

# spectra

The Magazine of the National Communication Association

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**SPEAKING  
OF**

*food*





# ABOUT spectra

*Spectra*, the magazine of the National Communication Association (NCA), features articles on topics that are relevant to Communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners. *Spectra* is one means through which NCA works toward accomplishing its mission of advancing Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

NCA serves its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems. NCA supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion.

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## spectra ? DID YOU KNOW

More than 50 sessions will focus on food-related topics at the upcoming NCA 105<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, to be held November 14–17, 2019, in Baltimore, MD. For full program details, visit [natcom.org/convention](http://natcom.org/convention).

## More than a Seat at the Table

By Star Muir, Ph.D.

Having a “seat at the table” is often taken to mean having some voice in a decision-making process. For many years, this has been a focus for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts—bringing diverse peoples and perspectives “to the table” for rich discussion. Yet some of our rhetorical touchstones might caution us about the metaphor, and impart limitations of the frame. The Arthurian legend of the round table, embracing the absence of a “head” of the table as an equalizing democratic structure, is romantic and intriguing, but nonetheless presents a very real cultural predicament: an egalitarian structure totally belied by the elite qualifications for access as a male warrior. Even Judy Chicago’s striking triangular “Dinner Party,” which offers a rich celebration of women’s history by bringing 39 famous women to the table, has drawn some criticism as “second wave” art missing an enriched racial dynamic. There are implications here for both the efficacy of structures and the importance of perceptions. Having a seat at the table is fraught with rhetorical power, and making access fairly available to a broad and diverse membership is an important responsibility of every scholarly association. Sharing a seat at the table with my colleagues on the Executive Committee has been enjoyable and productive, but just sitting at the table is clearly not enough.

In 2016, the membership of NCA voted to adopt a revised set of bylaws and a new working structure that enriches the diversity of our discussions and our decision-making. The new representation on the Executive Committee by the Chair of the Diversity Council, in turn representing the strengths of our many

Caucuses, has brought important strong voices to the table, and provided key insights into revising our Anti-Harassment policies, building a more inclusive editorial staffing process, and changing the Distinguished Scholar Award selection process. At meetings of the Executive Committee, a rich mix of voices and perspectives is heard, and we work hard to achieve consensus. Yet it is also clear that as significant as these changes have been, they are only first steps in what I hope will be an inviting, engaging, reflective, and productive process of change moving forward. Let me offer a few personal observations as we journey a while together.

As my bracket [white, male, cishet, 60, associate professor, UU, he/him] shows, I am well-served by listening long and thoughtfully during discussions on matters of race, gender, and power. While I have felt some of the desperation of poverty, my privilege has long made many experiences invisible to me. Having a diverse Executive Committee has brought experience, insight, and emotion into sharp focus for me, and has helped deepen my understanding of structural racism and white privilege. I also feel invited into this conversation and able to make critical points without fearing disparagement, which is crucially important for healthy dialogue. The value of diversity and inclusion is not that they become absolute, but that they become centrally important and institutionalized aspects of our decision-making, empowering many voices to help address long-standing barriers to equity.

As NCA President, I have framed some of my agenda for the association in terms of developing the strength



With increasingly diverse voices raised in our community, and seated at the table, we do not move in haste, but we do move forward with determination and dispatch.

and breadth of our community. This was part of my initial campaign, the tone of my convention theme, and a continuing thread of my columns. Within the limits of my bracket, I see the diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns as very closely intertwined with how people experience the community of NCA. If you are disparaged, harassed, denied opportunities, or denigrated, then the community is not providing a safe or inclusive space. If you find shared interests, feel you can be yourself, and are supported and appreciated by a community, then you will more likely feel included and respected. Fostering a strong sense of community is not the only way to change member experiences, but it is certainly very powerful, as broader and richer connections enhance inclusion while also sustaining teaching innovation and supporting the creation of new knowledge.

Reflecting on the state of our community, I prefer to think of this time as one of high energy and commitment, rather than as any kind of crisis or emergency. An outpouring of reflection and critique is momentous, opening up possibilities, and pointing us toward more research, engagement, and action. Statements and declarations are good demonstrations of intent, and can provide impetus and justifications for change, but clearly they are insufficient on their own. The National Office and the Executive Committee have been busy addressing these issues in other ways as well, including recently committing to the use of gender-appropriate language in NCA public messages and working actively over the last five years to expand diversity, inclusion, and equity at our

Annual Convention experience (providing all-gender bathrooms, a lactation room, transportation assistance, signage and registration changes for safety from harassment, and other support). I generally avoid crisis mode activity, because mistakes are easier to make, and perspectives are easier to flatten, when one rushes, but these concerns have become and will continue to be a consistent and significant interwoven part of what we do. It is an amazing time to be a leader in NCA, and it is quite thrilling to see the commitment and passion that will sustain us through needed changes. With increasingly diverse voices raised in our community, and seated at the table, we do not move in haste, but we do move forward with determination and dispatch.

