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**Watch What You Eat:
From self-surveillance to affective eating**

by

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Senior Capstone Thesis

Columbia College Chicago

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Abstract:

How is it that Americans are so obsessed with nutrition and dieting and yet remain unhealthy? This project attempts to give a theoretically driven answer to this great paradox within the Western diet. **Constance Calice** analyzes the practice and rhetoric of dieting as a crystallization of a problematic relationship to food using a Foucauldian understanding of discipline. Using examples from the media, she illustrates the way in which outside forces effect our food choices and the power relationships formed in this exchange. To offer an alternative view to nutritionism she looks to the Local Food Movement and affect theory to illustrate how we can understand food and eating in such a way that incorporates the personal, emotional, spiritual and cultural aspects of food rather than as a collection nutritional components.

Key Words:

Dieting, Nutritionism, Eating, Discipline, Affect, Local Food Movement

“There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk. And that is my answer, when people ask me: Why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love?”

M.F.K. Fisher

Americans are obsessed with weight. Popular belief claims that Americans are the fattest population in the world followed by countries that have begun to adopt our consumption habits. And yet the US is also home to the most dieters in the world. The food market is full of products to help you lose weight. Almost any magazine you pick up today will have an article or advertisement on how to lose weight. How is it that a country so obsessed with weight and staying trim can still be getting fatter? What benefits are we seeing to all of our calorie counting and “sacrifice”?

Perhaps dieting just isn't the answer. There are many scholars in the emerging field of Fat Studies who have illustrated the problematic nature of dieting and shown that it often simply doesn't work. Many have also argued well that fat does not necessarily lead to ill health; some people can be fat and just as healthy as their thin counterparts. Eating is not just a scientific process of burning calories in order to ensure survival. Eating is also personal, emotional, spiritual, cultural and aesthetic. Sharing foods and meals connects us—human to human. To ignore all of these complicated, hard to explain, aspects of food and to strip it down to calories and nutrients leaves us with empty food. Dieting encourages looking at foods as quantities of protein, fat, and carbohydrates that need to be controlled, rather than whole foods and meals that you can find joy in. Dieting asks us to look at our bodies, find what is imperfect, and “watch what we eat” to improve our imperfections.

Diet, as I will use it in this analysis, refers to the selection of foods that a person or group of people eats. Dieting, on the other hand, refers to the specific practice of altering (and often limiting) one's food selections for the purpose of weight loss or body modification. Historically dieting has been a practice more often associated with women, particularly in the media and advertisements. But today dieting is less and less a strictly gendered practice as many men also feel considerable pressure to change their eating habits for the purpose of body modification. Dieting is moving toward being a universal issue of the industrialized world. Men and women alike are becoming obsessed with eating "right," but perhaps the question is: are we eating *well*?

To speak clearly about what it means to eat well, it is necessary to think in terms that expand beyond the mere nutritional value of food. If we accept that eating is personal, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic then we need to consider those aspects of the ingredients, preparation, presentation, and overall discourse or rhetoric about food in terms of the whole food, the whole person, the whole community affected by the communion of a "good" meal. In order to address this larger "whole" rhetorical context for food and in so doing contrast it with the limited and limiting rhetoric of dieting, I would like to look at the rhetoric of the Local Foods Movement. While I do not see the Local Foods Movement as a perfect answer to our problems, I do see it as a way to identify those problems. In order to do this I will set up a backdrop of our current discourse on food using Michael Pollan's notion of the Western diet and Nutritionism.

Eating by the Book

Within the past five years *New York Times* contributor and best selling author, Michael Pollan has captured America's attention with his investigation of food production and consumption in his books *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2009). *In Defense of Food* examines what Pollan calls the Western diet¹, the problematic nature of this diet and how to reverse these negative effects through our own food choices. One of the key aspects of the Western diet is what Pollan calls nutritionism; he identifies nutritionism as the scientifically driven ideological paradigm of understanding food as a set of nutrients rather than "whole" foods. Within this context whole foods are understood as food items that exist naturally without any other ingredients, such as carrots, oats, milk, etc. Nutritionism supports the idea that a food's value is determined by the sum of its scientifically identified nutrients. While the concept of nutrients—proteins, carbohydrates and fats (known to us today as micronutrients)—has been around since the early 19th century, the term nutritionism was only recently coined in 2002 by Australian sociologist Gyorgy Scrinis (Pollan, *In Defense of Food* 27). As Pollan points out, since nutrients are impossible to identify without some scientific knowledge, nutritionism requires a scientist to identify "good" and "bad" foods for us. Paired with scientific evidence, food companies and their marketing experts often

