

Transnational Perspectives on Food, Ecology and the Anthropocene

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Introduction

While food is at the core of what it means to be human because we need it to sustain ourselves, it is not just the case that ‘we are what we eat’ because our collective lives and cultures are structured around and relate to food in multifaceted ways that prompt deeper questions. Far from simply being a fact relevant to diet, nutrition and calories it is also a sociocultural product (Counihan 1999) and highly gendered (Counihan 1999; Inness 2001; Lewis 2015; Meyers 2001; Theophano 2003). Bourdieu (1984) acknowledges food as a key semiotic resource in identity and class hierarchies. The food-centred discursive strategies therefore embody ideological elements that resonate with particular socially constructed ideas, tastes, feelings or desires that are shaped by our diverse contexts. More so, food complicates foodways as a network of activities and systems in its production and consumption (see, for example, Lawrance & De la Peña 2012; Riley & Paugh 2019; Sutton & Hernandez 2007). In several ways, it directs us (beyond its viscerality and biomateriality) (Boxenbaum et al. 2018; Moser et al. 2021) to its circulation as a set of social practices. These ideas point us to thinking about food in far more engaged and reflexive ways that urge attention to the various transformations in the social life of food (from farm to fork for instance) which is crucial to the understanding of how we interpret the production and consumption as meaningful sets of activities. The ever-changing discursive practices and food systems brought about by the forces of globalisation have led to new challenges and opportunities. Some of the challenges are subtle erasure of women’s roles in food work and local taste, including promotion of unhealthy food over health choices.

To build on this idea, the political dimensions of food have been highlighted in several ways: as an element in defining and distinguishing collective identities (DeSoucey 2016; Poulain 2017); being subject to the exercise of (state) power in relation to its distribution and withholding (see De Waal, 2018, in relation to famine as an instrument in warfare); as corporatised and Mcdonaldized in global contexts (Ritzer 1993); as food organising and resistance to crisis and hunger (Raj 2008; Shattuck, Holt-Giménez & Patel 2009); the hijacking of the global food supply chain (Shiva 2016), but also increasingly in relation to food waste (noting that much of what is produced is never consumed, see for example, Stuart 2009).

For decades, peripheral conversations – both in activism and in scholarship – have focused on looming ecocide, increasingly brutal industrial agriculture and farm fishing, mountain blasting and tree clearing for the sake of building malls, and enormous homes. At the same time, the arrogance of certain privileged human groups (actually a minority of the world’s population) believes that it is entitled to dominate other humans, as well as non-human species and the earth, especially also in reducing the carbon hoofprint (Mayerfield 2023) in the atmosphere. The responsibility of certain groups for anthropocentric worldviews and actions is what has led many to question the usefulness of the term Anthropocene (erroneously conveying human beings’ collective destruction of the earth and a kind of geological inevitability in the evolutionary process), and to favour terms such as capitalocene. Crutzen and Stoermer’s (2000) naming of the ‘Anthropocene’ has provoked lively debate across the physical and social sciences. The term has also triggered deeper thinking for environmental politics, compelling recognition of the socio-historical causes of massively scaled environmental change (Dalby 2007; Steffen et al. 2011). The ‘anthropocene’ as a rough place-holder with a bloated emphasis

on the ‘anthro’ has often minimised more critical debates (recognising the location of gender as one, broader environmental uncertainties another) and food in the broader arguments yet to be explored. The Anthropocene debate has only recently reached the social sciences and humanities (see for example, Chernilo 2017) and compels us to consider other trajectories of power that intersect with it, namely the capitalocene (in its manifestation as global capital and broader circuits of power). The issue here is not simply the choices of either the ‘anthropocene’ or the ‘capitalocene’, as Moore (2016) suggests, but rather the social and political alliances that also shape the relations between ‘society’ and ‘nature’ that compel us to place the emphasis on history, theory building, politics and ecology, indeed economy and culture.

Today, interventions that were peripheral have given way to a flood of organisations, regular columns in newspapers, academic publications and books, teaching and organising among schoolchildren. Since feminist philosophy has long been central to critiques of environmental destruction and masculinist-colonial land exploitation and farming, it is not surprising that feminist tools, concepts and methods provide powerful critiques of our current food systems, ecological collapse and the Anthropocene (see for example, Buckingham 2000; Maathai 2009; Seager 1993; Warren 1997). This issue of *Agenda* broadens, shifts and enhances existing work by bringing a Southern and black feminist lens to bear on what can only be seen as global developments. The special issue inspires a deeper and richer interdisciplinary exploration of the intersection of the meanings, presence and agency of food in contemporary contexts.