One aspect of sitting at the table that is particularly important for the theme of this issue of *Spectra* is the breaking of bread and the sharing of food. Food is a fundamental aspect of human cultures, and it is interwoven with economics, entertainment, health, politics, and race in ways that can both strengthen and undermine individuals and communities. One of the experiences I treasure is sharing food during sessions of the Executive Committee. For a brief time, we set aside NCA concerns and share our lives, our passions, and our mishaps to laugh, offer and receive advice, and commiserate before returning to our work. Understanding how communication and food work together to determine critical aspects of health, lifestyle, identity, community, and culture is another reminder of the powerful insights and actions available to scholars and students of our discipline. ■



## PUBLIC PRESENCE

### NCA Participates in Research Exhibition on Capitol Hill

The Coalition for National Science Funding's (CNSF) 25th Annual Exhibition and Reception was held on Tuesday, April 30, 2019, on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. This annual event is designed to encourage members of Congress to support the National Science Foundation (NSF) by showcasing research and educational projects made possible by NSF funding. This year's CNSF exhibition theme was "Building the Future: Federal Investments in Science, Engineering and Education."

Researchers from 34 institutions spoke with congressional leaders and their staff members, university scholars, and NSF liaisons. Among these researchers was Communication scholar Joshua Barbour of the University of Texas at Austin, who spoke about his work with the Automation Policy and Research Organizing Network (APRON), which advances Communication research focused on the future of data-intensive, automated work. The APRON lab currently focuses on health and health care analytics, which was the topic of Barbour's presentation, "The Future of Work in Health Analytics and Automation."



## IN OUR JOURNALS

### Isaac West, "Wedding Cakes, Equality, and Rhetorics of Religious Freedom," *First Amendment Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/21689725.2019.1604246.

This article examines the rhetoric of religious freedom in the context of a 2013 incident where small business owners refused to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. The author laments the use of religious freedom as a strategy to defy full and fair execution of equality laws. West explains that conservative media and the discourse surrounding small businesses, religious freedom, and wedding cakes create an environment that enables this injustice. West stresses that small businesses have an obligation to adhere to specific rules and regulations that prevent the discrimination of protected classes. Regardless of the meaning behind a wedding cake, West writes, it is a good available in a marketplace that is subject to state and federal laws. The article concludes by stressing that our rights to equality are fundamental to American law and that we must ensure these principles are upheld.

### Justin Eckstein and Anna M. Young, "wastED Rhetoric," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15 (2018): 274-291.

This article highlights the significant role that Public Chef Intellectuals play in cultivating a more sustainable food culture. Eckstein and Young examine this phenomenon through wastED, a 2015 experimental pop-up restaurant used as a rhetorical strategy to underscore the unnecessary food waste that plagues society.

The restaurant's glossary, design, and plate were used as tools to bridge the gap between farm and table, and expose the fine line between food and waste. According to the authors, although a small percentage of the population had the opportunity to dine at wastED, its existence created a platform for necessary conversation about the topic of food waste, which is often ignored. Eckstein and Young suggest we pay closer attention to the choices we make about our food and other daily habits, as these are inherently political decisions that shape who we are.

### Mohan Jyoti Dutta and Jagadish Thaker, "'Communication Sovereignty' as Resistance: Strategies Adopted by Women Farmers amid the Agrarian Crisis in India," *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 47, (2019): 24-46.

In this article, the authors explore the culture-centered approach in the context of their collaboration with dalit women farmers who have organized to resist the corporatization of agriculture in South India. The authors explain that corporatization in farming culture has created market dependence and has disrupted community life, food security, and access to local health resources. The female farmers have resisted the expansion of neoliberal cash crop agriculture by spreading local knowledge that is based on seed sovereignty, advancing local ownership of land, and promoting community-based health care. The authors emphasize that the work of the dalit farmers is grounded in communicative sovereignty and offers a framework for withstanding other struggles of oppression.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

### Denison University Hosts NCA Institute for Faculty Development

The NCA Institute for Faculty Development, also known as the "Hope Conference," was held July 14–20 at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Forty-five members representing 21 states participated in the annual conference, which is designed for undergraduate Communication faculty who want to build collaborative research and pedagogical relationships, learn about new directions in theory and pedagogy, and develop new course area expertise. This year's seminars included "The Collaborative Turn: The Communication-Based Reformation of Decision Making in Organizations and Communities," led by Stanley Deetz (University of Colorado Boulder); "Place Matters. Communication, Rhetoric and the Centrality of Place in Cultural Life," led by Greg Dickinson (Colorado State University); "Take(s) Heart!: Writing, Teaching, and Researching with Care and Compassion," led by Carolyn Ellis (University of South Florida); "Creativity, Aesthetics, and Dialogue in Everyday Communication," led by William Rawlins (Ohio University); "Rhetorics and Cultures of the Visual," led by Claire Sisco-King (Vanderbilt University); and "Becoming a Resilient Scholar," led by Catherine Squires (University of Minnesota). Laura Ellingson (Santa Clare University) served as the 2019 Scholar-in-Residence.



