us that making food modular helps to clarify largescale nutritional problems by suggesting certain technical solutions. That the U.S. Surgeon General's largely fruitless war on obesity has tended to rely on educational campaigns involving food pyramids, portion sizes, and minimal daily requirements reminds us, too, that frameworks that clarify some problems may obfuscate others.

This is the argument that sociologist Amy Best takes up in *Fast-Food Kids: French Fries, Lunch Lines, and Social Ties*, an eloquent meditation on how food serves as a medium for teenage identity experimentation and proto-political commentary. Drawing from two years of fieldwork in public high school cafeterias in northern Virginia and Washington D.C., along with systematic observation of commercial food spaces frequented by American youth (e.g., Baskin-Robbins, McDonald's, Chipotle, Starbucks), interviews with teachers and administrators, and a corpus of written work from students, Best asks what is overlooked in today's policy debates about how badly kids eat. If getting young Americans to eat better is chiefly a matter of improving their menu options and knowledge of federal dietary guidelines, then the U.S. National Student Lunch Program would seem to be succeeding. Contrary to widespread stereotypes, students who participate in the NSLP get fewer calories from low-nutrient sources than nonparticipating peers, and are twice as likely to consume fruits and vegetables (pp. 218, 70-71). In fact, Best reports that up to sixty-nine percent of high school students agree that it is more important for lunch menus to offer fresh fruit than processed snack foods (p. 61). The reason why kids in public schools seem to eat so poorly, in short, is not that they don't know what's "best" for them, nor is it necessarily that school lunches are simply unhealthy.

As Best deftly illustrates, teenagers' preference for commercial foods over school foods must be understood against a backdrop of nonnegotiable institutional banality. School meals are a proxy for school authority, and young people's boredom with or repudiation of them often has less to do with taste or nutritional value than with the social value of performing that boredom or repudiation (as captured in a student's offhand remark, "What...are *they* serving *us* today?" [p. 112]). Sharing "outside" foods with peers allows students not only to cement relationships in a fraught social landscape, but to "comment on the public institutions that house them" (p. 153). Best also sees such comment in camaraderie-building pranks and irreverent complaint performances: rolling one's eyes at a long lunch line or bland salad, grumbling about food service workers, boasting about Doritos-fueled all-nighters, or casually defying coaches' bans on fast food before athletic competition. Commercial food outlets likewise double as "way stations, absent adult authority found at home and school" (p. 131), where small, affordable purchases

unlock time and space for kids to socialize and reinvent themselves “outside of the institutional confines of school and home where more clearly etched social roles and rules guide them” (p. 152). With this in mind, it becomes less surprising that students who qualify for a free school lunch from a diligently crafted menu that meets federal nutritional guidelines may opt instead for a bag of chips purchased off campus (p. 201).

For some young people, “campaigns to reduce the consumption of processed foods look a lot like bans against other items” (p. 165), and not only come up against the insurrectionary identity work that is vital to youth socialization in North America, but start to resemble other efforts to govern through taste. Strictures on taste and style—on jeans, hooded shirts, or racialized rhetorical genres—may pass, to some, as efforts to “professionalize” today’s kids, but their legitimacy rests on historical power asymmetries that have entitled a few to define the interests of the many. Whatever their biomedical value, calorie counts and sodium intake warnings are also governing instruments, aligned with “gross national products, poverty rates, intelligence quotients, and the panoply of indices that in the twentieth century authorized government to tell people what was best for them” (Cullather 2007, 347; cf., Rose 1996). The indignities that racialized youth endure in a society that systematically stigmatizes, pathologizes, and criminalizes them are not lost on the school administrators in Best’s study. On the contrary, school staff work hard to build rapport with marginalized students, keep disciplinary judgments out of the cafeteria, and improve their lunch options and life options. We should reflect, then, on how a school’s partnership with, say, “Krispy Kreme’s ‘Doughnuts for A’s’ program, whereby every A awarded earns the student a free doughnut” (p. 18) presses the emotional labor of educators and the underfunding of public schools into the service of private capital, yoking teachers’ aspirations for their students to the branding aspirations of corporate shareholders.

Students have few tools with which to navigate the symbolic demands of high school, but among them are the “dispositions and expectations” they display toward food (p. 113). One of Best’s cardinal insights in this context is that cafeterias are key sites for the reproduction of class identity. Of the two schools that hosted her fieldwork, one had a majority white student body from an upper-middle-income catchment area, and the other served a more ethnically diverse, lower-income district. While students in both schools performed identity work using food, those in the wealthier, whiter school expressed significantly more aesthetic and moral judgments about the flavor, freshness, sourcing, and appearance of school lunches, a pattern that Best situates within “the ambivalent relationship of the professional middle class to public institutions” (p. 103), and children’s internalization of a neoliberal posture on publicly provisioned care. The fears of affluent parents, in turn—who sought to protect their kids “against environmental and health risks associated with an industrial food system”—manifested in initiatives to replace candy in school vending machines with Kashi granola bars, Horizon organic chocolate milk, San Pellegrino sparkling juice, and other products seldom encountered outside of Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s (pp. 109-110; see Roseberry 1996 on the “preindustrial nostalgia” built into such commodities). These snacks remain highly processed and quite sugary—but their rustic, upscale

branding serves to reassure PTA members that their families' futures are securable through a worldly palate, disposable income, and educated consumer choice.

