Part 3:

Representing and Imagining Food

Long before the surge of work in transdisciplinary food studies in the new millennium, scholarship by cultural studies scholar and philosopher, Roland Barthes, anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explored the intricacies of food's semiotic and interpretive meanings—within particular societies, among certain groups and transnationally. Often drawing directly or indirectly on these scholars' insights, food studies scholars have recognised that food is never simply a material resource, but always redefined within certain symbolic and meaning-making systems. The very fact that what constitutes "food" is defined culturally, and that what is deemed edible or not, or special or mundane in certain contexts, makes it clear that food is never devoid of social and cultural signification. An obvious example is that for many French people, snails are a delicacy, whereas for those who are unfamiliar with the idea of a mollusc being edible, the eating of snails is abhorrent. In South Africa, many think with tremendous pleasure of the eating of tripe, trotters and "offal"[1] as pleasurable. Yet for some, the idea of eating meat from the head of a sheep is appalling, although these people may find raw fish (unimaginable as food for certain offal eaters of cooked meat) wonderful. One of the first rules in accepting that food is always socially constructed, represented and imagined, is to respect the relationality of the meanings accorded to specific food items or cuisines, and to accept how varied food tastes and food meanings are. One crucial way of ensuring this respect is by understanding the histories through which certain foods come to be valued under certain socio-political circumstances. Therefore, to take the example of offal in South Africa, we could speculate that many South Africans had limited access to all parts of butchered animals, or ate as much of what an animal could provide or ate what was discarded by those who had the buying and social power to choose. A similar explanation has been given for why the intestines of pigs (known as chitlins) have been important in black American cuisine.

However, some black food scholars have stressed that attributing food tastes only to what groups *have* to eat because of their limited options, distorts the agencies and culinary inventiveness of socially and historically marginalised groups. Consequently, how food is represented and valued

1 Offal can include inner organs as well as the heads of animals such as sheep and goats, and is relished by many Namaqualanders (Nama people from the Namaqualand region of Namibia and South Africa), for example.

cannot be explained based only on socioeconomic factors, but has much to do with the sensory, olfactory, visceral and aesthetic meanings that certain foods, food rituals and dishes hold for particular groups. In emphasising the contextualised cultural relevance of certain food practices, Limpho Makapela turns to animal slaughter and the cooking of meat in her grandmother's home. Incorporating striking images in her photo-essay, Makapela shows that animal slaughter and the eating of meat have very specific cultural meanings in certain contexts. She therefore, challenges the blanket denunciation of animal slaughter and meat-eating in much of the cosmopolitan environmentalism we see today. Makapela, herself a vegan, draws our attention to the fact that colonial legacies, the Big Food industry and factory farming are the broader ethical and political issues requiring progressive environmentalists' or animal rights activists' attention. Her contribution here, eclectically combining personal reflection, recipes and photographs, makes it clear that meat-eating in certain societies can coexist with peoples sensory and spiritual grounding in ontologies of the physical and psychic entanglement of all life forms.

In "Kitchen Confessions", another, co-authored photo-essay in this book, the authors evocatively represent a performative work drawing attention to memory and identity. This contribution is refreshingly provocative about how we can explore food in relation to memory and identity. Originating as a performative work, it can remind us of how adventurous and generically hybrid food writing can be.

The links between constructions of nation or national identity and the representation of food is always a pivotal issue. This is because food is one of the salient resources through which nations define their distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* others. We need only consider how restaurants are advertised as specialising in national, rather than in ethnic, racialised or classed terms to understand how insistently food is represented in relation to nationalism and national identity. And in the same way that nationalism often rests on othering, so does the representation of food feature in defining the nation and its others. In her fascinating study of how North Americans have imagined food from Africa and, therefore, also the food of black Americans, Ani Steele situates herself as a black North American with a strongly critical sense of the othering and stereotyping of black and African food. Based on her research and onsite analysis of Walt Disney's theme parks, Steele sheds tremendous light on the extent to which signifiers of African food are enlisted to function in the Euro-American imaginary. Through exoticizing (and often inventing) dishes and food items from various parts of Africa, Disney sediments myths about the primordialism, homogeneity, stasis and danger of Africa.

Although these myths might appear to be "positive", seeming to celebrate African cuisine for an audience unfamiliar with Africa, they ultimately reinforce colonial tropes and demonstrate 'eating the other' (Steele, quoting bell hooks). As her study clarifies, the process of representation is a complex and intricate one. While it may seem easy to identify the oppressive effects of stereotypes, it is often far less easy to disentangle their complex semiotic and linguistic functioning. Steele's chapter is, therefore, noteworthy in explaining how signifiers work to create "signifieds" around food, which codes are at play in linking signifiers to "signifieds", and what broader discursive and political contexts reinforce and shape food's meanings