### NCA and Shenzhen University of China Hold Forum on "Communication Innovation, New Media, and Digital Journalism"

Numerous NCA members participated in "Communication Innovation, New Media, and Digital Journalism," a conference held June 27–29 in Shenzhen, China. Co-hosted by NCA and the Shenzhen University of China, the conference brought together Communication scholars and media practitioners to engage in conversations about cutting-edge communication-based issues. The conference explored communication in three tracks: "Experiments in Communication Innovation," led by Rolien Susanne Hoyng (Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Chen Changfeng (Tsinghua University); "Intersections in New Media and Health Communication," led by Amy Hasinoff (Colorado University Denver) and Yuqiong Zhao (Shenzhen University of China); and "The Digital Journalism Challenge," led by Qingwen Dong (University of the Pacific) and Xiaojin Gu (Shenzhen University of China). In addition to conference presentations and workshops, participants engaged in a pre-conference workshop on international communication and visited one of the world's largest social media companies, TenCent.



### NCA Hosts 2019 Chairs' Summer Institute

NCA hosted its Chairs' Summer Institute June 13–15 at The Hotel at the University of Maryland. This year's theme, "Chairperson Leadership: Advocating, Mentoring, and Managing," attracted more than 20 department chairs to the DC area for a workshop designed to help department chairs better understand and address a variety of issues within their departments and larger university communities. Session topics included the role of administrator, negotiating identity as a chair and administrator, and balancing research, teaching, and administrative responsibilities; managing issues of faculty mentoring and advocating for the department and faculty; identifying a departmental vision, goal-setting, generating faculty buy-in, and strategic planning; recruiting, hiring, and evaluating faculty; and managing departmental and campus crises. Seminar leaders included John Caughlin (University of Illinois), Thomas Endres (University of Northern Colorado), Maurice Hall (The College of New Jersey), Kent Ono (University of Utah), and Helen Sterk (Western Kentucky University).



### NCA Doctoral Honors Seminar Held at University of South Florida

The annual Doctoral Honors Seminar was held July 21–24 and hosted by the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Thirty doctoral students from more than 20 Communication doctoral programs attended the DHS, where they worked with distinguished researchers to discuss current topics and research within Communication Studies, Media and Society, and Rhetoric and/or Performance Studies. This year's DHS, themed "Communication, Engagement, and Social Justice" was led by faculty seminar leaders Erin Donovan (University of Texas), Rachel Griffin (University of Utah), Matt McAllister (The Pennsylvania State University), Mark McPhail (Indiana University), James Olufowote (University of Oklahoma), Belinda Stillion Southard (University of Georgia), Tracy Stephenson Shaffer (Louisiana State University), Jan Van den Bulck (University of Michigan), and Heather Zoller (University of Cincinnati).





# COMMUNICATION FOR Survival

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November 14–17, 2019 • Baltimore, Maryland

### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- *NCA Opening Session: Race Relations in Charm City: Communicating Social Justice*, chaired by Kimberly R. Moffitt, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and featuring panelists Dottye Burt-Markowitz, Baltimore Racial Justice Action; J. David Cisneros, University of Illinois; Ranjani Gudlavalleti, Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition; Mark C. Hopson, George Mason University; Karsonya Wise-Whitehead, Loyola University Maryland; and Janelle Wong, University of Maryland. Sponsored by The Waterhouse Family Institute for the Study of Communication and Society.
- *Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture: Mobility, Containment, and the Racialized Spatio-Temporalities of Survival*, delivered by Lisa A. Flores, University of Colorado, Boulder. Sponsored by Pearson.
- *NCA Presidential Address and NCA Awards Presentation: The Coming Dark Age and the Future of Scholarly Associations*, delivered by NCA President Star A. Muir, George Mason University, followed by presentation of the 2019 NCA awards. Sponsored by Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

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### AN INTRODUCTION



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We talk about food, we connect with one another over food, and really good food speaks to us in the same way that a piece of fine art might. The very act of consuming food is communicative. However, as Sheril Kirshenbaum writes in the opening article to this issue of *Spectra*, few of us really understand the complicated relationship people have with the food we eat. “While much of our lives revolve around meals,” Kirshenbaum writes, “the vast majority of us are unengaged with and misinformed about both production and nutrition.” Kirshenbaum calls on communicators and Communication scholars to “help cultivate a culture where more people recognize our foods’ origins, as well as our personal and collective ‘food print’ on the environment.”