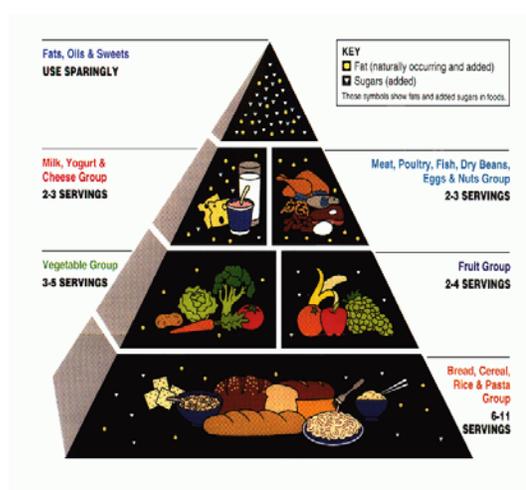
¹ Throughout his work Pollan refers to the Western diet; this is a term I will also be using to discuss the current state of food politics. The term Western diet refers to the food system that has come into being particularly in the United States and Western Europe through industrialization. Namely, a diet high in processed foods, refined grains, sugars and fats; the use of chemicals and industrial systems to raise plants and animals in large monocultures; and a narrowing of the biological diversity of the human diet (Pollan, *In Defense of Food* 10). While the Western diet is most closely associated with the United States, these food practices are rapidly spreading across the globe, giving the term more ideological rather than merely geographical significance.

offer us not so subtle suggestions of what to eat. This nutritionist model of eating takes foods that we once understood as simply a part of living, and turns them into mysterious items that need to be de-coded by authoritative figures that control our food supply.

Michael Pollan has built up his fan base with books critiquing the industrial food system and the lack of intuitive understanding of food on behalf of the general consumer. He seems to argue against all the media hype on what to eat and marketing of “good” foods. Yet his most recent book, *Food Rules* (2009), is an entire book of rules for what to eat, what not to eat and how to eat. This publication by this incredibly popular food writer draws our attention to the very notion of “food rules” and the question of why we need someone to tell us what we should eat. Humans have survived for hundreds of years without advertisements or food pyramids. Why, all of a sudden, do we need so much help figuring out what is good to eat? Pollan raises this question in his previous book, *In Defense of Food*.

I must clarify here that I do not think Pollan’s rules are bad—in fact I think they are a great guide to understanding the industrial food system and eating “around” it. I was originally drawn to Pollan, like millions of other readers, because I like his message and agree with him; I think *In Defense of Food* is a wonderful book. My problem is with the notion of making a rulebook for what to eat while disparaging other social forces making similar “rule” claims. In fact, one of the rules in *Food Rules* is to not always follow the rules. Clearly, Pollan himself sees the problematic nature of making a Food Rule Book that condenses everything down and fits it into a convenient pocket book. A book like this does not allow room for context and encourages relying on others to understand food, rather than understand it inherently for oneself.

One of the most important figures in the dissemination of food information is the American government, specifically the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Today almost every child receives some kind of health and nutrition education in school. The USDA has been classifying foods into categories based on nutritional components and suggesting what we should eat since 1894, when W.O. Atwater published a dietary guideline in a farmer's bulletin. This information was continually edited and re-distributed to the public throughout the 20th century as food science continued to expand. In order to increase the impact of the food guide—*A Pattern for Daily Food Choices*, published in the mid 1980s—the USDA developed a graphic representation of the information in the guide. In 1992 they published the first *Food Guide Pyramid*, which conveyed the key concepts of variety, proportionality and moderation in a colorful graphic form. In this image the pyramid is broken into six categories in four levels; carbohydrates occupying the entire bottom and largest cell, fruits and vegetables sharing the second level, dairy and protein occupying the third level, and fats, oils and sweets occupying the fourth and smallest level.



MyPyramid.gov



MyPyramid.gov

In the most recent food pyramid the categories have been turned vertical and the pyramid is accompanied by an image of a person going up stairs to encourage physical activity along with a balanced diet.

While the Food Pyramid may be helpful to understand some of the nutritional differences of the various foods we eat, it is, like most nutritionist models of consumption, highly reductive. There is little explanation or representation of personal, familial or cultural food practices. What is problematic about nutritionism, and revealed in the food pyramid as a symbol, is the way in which it alienates us from and de-contextualizes our food. When food is looked at as a set of calories and nutrients it is no longer seen within the context of a meal—one that nourishes the body while connecting us to family and culture. When meals are seen as times for testing our nutritional aptitude, we are stripped of our sense of community that comes from sharing food with others. While calories and nutrients may be an important facet to our health, these factors cannot be taken out of context of the experience of eating and the social factors that are intrinsically linked to eating.