Food Studies as an emerging body of knowledge

As we suggest in the preceding paragraphs of the introduction, food studies, as a coherent body of scholarship and publications, has come a long way in a relatively short space of time. It has in fact been labelled a “food studies movement” as Nestle and McCintosh (2010, p. 160) motivate because it has sparked an extensive growth in scholarly (and activist) interest in “the use of food as a means to examine critical questions about the causes and consequences of production and consumption”. In fact, food studies have the identity of a new movement beyond an academic discipline “as a means to change society” (Berg, Nestle & Bentley 2003, pp. 16–18).

Humanities scholarship on food predated feminist work from the late 1990s with Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978; 1983) and Roland Barthes (1982) as important precursors decades earlier. In respect of Barthes (1982, pp. 171-172), he prophetically anticipated what today remains a central focus and engagement with critical food studies, namely that: “food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means a way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed, by it.”

However, it was the significant inroads made by feminists – often working independently of one another and with little awareness that others were pursuing related work – that sparked the flame that has now become the roaring cauldron of critical food studies. Dating back to work by scholars such as Avakian and Haber (1997), Avakian (2005), Haber (2002), Counihan (1999), Counihan and Kaplan (1998), DeVault (1991), Lupton (1996), Probyn (2000), Williams-Forsen (2006; 2022), Williams-Forsen & Counihan (2012); Randall (1997), Shapiro (1986), and Witt (1999), the consolidation of scholarly writing about relationships between food, food performances, foodways and human experiences has increased in scope and variety. So much so, in fact, that it is sometimes forgotten that the pioneers of humanities-driven work on food were feminist scholars and writers. The rapid growth of the field has led to several trajectories of academic and popular publications (including televised work) such as those by

scholar-journalist, Michael Pollan (2007; 2009). Moreover, as Heidi Zimmerman (2015, p. 31) argues in her engagement with Pollan's work on ethical eating, its "popularity among members of the liberal professional middle class functions as a classed technology of the self and an ethical, albeit highly ambivalent, form of neoliberal citizenship." Despite the limits of popularised critical work on food in the present, then, it is often celebrated male figures (who pay little, if any attention to gender analysis and feminist visions), rather than feminist scholars who are applauded for their prescient attention to human engagements with food from the late twentieth century.

This issue is in some ways a reminder of the critical power of food studies that reprioritises analysis of gender, patriarchy and heteronormativity. It is also a platform for framing perspectives and debates – especially within the global South and among black feminists – on relationships between food and the classed, gendered and racialised nature of "human" experience. By confronting the nexus of gender, food and ecology from feminist and transnational perspectives, the issue brings regional insights from regions including South (and Southern) Africa, Central and East Africa, North America and India into conversation at a time when our globalised foodscapes demand these.

The transnational remit of this issue in a South African feminist journal is also meant to animate evolving directions in this country's work on the relationships between food, human experiences and human engagements with nature and the environment. It is disappointing that South African work on food remains bogged down by what Richa Nagar, in her book, reviewed in this issue, terms "the hunger of the belly". Google scholar searches and literature reviews of work on food in this country reveal an abundance of developmentalist, social science and scientific work on how to grow more food to feed rising populations, especially in urban areas, or how to make food more accessible in often uncritical, conceptually weak and staid debates. The field is also replete with varied ideological approaches to poverty and food struggles. More conservative research leans towards food security and green revolution discourses, while radical work concentrates on food sovereignty, food justice and the relationships between food, land redistribution and the power politics that inform food. Yet food, as many scholars in the humanities and critical social sciences argue, does not simply raise issues around *how* to grow better and safer food as cheaply as possible, or *who* gets to eat, *who* consumes conspicuously and *who* goes hungry, or who is exploited in growing or cooking food and who benefits, or *how* to ensure that we all eat well. Food is also a lens for exploring a wide range of concerns from various disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Feminist writers, who have always favoured interdisciplinarity anyway, traditionally, have honed in on trivialised and domestic sites for path-breaking analysis, and have frequently raised the themes that now fascinate growing numbers of students and new researchers. These include gendered power and women's agencies in growing and cooking food, the centrality of affect, the senses and conviviality in cooking and eating, how critical thinking about food is connected to radical approaches to ecology, the masculinised ways in which extractivist agribusiness and agricultural farming is contributing to ecocide, and the positive way feminist ecology responds to this.