Apart from representing national and regional identities, food and food items can represent complex meanings for groups—defined in terms of class, race, gender, caste and so on. As Pamella Gysman shows in her chapter on black middle-class South Africans' eating practices, food has become an important signifier in forms of communication about identity and identification. By drawing on Bourdieu, Gysman shows how eating certain foods, at certain restaurants and in certain ways, all work as symbolic capital. The high-end foods consumed by the middle-class participants in her study do not simply indicate black people aspiring to whiteness; their consumption is instead evidence of using symbolic capital to make claims to dignity, public visibility and social success—in a racist context where black South Africans continue to be subordinated in various ways. Gysman's detailed attention to food, eating and race in Cape Town also explains how racialised eating patterns should never be essentialised or seen as static. Hybridised foods and eating practices characterise most societies, and it is important for rigorous humanities research to examine how food items, cuisines or food habits constantly change, fuse and signal shifting meanings and values—for individuals, within communities, within nations and of course also globally. South Africa, with its long history of migration, slavery, settler colonialism and postcolonial migration, is especially rich in revealing centuries-long legacies of hybridised dishes, food practices and cuisines—and their cultural connotations.

Brian Sibeko's chapter resonates with Gysman's. In his study of black gay men's food consumption, Sibeko demonstrates that food can function as cultural capital, and shows how often it can be enlisted in the individual and day-to-day struggles for recognition of those within socially subordinate groups, especially when individuals are caught in multiple axes of subordination. In effect, he illustrates how food can be "made to speak for" an individual, when his research participant constantly turns to food items and ways of eating to communicate a sense of himself

to others. Both Gysman and Sibeko draw extensively on Pierre Bourdieu's formulations about symbolic capital. It is also significant that Bordieu, who himself did not often write about food, currently plays a pivotal role in guiding food studies scholars' analysis and conceptualisation for understanding the meanings we attach to food, the centrality of food as a cultural resource and the increasing importance of food's cultural meanings when it circulates as a commodity and in systems of value. Gysman sharply reminds us of this in identifying and explaining the role of social media messages and photographs of subjects eating or close to food items. Like Sibeko, Gysman shows how food is used to communicate a sense of subjects' embodied subjectivity to others.

Conceptually, work on what food means to certain groups is linked to representations of food in the media and advertising. There has been a glut of work on how food is represented in the media for obvious reasons, the main one being the extent to which food is a key object in circuits of commodity production, sales and consumption in global capitalism. It has been noted by some researchers that food corporations spend enormous amounts on advertising food items, often to children, since this ensures the maximising of profits. Some of the work on representing food in the media is strongly oriented towards guiding civil society activism and policy intervention. For example, work on the advertising of fast food to children in South Africa has, in recent years, focussed extensively on trying to ensure that legal and policy provisions to protect children from harmful fast foods are put in place. Other work, especially at the global level, has been more exploratory and often very rich in its insights into, for example, gendered representation in food advertising, racial representations in the marketing of food, or how food adverts work as complex communicative texts. For example, in a recent article in the '*Journal of African Cultural Studies*', Ivan Lukanda deals with the fascinating ways in which a popular Ugandan street food known as the "rolex" has become iconic. Apart from revealing a great deal about the role of national foods in food tourism in the present, this is an intriguing insight into the range of ways in which national and local newspapers, tourist publications, social media and the public imagine food items in certain ways.

In her chapter on the branding of halaal food, Ammaarah Seboa shows how branding and marketing have dovetailed with the religious coding of food, specifically with Islam's distinction between foods that are haram (unlawful) and halaal (lawful). The chapter raises the extent to which small grocery stores and large supermarket franchises are extending their marketing strategies to address customers' religious beliefs. The chapter is, therefore, provocative in reflecting on how the current marketing of food is increasingly focussing on consumers' diverse lifestyles and food choices.

Another important thread in media representation centres around growing celebrity chef and food television programmes. Most watchers of cable television are aware that there are several channels devoted solely to food and food preparation. What is pivotal here, is the role of what has been known among food studies scholars as "food porn", images and stories in which alluring images of food titillate viewers and function as spectacles and objects of desire. This work, therefore, reveals a great deal about how food currently features in commodity culture and worlds in which all resources have become coveted objects of craving.

One of the liveliest research areas dealing with food and representation in South Africa deals with the role of food in various literary texts. Several South African literary studies scholars and scholars dealing with South African fiction (Baderoon 2014; Moolla 2016; Highfield 2017) have turned to how food amplifies certain themes, or functions metaphorically and generally amplifies descriptions in fiction. This may be one of the most striking indications of just how much food means; exploring food in literary texts does not only mean that it echoes or reinforces what critics are able to discover without any attention to food, but that it intensifies, expands and even transforms what we can read into literary texts. This prompts us to realise that food is, as Williams-Forson (2022) puts it, an unstable signifier, often leading one to many meanings, or the foundation of multiple and ambiguous meaning-making. We can, therefore, be reminded that not only is the representation of food of great interest intellectually and in humanities scholarship, it is also the source of joy and surprise because 'food is vulnerable to the manipulative whims and manoeuvrings of people. People use food to say "I am happy, I am sad, I am mad, I am tired" and so on' (Williams-Forson, 2022: 8).

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