Low-Cal Living

Dieting is the practice ultimately produced by nutritionism and the ideology of the modern era. In the language of Susan Bordo in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, dieting is the crystallization of the ideology of our culture. Bordo explores anorexia nervosa as a psychopathology that reveals a problematic ideology in our culture. While dieting may not be as striking of a practice as anorexia or bulimia, I believe it is equally if not more so a crystallization of our harmful nutritionist

ideology, in part because dieting is far more widespread than officially medicalized eating disorders. Dieting affects both men and women and people of every age—even young children (Butryn and Wadden; Claus, Braet and Decaluwé; Yanovski). In 2004, forty-six billion dollars was spent on weight loss products and programs, not including weight loss surgery (Gibbs, quoted in Lyons 77). And of course the diet industry cannot actually be invested in helping consumers lose weight when their pursuit of weight loss is what is making these huge profits. Pat Lyons critiques the diet industry saying, “Enormous corporate profits are at stake, and maintaining public distress and biased attitudes about weight ensures the continued production of those profits” (76).

The rhetoric of dieting that we have become so accustomed to has not always existed. Throughout history it has been fashionable to be plump—excess weight was a sign of prosperity, aristocracy, and leisure. Artists have long portrayed women with ample curves and jolly old men with large round bellies. Fat was seen more as something that came with age to those with enough wealth to eat heartily. But in the 19th century industrialization brought about great changes in the Western world, particularly in the United States. For the first time food was being produced on an industrial scale and more and more people were able to eat, while less and less were required to produce it. Those who had once worked the land moved into the city to work in factories and service jobs. Additionally, there was a huge influx of immigrants—many genetically shorter and rounder than the earlier American settlers. Laura Fraser writes, “people who once had too little to eat now had plenty, and those who had a tendency to put on weight began to do so. When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat no longer was a sign of prestige” (Fraser 12). These changes were occurring among many in

American life, including changes in the world of fashion and an increased understanding of reliance upon scientific knowledge. Some, including Woods Hutchinson—a medical professor and one-time president of the American Academy of Medicine—were wary of the turn towards thinness. In a 1926 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* he wrote,

In this present onslaught upon one of the most peaceable, useful and law-abiding of our tissues, fashion has apparently the backing of grave physicians, of food reformers and physical trainers, and even of great insurance companies, all changing in unison the new commandment of fashion: ‘Thou shalt be thin!’ (quoted in Fraser 11).

For the first time in history multiple powerful social forces deemed fat unseemly and being thin fashionable, high class and healthy. Suddenly the foods of the past—of the farm and the “motherland”—became unhealthy and the grocery store became the safe place to buy modern, healthy, scientifically proven products. At the same time magazines began advertising recipes for meals made entirely from grocery store bought ingredients, with an emphasis on fat content or health benefits. Together, the fashion industry, food reformers and many powerful companies—all fueled by industrialization—were able to shift the national discourse on fat and food away from farms and feeding to products and weight loss.

Weight loss products have only been created and promoted to consumers since the 19th century. In the 1950’s and 60’s weight loss programs and products gained the attention—and money—of millions of Americans, particularly women (Lyons 76). It was during this time that amphetamines, diuretics, and “low-cal” products began being sold for the purpose of weight loss. During this time what increased along with the

introduction of weight loss programs and products was a bias against the fat and obese—a bias that has only gained strength recently in the age of the “Obesity Epidemic.” Many studies proving that dieting simply does not work—many people end up only lowering their self-esteem, becoming less motivated, and more unhealthy than when they started because they plunge back into the eating patterns that made them overweight in the first place. Despite this, we continue to wage war on our fat along with the help of myriad drugs and diet programs. Researchers are beginning to give attention to the act of over dieting and the due health consequences. While it is not yet recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, there is burgeoning academic research underway to investigate orthorexia nervosa²—the act of dieting obsessively to the point of detriment to one’s mental or physical health.

Inviting Foucault to the Table

The popularity of Michael Pollan’s books has drawn a great deal of mainstream attention to food discourse. Pollan and, in its own right, the rise in popularity of the local foods movement has made clear that there is a great deal of power at stake in who controls our food. At the center of this issue is an issue of power—who has it and who is affected? Michel Foucault has written extensively on power and how it has been used throughout history. In his work *Discipline & Punish*, Michel Foucault suggests that throughout history power and the way it is exerted has evolved. Foucault specifically traces a genealogical path of power from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth

² The term orthorexia, closely related to the well-researched eating disorder anorexia nervosa, was first proposed by American physician Steven Bratman in 1996. (Pollan, *In Defense of Food* 9.)

century and the birth of modern power. He identifies the mode of power in the seventeenth century as Sovereign, and that of modern power as Discipline. Within each time period the given mode of power is acted out by particular entities that hold power. In the seventeenth century the King held the sovereign power, but in the nineteenth century discipline is enacted by “the expert.” This expert is one who holds and produces knowledge that is valued by the dominant group of society.