This issue provides a platform to reactivate the particular significance of feminist food studies, focusing especially on the way that feminist scholars – in contrast to what has become an industry of work on food studies – are leading the way in exploring questions to do with the environment and Anthropocene, or unravelling the complexities of the senses – despite the way that these have been neglected in humanities work. The transnational focus of the issue reflects the extent to which conversations about food must take into account a global landscape in which knowledge travels, and in which food cultures – although always bearing distinct

geopolitical meanings and legacies – are situated in and shaped by connected gendered, neoliberal, racial and classed discourses, institutions and relationships.

In an essay published several years ago on the Critical Food Studies website (<http://criticalfoodstudies.org.za>), titled ‘Food is an African feminist issue’, the late Elaine Salo declared:

Women’s engagement with food has informed our gendered identities in ambiguous ways. Our primary roles ensuring food and nutritional security to households and communities provides us with a grounded sense of identity and of power anchored in reproductive labour. Terms of respect and endearment emanate from such work so that appellations such as Mama, Nomasizwe, and the like denote deep, shared respect. However, such terms of endearment and respect do not extend to significant material power and confine women’s power to the limited zone of emotional affection and more cynically sentimentality.

In the same piece Salo reiterated the entangled and triple-labour bound relation between food and its gendered meanings, namely that food is a feminist matter first because the value of women’s household labour remains invisible; second, women are at the forefront of labour in the agricultural and food processing sector; and most importantly thirdly, the complex global capitalist flows as an effect of globalisation through neoliberal practices in agribusiness have augmented women’s landlessness and weakened their control over natural resources.

Salo invokes Nancy Fraser’s (2000) well-known discussion of feminists’ need to scrutinise how power works with reference to both the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution. The use of food as an optic not only allows us to confront socially marginalised groups’ struggles for recognition; it also prompts us to examine the exploitative and hegemonic role of global capitalism, and, indeed, how identity politics – when it becomes an end in itself – can reinforce neoliberal social practices and individualism. African feminism, argues Salo, needs to recuperate its radical impetus, through a renewed focus on economic inequality and redistribution, if we are to make any difference in the lives of many women who have to ensure food for their households. Her call for feminists to address the structural, systemic injustices in which our current worlds of food are embedded is an important one: feminists who are writing incisively and perceptively about food need to incorporate understandings of corporate capitalism, neoliberalism and the hegemonic nature of discourses about, for example, the green revolution, healthy food alongside and as part of our critical analysis of gender and sexuality.

In 2016, an *Agenda* special issue titled ‘Food Challenges, Feminist Theory: Revolutionary Practice’ focused on gender, feminism and food. The scope and focus of the 2023 issue relative to *Agenda*’s 2016 one is an indication of enormous shifts – in global worlds that both reveal increasingly exploitative forms of food production, ruthless ecocide in the name of growing food for growing populations, and aggressive marketing of mass-produced food sold for profit, *and* that are also galvanising richer and more nuanced scholarship on the relationships between food and the human, and what those relationships reveal.

Synopsis of papers

This special issue builds in part on the above themes as well as others, and in line with the aims of the journal, our approach is to eschew perspectives on the shifting historical, social, cultural,

political and socioeconomic spaces of foodscapes and foodways in favour of power relations shaping food in its local, global and manifested transnational ecologies. The special issue also brings together a diverse range of methodological, conceptual and empirical responses that frame issues, themes, ideas and topics that highlight the complexities, competing discourses, asymmetrical power dynamics across a range of issues in a rich suite of insights.

Svati Shah's briefing titled 'Agriculture, rivers and gender: Thinking with 'caste capitalism', migrant labour and food production in the Capitalocene' offers an analytical frame for interpreting how the politics of irrigation for food crops are entangled with the politics of gender and the re-production of caste-based hierarchies in contemporary India. Shah deploys the frame of 'caste capitalism' as a counter point to 'crony capitalism' to illustrate the enfoldment of caste, class, gender and environmental change in respect of agricultural irrigation and the growing crisis of India's water sources.