Beautifully written and interwoven with shrewd observations, *Fast-Food Kids* makes a robust case for qualitative empirical analysis in health policymaking, and enriches the evidence for why a sustainable global food system “will require cultural shifts in personal aspirations, assessments of quality of life, and consumption practices,” as Peggy Barlett has argued (2011, 112). Without such shifts, exhortations to make sensible, farsighted choices are unlikely to be top-of-mind for, say, a teenager who is starved for acceptance or a mother who can't afford a family vacation but can treat her kids to McDonald's. In this way, Best contributes to a long ethnographic tradition of showing that unless policy instruments attend to the full range of stakes, goals, and incentives that shape people's priorities, campaigns to reshape those priorities are likely to misfire (Justice 1986, Merry 2006, Wardlow 2012, Mulla 2014). It is slightly dissatisfying, then, given Best's close attention to the subtleties of dignity, that frontline service workers are almost entirely silent in this study. Mostly middle-aged migrant women, they are the only adults whom the youth in the book seem to have some authority over, as in Best's accounts of kids at the wealthier school habitually requesting personalized modifications to their meals, intensifying staff workloads and “reproducing a sense of entitlement as students came to expect personal accommodations in institutional settings” (pp. 114-15).

Of particular interest is what these workers' own children are learning about class and food, a topic Best does not discuss but does touch on in a fleeting chapter on students' reminiscences, which provides one more glimpse into what shapes taste. Juggling stressful schedules, Best's informants express nostalgia for the meals of their childhoods (pp. 48-49). These kids' yearnings, she notes, are easy grist for perennial debates about late capitalist precarity and “a largely fictional collective past of family cohesion” (p. 52) that is more about the present than the past, given that the slow-paced, sit-down, full-course dinner we associate with mid-century Middle America was rarely a reality for anyone. But for the subset of students Best identifies as having roots in the global South—not unlike their schools' lunchroom workers—it's not clear that the longing has much to do with dietary quality or even ideas about culinary authenticity. For plenty of immigrant families leading dislocated lives beset with time pressures and money problems, fast food has diasporic meanings just as wholesome as any homecooked dish: recalled fondly as the flavor of a bygone adversity, or bound up in wistful memories of hardscrabble togetherness that can be relived, in adulthood, with a greasy trip to Pizza Hut or late-night bowl of Corn Pops.

Nutritional Values

In her study of American colonists' letters and diaries in the Philippines following the 1898 Spanish-American war, Megan Elias noticed a recurring preoccupation with rehabilitating Filipino eating and dining norms. “How Americans wrote about food,” Elias (2014, 46) has pointed out, “expressed ideas about their own nation and the imperial project that many did not make explicit,” and the fact that “almost all who wrote did write about food” suggests that dietary ideologies contributed to the logic of the occupation (see also Anderson 2006). During

these same years, stateside, labor activists were fighting “for leisure, meat, and bread as matters of justice” in Congress and on picket lines (Cullather 2007, 343). The U.S. federal government did eventually outline minimal standards for wages and nutrition, not as a matter of justice but on the basis of Taylorist industrial management principles: using calculations of the wage floor and calorie floor needed to maintain target productivity levels. This idea of maintaining the workforce through its diet and putting the public purse to work for private industry was, in turn, critical to the launch of the National Student Lunch Program in 1946—administered to this day by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a market for agricultural surpluses, while seeming to confirm both social democratic and neoliberal critiques of the current state of public institutions, their duties, and their worth.

What does it mean, in this historical moment, to get people to eat better? What does it do? The three books reviewed in this essay help us understand how individual and institutional efforts to strengthen the tactical merits of meals bring certain crises into focus while obscuring others. As Anderson-Fye and her collaborators contend, the “war on obesity” masks the significant health threat that BMI-shaming poses to people who face no shortage of reminders that their bodies fall short, and discourages competing conceptions of wellbeing. “When the solutions to health epidemics focus only on bodies,” Bauch (p. 3) cautions us, “an entire map of potential places on which attention could be focused is lost,” ranging from farmers markets to job markets and stock markets, not to mention upscale supermarkets that conflate fashion, health, consumer choice, and political responsibility. At stake in such reminders is what we see, and what we miss, when nutritional education dwells narrowly on nutrition. If eating well is mainly about knowledge, location, and money, then hunger is, above all, an infrastructural challenge—and it is, indeed, that. But hunger isn’t just physical, and food isn’t just nourishment; sustenance comes in many flavors, with lasting consequences for how likely a dietary recommendation is to succeed and where it will fall flat. Policymakers and legislators interested in a healthier future would be wise, then, to take up Best’s proposal for a move toward “critical food literacy” (p. 166) in and beyond the K12 curriculum: a focus not just on bodily health, but on planetary health, food sovereignty, industry, empire, and the role of eating in civic life.

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