One of Foucault’s key contributions to political theory from *Discipline & Punish* is his suggestion that power, specifically disciplinary power, is productive. Disciplinary power does not seek to punish and take away the rights of its subjects, but rather creates desires, formations, objects of knowledge and discourses, which cause subjects to behave in the socially desired way without being enforced by a specific government body. What is so profound about discipline is that it is enacted by the subjects themselves and reinforces their very subjugation. Jeffrey Nealon describes the Foucauldian idea of discipline as “a power that increasingly targets actions rather than bodies” (31). Power that targets bodies imprisons them, tortures them, and commits acts of violence on the body in order to force the person to submit to the will of the Sovereign. Discipline, on the other hand, targets actions; it controls by being so ingrained in our social understanding that we control our own actions.

Discipline is a technology of power specific to the modern era; we cannot examine discipline without examining the cultural and economic context that made the modern world different from any other time in human history. The birth of discipline, as Foucault places it in time, coincides with the industrial revolution and a new understanding of economics. The industrial revolution caused us to think about efficiency

in a whole new way—efficiency of time, labor, and capital particularly. Discipline is inextricably linked to the need for efficiency in the modern era because in its very nature discipline is a far more efficient mode of control than those that came before it: better results with less economic and political resistance (Nealon 31).

Discipline is not just a new type of force exerting power; it also creates a new type of subject. Foucault argues this new subject is characterized by being ‘docile bodies.’ He argues that “the classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (136). Whole sets of regulations and systems of data collection were established in institutions such as the army, the school and the hospital in order to control or correct the operations of the body. It is these docile bodies, which can be subjected, used, transformed and improved without outright punishment, which historically have been costly and violent. Docile bodies are formed through everyday institutions and are constantly renewed by the system itself.

So why do these docile bodies obey the experts? How does discipline actually work? To explain this Foucault gives us the example of the ‘Panopticon.’ The panopticon was an architectural design for a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785. The concept of the panopticon was for the prison guard to be able to monitor all of the prisoners without them being able to know when he is watching. In the design the building has a center chamber for the guard and in a circle around him are individual cells. Each cell is lit in such a way that the prisoner can never see the guard in the central tower. Because the prisoners never know exactly when they are being watched, they must

behave as though they are being watched all the time. Foucault was interested in this architectural concept as a model for the type of control exerted in a disciplinary society. But the image of the panopticon can be extended out even to our everyday lives. When you are out in public you never know who is truly watching you, who is the one that will notice your discretions and so you must act as though someone is watching you all the time. This behavior is internalized and the subject develops a sense that someone is watching them all the time, but really it is only him watching himself. The subject becomes his own prison guard.

In lectures given between the publication of *Discipline & Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Part I*, Michel Foucault suggests a continuation of his power timeline into the twentieth century. He suggests that the newest technology of power will grow out of disciplinary power and is what he calls “biopower.” Nealon explains, “Under a regime of biopower, the political task becomes less training people to be docile, and more a matter of producing and classifying ever-more kinds of subjectivities” (47). Nealon explains biopower further,

Biopower, then, further multiplies the concepts and practices of potential guilt by its invention of a species or life from lurking behind the acts of criminality: the delinquent, the monster, the homosexual, the pervert. These are subjects who may or may not have done anything illegal or transgressive, but their lives are nonetheless outside the slippery slope of biopolitical normativity. As Foucault insists, biopolitical “delinquency must be specified in terms not so much of the law as of the norm. (47)

In the stage of biopower, ever more types of delinquent subjects are produced; there are

ever more socially unacceptable traits that one must guard themselves from. Biopower creates a sense of shame surrounding the imperfect body and makes the person responsible for their shameful body something of a criminal—someone that needs to be punished and reformed. While Foucault was primarily studying sexuality in his exploration of this technology of power, it can easily be applied to many more facets of Western culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including the rules that dictate how we eat.

Naturalizing Nutritionism

This stage of power and discourse is quite evident in food as it is in other large social systems. Following Foucault's argument, the processes of power during nineteenth century made us docile bodies in how we eat by establishing the necessity for experts to help us to understand what to eat. Within the world of food the "experts" are the nutritionists and bariatric doctors—diet doctors and weight loss surgeons—that study what is "good" for us. The nutritionist, with his advanced degrees and association with the field of science, quickly gained more power than those who had informed us about food for thousands of years—farmers and families. The nutritionist, the journalist, the celebrity chef—these roles became the privileged ones and it is their understanding of food that created the dominant discourse that shapes our diet today. We all receive messages from nutritionists and dietitians, even if we never pay one to specifically give us their tailored advice. These messages from the experts come through the media. While experts may be the creators of knowledge, the media, in all of its forms, is the disseminator of this knowledge. While members of society do not have an individual

connection to “the experts” we receive information from them through the media we interface with in our daily lives. You don’t have to have to know a psychologist to gain information about the latest breakthrough in psychological science. The media does not create the information we consume, but it acts as the vehicle by which we consume it—the media mediates the information. It is through magazine articles, television shows, and advertisements that this message is passed down to the social body. The media also plays a function of clarifying the knowledge of the expert so that it can be more easily understood by the masses. For example, complicated information about the chemistry of the human body and the process of digestion gets edited and cut down to its simplest forms, until it is simple enough to be explained in a brief magazine article, or even a headline.