Nise Paleker's contribution, 'Rhizome networks: Turmeric's global journey from *haldi doodh* to turmeric latte', draws on Deleuze and Guattari's poststructuralist conception of 'rhizomes' and the 'rhizomatic' – modes of thinking that highlight connections between semiotic chains and the organisation of power. In this perspective Paleker explores the global circulation of turmeric discourses as networks anchored in Vedic culture. However, her paper shows how turmeric operates within a global matrix of discursive meanings and social cultural practices (including its gendered and feminised attributes) that are rhizomatic.

In her profile piece "*Loboko Ya Mama*": Homemade recipes of belonging', Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga turns our attention to the viscosity of food in relation to how embodied subjects attain personal pleasure in relation to the recent experience of food as comfort during a pandemic. Based on an online project, Food for Change, the profile features insightful narratives of eight forced migrant women from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda who live in Gqeberha (formerly known as Port Elizabeth), South Africa. The paper provides rich insights that accrue from shared recipes that cultivate a sense of home, place and belonging through food.

As the contributions surveyed above make clear, many writers for this issue are concerned with complex entanglements of power, and present varied responses to the question: How can postcolonial and decolonial feminist perspectives take intersectionality squarely into account alongside the attention to ecofeminism? Psyche Williams-Forsen's article squarely confronts this by criticising the idea of collective human culpability in and responses to the Anthropocene. She focuses on how black bodies, especially in the United States (US), have been exploited and erased in seemingly progressive processes of food production and selling, including many white-centric and elitist "alternative" food markets in North America. Although her focus is the US, her analysis gestures towards trends in South African ecopolitical and food justice movements, where "performative activism" or involvement "to increase one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause" leads to the occlusion of black people, and black women in particular, as important voices in ecopolitical, food justice movements and in the existing alternative food production sites. As Williams-Forsen goes on to point out, however, embodied black subjects are not only subjected to ongoing exploitation and erasure; they also vigorously resist oppressive systems. Homing in on how black food producers and vendors – especially women – ingenuously create what she calls "Black food energy", her reflections pinpoint their uneven but vigorous efforts to grow and sell food on their own terms, while also promoting an ethos in which culturally marginalised food tastes and consumption patterns are celebrated, rather than disparaged.

Dhee Naidoo and Vasu Reddy unravel philosophical threads around food, taste, identity formation and power relations by showing that the appreciation of various spices is complicatedly shaped by economic and social processes, as well as by human creative and sensory energy. These include the senses, past and recent technologies, trade, ethnic-specific histories and deep symbolism. Parts of their article amplify Williams-Forsyth's affirmation of "Black food energy": they highlight the resilience of food cultures (what they define as a "particular ethnoscape ... the Indian diaspora of Durban" at the margins of western-centric and elitist notions of taste). As Pierre Bourdieu (trans. Nice, 1984) has argued, the reification of "taste" in cuisine – especially French cuisine – echoes an imperial and classist legacy in which socially dominant cultural inclinations become globally hegemonic.

Another equally provocative trajectory in Naidoo and Reddy's analysis is their attention to connections between food, healing, gendered knowledges and women's labour. Showing how ideas about healing and knowledge of the medicinal powers of plants and seeds are reflected in using, cultivating or understanding spices, they analyse women's complex knowledges about food – orally through shared memories, in the form of handwritten recipes, or codified in medicinal texts and cookbooks. Overall, then, the article raises tantalising provocations for further feminist transdisciplinary research into food that focuses on subaltern practices and knowledge-making.

Rejoice Chipuriro's 'Vulnerabilities, power, and gendered violence in food systems', examines from an African feminist standpoint lens, the narratives of 21 elderly women farmers who navigated diverse contexts of Zimbabwe's political, economic and agrarian reforms. Centring the voices of elderly women in articulating alternative pathways to food sovereignty, this profile assesses how such women negotiate the gendered structural biases and attendant violence that are coded into power asymmetries with food systems from production to consumption.