In the February 2011 issue of *Fitness* magazine there is an advertisement for Egghland’s Best eggs. This advertisement is placed within the section of Fitness magazine titled “Eat Right”. Within this twenty-four-page section there are eleven full-page advertisements advertising nine different products or companies. Of these nine products and companies six are food products and two are weight loss supplements.

The ad reads, “The *best* nutrition just got better” and has a picture of two Egghland’s Best eggs surrounded by nutritional facts. The advertisement claims that compared to ordinary eggs, Egghland’s Best eggs are “high in vitamin E, have twenty-five percent less saturated fat, four times more vitamin D, over three times more omega 3, forty-six percent more lutein, nineteen percent less cholesterol and a good source of vitamins A and B.” The advertisement offers no explanation how Egghland’s Best eggs

could possibly have more vitamins and less fat and cholesterol than any other brand of egg.

THE BEST NUTRITION JUST GOT BETTER.™

Compared to ordinary eggs:

- High in vitamin E
- 25% less saturated fat
- 4 times more vitamin D
- Good source of vitamin A, vitamin B, and vitamin B₁₂
- 19% less cholesterol
175 mg (38% DV) vs. 215 mg (71% DV)
- Over 3 times more Omega 3
- 46% more lutein

Announcing some eggciting news:
Eggland's Best now provides even better nutrition for your family. Compared to ordinary eggs, EBs deliver even higher levels of important nutrients like vitamins A, D and E. Along with lower levels of saturated fat and cholesterol. All this, combined with their delicious, farm-fresh taste, is why Eggland's Best continues to stand for the very best in quality and value for your family.

EGG-LAND'S BEST
Better taste. Better nutrition. Better eggs.

www.eggland.com

THE BETTER EGG

(Fitness Magazine, February 2011)

This advertisement is a clear example of nutritionism hard at work. Here eggs are illustrated as being valuable because of the combined value of their nutritional components, rather than because of their place within a complete diet. In this ad emphasis is placed on the amount of vitamins and the fat content of the eggs, but the critical reader asks, how on earth do they make an egg more nutritious and less fattening? This question points us, rather, in the direction of the egg production. What are the chickens eating who are laying these eggs? Is it their natural diet or a synthetic additive? This advertisement

also appeals to the notion that one cannot select a food without knowing its nutritional composition and therefore without an expert's help to point out such helpful statistics such as vitamin and fat content. The impression we get from this gleaming white ad is that these eggs are not being sold by a farmer, but rather a scientist, one who has perfected that which nature seemed to have missed.

What is profound about Foucault's work is that it illustrates the complicated nature of power in modern society. Discipline is not just a top-down operation where say, a King exerts power over his subjects; discipline operates by creating powerful forms of knowledge that cause the subjects to govern themselves—to subject themselves. Yes, we receive information from experts and rely on them for information, but the implementation of that information is done personally within our own free will. This is the inner panoptical prison guard within all of us and it is particularly powerful when we are making choices of what to eat. While it may seem like one of the most personal choices one can make, what to eat is a question that is always tied to power and dictated by one's place in society. In Foucault's language of biopower we understand that power is enacted through the creation of ever more subjectivities—as Nealon says, the delinquent, the homosexual, the pervert—and I argue, the obese. The fat or obese person may not have committed any crimes in our society, but in our biopolitical society certainly his or her weight is seen as problematic. Particularly now obesity is seen as a crisis, our public enemy number one. Those that are fat are seen as poor, lazy, lacking control over their bodies—a failure. In order to impose control over this rogue body one must discipline it through dieting.

Dieting asks the dieter to monitor what he eats in the same way that a prison guard monitors a prisoner. Like a prisoner, the dieter must act alone in a virtual cell, because the meals shared with others generally do not suit the diet, which must be strictly followed. The dieter must continually watch her own body and restrict the wrong behavior of eating the wrong foods, functioning as her very own prison guard. In order to police one's self in this way dieting comes with highly scientific monitoring systems—counting calories, counting carbohydrates, counting fats, consulting charts, following point systems. All of these monitoring systems make it easier to monitor one's success or failure in the system; transgressors are clearly identified and the extent of the transgression has a quantitative value.

Because self-control is so elusive, the dieter looks to authority figures or “experts” to guide them. The first tip in the “Eat Right” section of the February 2011 issue of *Fitness* magazine is titled “Outmuscle cravings.” The page upon which this expert advice appears is dominated by a brightly colored photograph of a stylish, thin, young woman leaning against a bakery counter eyeing a woman behind the counter who is pouring liquid chocolate over a white cake.



(Fitness Magazine, February 2011)

The column suggests,

Next time you're staring at the pastry case, willing yourself not to order a piece of cake, make a fist. A new study finds that when your self-control is tested, tightening your muscles can nudge you toward the healthier option... It doesn't matter which muscle you use, but timing is key. Wait for the moment you have to make a decision or it's not effective (Wells 125).

The author of the study cited in the column is Aparna Labroo, Ph.D., and associate professor of marketing at the University of Chicago. Because the statement is endorsed

by someone with a Ph.D. we are to assume that this is “hot new expert advice,” though it should be noted that this scholar’s work is in marketing, not medicine. The column suggests that we should—and actually can—physically fight our cravings and use our powerful will to gain self-control. This article is evidence of the way in which the rhetoric around food is twisted and becomes perverted. While it is our popular belief that it is the obese body that is perverse, what appears more perverse is our fear of the loss of control.

A Diet of Consciousness and Complexity

If nutritionism is so ingrained in our society today and is a part of a seemingly untouchable power structure, how can our discourse on food ever change? Is a true food revolution really possible? I am not sure. But I do believe that significant change is possible and I have found my own shift in food thinking has revolved around the “Local Food Movement”—a popular movement, with little specific organization or management, to buy foods produced within geographic proximity to one’s own home. The local food movement and the related slow food movement³, call for a way of eating that contrasts with the industrialized and fast food systems that became so predominate in the twentieth century. These movements call upon us to look at foods as food—within a geographic, communal and culinary context—rather than as calories, nutrients, fats or proteins. The

³ The slow food movement is spearheaded by the non-profit, grass-roots organization Slow Food International®. Slow Food is supported by its 100,000 members in 150 countries around the world. According to its official website the organization was founded in 1989 to “counter the rise of fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world” through the practice of small-scale and sustainable production of quality foods (About Us).

local and slow food movements encourage us to watch what we eat in a radically different way than dieting asks us to; they ask us to examine where our foods come from, under what circumstances they are produced, and how they connect to our food heritage.

One way of joining the local food movement and integrating local foods into your diet is to join a Community Supported Agriculture group. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a system of farming wherein a farmer sells “shares” to the public and in exchange these public “members” receive produce throughout the season from the farm. Most CSA farms give each member a box of produce each week with a mix of everything they have available that week. Some farms also include dairy, grain, honey, fruit preserves and other items produced on the farm. The beauty of the Community Supported Agriculture model is that the farmer has the capital he or she needs to get his farm going ahead of time when they need it most. It also causes consumers to have a stake in the harvest and does not leave the farmer holding the entire burden of loss if a given crop does not do well. CSA farms are highly diversified in order to serve the needs of their members, which is also much better for the soil than large monocultures.

CSA members experience the difference eating local food makes and many have shared their experiences in various media, including online blogs. As one CSA member, CV Harquail writes for the blog, Authentic Food Organizations, “for me, being a CSA member clicks me into a different perspective, so that I’m aware of a whole new meaning of being part of this community. Being part of a community and having a way to create meaning together can really make a person feel good.” Gary Hansen writes at fannetasticfood.com, “I love the community that we get from our CSA. There’s a connection that we have with others as we run into each other at the pick-up site. Our

food comes from the same soil. We all have a personal connection with the people who plant and harvest what we eat.” These testimonials illustrate the way in which eating local connects us to both our food and other eaters. The rhetoric created by this emphasis on community is one of people, rather than calories. Dieting, on the other hand, is an isolated(-ing) activity that causes dieters to make up a personal diet that is different from those around them and to then shop for, prepare and eat that meal which may be completely different from family or friends around you. The local food movement is more concerned with who grew the food, where it came from and how people enjoy it, than with scientifically identifying health factors. It is a rhetoric of experience—of positive human experience. This illustrates that there is something in our food beyond the “food” part, something *in* the experience of eating that affects us.

The act of buying food grown or produced locally is not an act that is, in itself, particularly profound. What are more important are the side effects of eating locally. In order to truly “eat local” one must engage with food and eating in an entirely new way. To eat local one must first find out what foods are even available in a given location. Many, if not most Americans never even consider where the foods they eat everyday come from or how they are produced. The local food movement, on the other hand, asks us to think about food as something that comes from somewhere other than a supermarket and that it is produced by actual people. Buying locally produced foods causes consumers to find food producers, namely farmers and to cultivate a direct producer-consumer relationship between the two. From that relationship can build a community of fellow consumers all linked by their common food source. This can materialize in something as simple as neighbors picking up their produce at the same time every week and sharing

recipes. But getting to know fellow members of a local food community can also yield much more than good kale recipes and a little chat on Saturday; deep relationships can be fostered. The local food movement fosters relationship building in all forms—relationship between consumers and farmers, between fellow foodshed members, to space and land and perhaps most of all a positive relationship with food itself.