'Odouring foodscapes, ordering gender: Mapping women and caste in *Samskara* and *The Weave of My Life*', an article by Gurunathan Thiyagaraj, Rajbir Samal and Binod Mishra revisits the castescapes in India by foregrounding, in relation to selected narratives, the olfactory zones in intercultural landscapes. Their analysis turns attention to the sensoriality of smell in diverse gastronomical zones and its influence on the socio-political conditions of Dalit women by interpreting the gendered aspects of caste-spaces. Their critical inquiry centres attention on two texts and they draw attention (beyond the effect of food and its chemical by-products) to the symbolic dimension of food in relation to its spatial and corporeal discourses.

K. Amaya's perspective, 'Reflections on the politics of gendered food chains' maps out how historical and social relationships surrounding food have traditionally been divided along gender lines. The writer explores linkages between women's work with food in the fields and labour market, their responsibilities for food provision in the care economy, and relationship with eating. That is how gender relations and dynamics are configured in the context of three categories of food – material, socio-cultural, and corporeal – that characterise women's interactions with food. Amaya argues that these are integral to the field of food studies and research which has tended to ignore the normalisation of 'women's work', invisible and undervalued domestic reproductive and productive labour. Integrating feminist studies with political economy can provide food studies with a theoretical framework that is able to shed light on some of the critical elements that shape gender relations in the agri-food system.

Safiya's Bobat's profile, 'Food, work and sensuous materiality: Immigrant Muslim women living in Fordsburg, Johannesburg', zeroes in on the viscosity of food. In this paper Bobat uses food and food practices as a lens to access the narratives of identity construction of immigrant Muslim women living in Fordsburg, Johannesburg. Beyond being a hub for shopping, Fordsburg is an urban space well known for its street food culture and eating places. The paper weaves together a set of narratives to analyse the space and place of food in relation to purchasing, preparation and consumption. In some ways the paper resonates with insights from the papers by Gurunathan, Samal & Mishra, as well as Arriaga about food and its relationship to home-making, belonging and memory.

In a reflexive and reflective paper, 'Greener on the other side: tracing stories of amaranth and moringa through indenture', Pralini Naidoo revisits the subject of indenture but this time with a focus on women and food seed. The article explores the world of leafy green vegetables and their intimate connection to women who had been brought to South Africa to service the colonial plantations. Utilising transcripts and fieldwork notes, Naidoo examines how these communities of women consume moringa and amaranth, while framing an argument about how human and other-than-human stories are entangled in these insights.

The issue also features poetry by Susan Nightingale as well as two book reviews. The first is Serawit Debele's review of Srila Roy's *Changing the Subject: Feminist and Queer Politics in Neoliberal India* (2022), a text that engages subject formation through queer feminist governmentality. Debele maintains that this is a text that also engages the state of feminism in India following liberalisation in the 1990s where the country "experiences neoliberalism, structural adjustment and a major socio-economic, cultural and political shift". Roy, according to Debele, while situating feminism as a site of governance argues for "the capacity not just for power and domination but also for self-making, self-transformation, resistance and contestation."

In the second review Desiree Lewis brings into conversation two texts: Psyche A. Williams-Forsen's *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (2022) and Richa Nagar's *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* (2019). The review focuses on two different and yet interrelated texts on food and hunger in relation to the very different geopolitical regions of North America and India. Lewis motivates that the Williams-Forsen text "raises parallels between racist North American food cultures and contexts like South Africa, where decades of apartheid and colonialism have pathologised many food cultures", leading "to the othering of indigenous people through the denigration of what they eat and, especially today, turned the eating black body into a subject for medical and public health intervention." In respect of *Hungry Translations*, Lewis suggests that Nagar's insights on the different forms of hunger "remind us of the entrenched oppressions that restrict our envisaging of social justice that transcends voting, having material resources to live and work, or having civil and civic 'paper rights'."

Conclusion

These papers compel us to ask several questions about the nature and meaning of food, about food politics, about the anthropocenic and capitalocenic dimensions of food in relation to texts, ideas and human geographies. Beyond this, papers compel us to rethink the relationship to food (and its histories, both in local and global contexts, their supposed authenticity, and their discursive circuits). Each of the papers in this issue also suggest that we do need to be reflective and reflexive about local, grounded knowledge and the vested interests that underline foodways

in order to rethink the meaning of ingredients, recipes and their location in spatial, temporal and political terms. The papers in this edition demonstrate a mutable social and human fabric in relation to ingredients, food stuff, as well as the politics of food.

We hope this special issue will inspire and ignite further critical research in thinking more deeply about the transnationality of food, gender, ecology and the Anthropocene.

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