This relationship is one that removes discipline from the equation. It is rare that prisoners and prison guards are going to be in any kind of healthy relationship. Except those dieters who truly do succeed at controlling their weight and then even feel a sense of pleasure from the very act of controlling their bodies—perhaps a veritable Stockholm syndrome of eating—most dieters do not feel empowered by their diets. Scholars in the field of Fat Studies have shown that the very act of dieting actually worsens the health of some by adding to their lack of self-esteem while they continue to struggle to lose any weight (Lyons 82). The local food movement offers a way of eating that is free of the shame that can come with self-discipline.

Unlike dieting, the local food movement breaks down the prison cell and prison guard mentality of eating based around monitoring the self and caloric intake. Eating local has no scientific system of monitoring one's eating; there are no rules about how much to eat or what types of food to eat. What you eat is dictated by your own tastes, cravings, level of hunger and what is in season and available. When a CSA member receives a basket of produce at the beginning of the week their meals are dictated by the types of food in the basket and their own level of creativity. There is no expert telling a CSA member that leafy greens are full of vitamins and therefore a necessary part of a good diet; they just receive three pounds of kale and have to figure out how their going to

integrate it into their meals so that it doesn't go to waste. The local food eater is given his own agency to make what he wants when he wants it within the confines of the season and availability.

Freedom from Failure

Most CSA members do not rely solely on their farm share for their weekly supply of groceries; they supplement their share by going to the grocery store. Most Americans, even the most environmentally conscious and locally focused still like to eat non-local items like bananas, oranges, coffee, chocolate or ice cream. Participating in the local food movement does not mean you have to give up all foods and ingredients that come from far away, but rather that you acknowledge the distance those products travel and the circumstances surrounding their production. The local food movement is an informal movement, structured by the actions of those interested in consciousness in food consumption and production. Some people come to it through environmental concern, others, like many professional chefs, are in search of quality ingredients. Others are simply concerned about the health of their families and feeding them wholesome meals. There is no right way to participate in this movement. There are no local food police who come give you a citation if you buy Oreos for your kids. Unlike dieting, the local food movement does not ask for you to monitor your calorie intake and punish yourself for “bad” behaviors. Rather, it asks us to relate to food and to think about it. What the local food movement does that is different from nutritionist models of eating is to change the way we think about food on an ideological level and then to let that change in paradigm come through in food choices when one is moved to do so. There is nothing that says you

cannot eat that Snickers bar or a Big Mac that you are craving. What the local food movement does in practice is to cause you to acknowledge the processes that went into making whatever you eat and to acknowledge that some of those practices may not be the best for the earth and the people involved in production.

The consciousness that the local food movement fosters can release those who feel imprisoned by the rhetoric of control and self-discipline. We seem to have this sense that if we do not follow our diets, if we do not watch our bodies carefully, they may run wild. A lack of discipline does not have to mean “go crazy,” it means to simply *be* with food; not to be perversely obsessed with it in any way. In the past humans have not felt as distraught about food as we seem to today. They either had food to eat or they didn’t—that was the distress. Today we have an overabundance of food and we have become obsessed with it.

I do not wish to imply that the local foods movement is the perfect solution to problematic discourses surrounding food, but rather that it is a step in a good direction. The rhetoric of the local food movement—seasonality, community building, fresh, ethically grown, sustainable, often heirloom produce—is certainly more conscious of ethical issues in the production of food than that which comes from dieting and nutritionism. But there is often a gap between the rhetoric and actual practice of those who identify themselves with the local food movement. When it comes down to it, it is often a movement of a bunch of well-off, white people enjoying heirloom tomatoes and artisanal cheese, but not truly engaging in a true political shift that would allow everyone access to these foods. Perhaps one good answer to this quandary are urban farms. Urban farms take the idea of eating fresh, local, sustainable food and bringing into the city,

particularly to areas where many do not even have access to grocery stores supplying fresh food. Many urban farms build up arable plots of soil right over concrete on empty lots of urban space and rely on volunteer work from the community to care for the crops.

The local food movement is just one site of resistance to the dominating, disciplinary food rhetoric among many. While Foucault talks about power, he also suggests that resistance to that power works in a mirrored way—resistance must become its own kind of power. The local food movement must produce its own powerful discourses.

Food and Affect

Today many scholars are turning to affect to fill the spaces left unanswered in their post-post-modern critiques of culture. In their introduction to the *Affect Theory Reader* Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affect thus, “Affect...transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities: all the minuscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra-. Affect is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness” (2). Affect can be understood as a constellation of invisible, unnamed forces that we witness constantly in everyday life, which give physical objects or bodies a sensation of human depth. Affect can be witnessed, seen, heard and felt regardless of the fact that it cannot be captured, extracted, or measured. This is what Seigworth and Gregg mean when they say affect is born in in-between-ness and accumulative beside-ness. While it can be related to human emotion, since affect often evokes or coincides with emotion, affect cannot be named as simply as emotions can—it is not merely happy, sad, or angry. Rather, affect is used to explain the sensation

of that which has impact in our lives and can be attributed to the simple material-ness of the object. In the body, for example, bodily movements without intention or energy appear somehow lack-luster or empty. It is affect, or the lack thereof in this case, that can be witnessed in those who have experienced episodes of depression—moments where one is lacking or has a flat affect. We know that we can see and feel affect and that it can be witnessed in the material world. Seigworth and Gregg write, “Affect marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters or; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters but also, in non-belonging, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or ‘mixed’ encounters that impinge and extrude for worse or for better, but (most usually) in-between” (2).

I propose that it is affect that makes food more than just calories—that there is a space, a something between the chains of sugars and proteins and the burning of molecules in your body that affects how you feel when eating food. Food is transformed, made more than the sum of its microelements in the act of eating it. Affect gives us an explanation to why a meal cooked lovingly and shared among friends can be so gratifying, nurturing, fulfilling. In a particular discussion of affect and aesthetics Steven Sharivo explains affect lies in the distinction of “not *what* something is, but how it is—or more precisely, *how* it affects, and how it is affected by, other things” (quoted in Seigworth 14, emphasis in original.) I am less concerned with what chemical composition makes up my food and more concerned with how it affects me and how I can affect others through food.

In her essay, “Writing Shame” Elspeth Probyn shares her own experience of affect in her life. In particular she discusses the “fear-terror” of producing work that

would not interest anyone and lead to shame (Probyn 72). Probyn discusses the affect of shame, building particularly on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank. She uses her personal experience to show how affect affects us in our daily lives: “Different affects make us feel, write, think, and act in different ways. It does this experimentally—the body feels very different in shame than in enjoyment—but it also reworks how we understand the body and its relation to other bodies or, for want of a better word, to the social” (Probyn 74.) Similarly, eating different foods in different settings or under different circumstances can affect us in different ways regardless of their nutritional content. Consuming foods with a belief that you are somehow not good enough—not thin enough, not healthy enough, not rich enough—causes a certain affect to be embodied. By the same token, eating with pleasure—pleasure from the ingredients, from the making of it, from the people you are eating with, from the pride of being able to afford the food you are eating—causes a positive affect on the body, mind and spirit. This affective argument cannot be measured or quantified and yet it most certainly can be perceived and therefore can be analyzed.

Where do we go from here?

I believe the answer lies not in extremes—of counting calories, or eating only foods grown in your back yard—but in a more complicated food discourse that empowers eaters and acknowledges the social disparities that greatly effect who can eat what in our country. I came to this issue as one of those people who was very influenced by the food pyramid in my youth. As a kid I insisted that my lunch (the only meal that a child can be in control of on a regular basis) contain the same thing every day—a sandwich, a piece of

fruit, a baggie of fresh vegetables, yogurt and a treat. I was comforted by the structure of eating this way, but as I grew older I realized how monotonous it was—the same foods everyday dictated by a cartoon I saw on the side of my cereal box every morning. So what is the difference between my sack lunch and wonderful dinners or holiday meals that I hold so dear? I have come to realize that there is more to food than nutrition. There is a space in food that holds spirit, love, family, heritage, identity, and we commune with it everyday.

Renowned food writer, M.F.K. Fisher has written, “all men are hungry. They always have been. They must eat, and when they deny themselves the pleasures of carrying out that need, they are cutting off that part of their possible fullness, their natural realization of life, whether they are rich or poor” (322). I fell for Fisher the moment my eyes laid upon her work. Though her first novel was published in only 1937, her work speaks to an understanding of human experience that is both ahead of her time and also timeless. When I first read M.F.K. Fisher I noticed that her work seemed like the perfect response to Michael Pollen though she preceded him by decades. She makes many of the same points that he does by simply sharing stories of her personal experiences with food that shed light on the universal nature of our connection to food and its connection to the deepest of human emotions and experiences. She inspired me to seriously explore my own relationship to my culture through food and in doing so, taught me that I do not need to be rich to eat well and live well. For that, one only needs love and intention. And for that lesson, I will be forever grateful.

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