In recent years, the television industry has helped us explore the cultural complexities of global food pathways. While Casey Kelly writes that food television has become a “genre for consuming the Other while eliding... global economic inequalities, histories of colonialism, and narratives of cultural survivance,” he also notes that recently, people of color within the culinary industry have created “in-depth, documentary-style programs that approach cuisines as windows into the experiences of the people who cook and eat them.” According to Kelly, “Food television has transformed American audiences’ perception of culture and place.”

Yet some food-related misperceptions remain strongly imbedded in the public imagery, especially stereotypes

that are related to race and body image. “Foods, after all,” writes Psyche Williams-Forsen, “are cultural products that invoke a range of individual and collective practices and memories. They reveal cultural traditions and culturally transmitted values that govern societies far and wide.” “So,” Forsen notes, “while every culture experiences food shaming, African Americans have experienced histories of demonizing and degradation, most often under the guise of having their lives saved and their health ‘improved.’” Forsen concludes that “Finding better communication strategies that consider the expressive variables that help to sustain us seems both ethical and logical.”

According to Amber Kinser, we certainly need to explore and strategize around the ideal of the family meal, the positive impacts frequent family meals have on child outcomes, and the pressure public messaging around family meal frequency places on parents, especially mothers. There are, Kinser notes, multiple and significant barriers to frequent family meal sharing. “If, in fact, increasing family meal frequency is a goal worth pursuing in support of healthy children,” Kinser writes, “then families need to be differently positioned, and institutional and societal levels are where that change must be initiated.”

We hope you enjoy these authors and their insights, and we look forward to greeting you (and sharing meals with you!) at the upcoming NCA 105<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention in November. 🍽️

# Changing the Conversation

## ABOUT FOOD

By Sheril Kirshenbaum, M.S.

Americans like to eat. Food unites families and communities in myriad ways. We gather around the dining room table to celebrate births and return for comfort during life's most difficult challenges. We pass down time-honored recipes and plan holiday travel around opportunities to sample unique cuisines. Our diets shape us personally, while our collective choices and agricultural practices chart the course for Earth's future.

Americans also have a very complicated relationship with food. We are a nation of self-proclaimed "foodies," with very little understanding of how food gets to our plates or its impact on our bodies and the environment.

While much of our lives revolve around meals, the vast majority of us are unengaged with and misinformed about both production and nutrition.

In fact, the United States is further removed from agriculture than ever before. Less than 2 percent of Americans currently live on farms, as the population shifts from rural areas into cities and suburbs. According to Michigan State University's national Food Literacy and Engagement Poll, half of us say we never or rarely seek information about where our food was grown or how it was produced. This lack of interest and attention has created unique social and policy challenges with which we must grapple as a nation.

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For example, 37 percent of Americans do not know that all food contains genes, even though genetically modified organisms, often called “GMOs,” are a hotly debated topic. Americans are largely unfamiliar with genetics, and we cannot begin to have serious regulatory discussions about emerging gene-editing technologies until more people are informed about the science that is vitally important to this conversation.

On less divisive subjects, much of what we think we know about food is wrong. For example, contrary to popular belief, there’s no scientific link between sugar and hyperactivity in children. Local and organic foods aren’t always best for our bodies, farm animals, or the environment. And, even though 65 percent of consumers look for the word “natural” on food labels, the term is not always synonymous with healthfulness or what’s necessarily best for our bodies. Arsenic occurs naturally, after all, but we should not eat it.

Making matters worse, modern food labels frequently drive consumers to pay high prices for meaningless terms or even dangerous substances that capitalize on our naïveté to make a sale. We place blind trust in advertisers, without recognizing that their best interest may be at odds with our own. One example is “vitamin B17,” frequently touted in products as a healthy, natural cure for cancer. Yet B17 is not really a vitamin; rather it’s

amygdalin—which naturally contains cyanide and can pose a health risk. In such instances, marketers sell false hope by promoting pseudoscience, which fosters mistrust of experts and further complicates the conversation around food. This mismatch of information and priorities influences social norms and can reinforce false beliefs. The results add to the mountain of misinformation already plaguing the food industry and can take a toll on our bodies and our bank accounts.

Unfortunately, Americans also do not trust experts when it comes to information about nutrition, food safety, and sustainability. Just 52 percent say they trust academic scientists, 48 percent trust government scientists, and only 33 percent trust industry scientists.

When studies about nutrition make headlines, they are often unreliably reported. The people and companies with the loudest voices on and off line dominate public discourse and sway popular opinion on diet and health, while those with credentials rarely have the platform they would need to reach a wide audience.

As a result, the public is all too often spoon-fed lies about the best ways to eat. Popular magazines and blogs make it nearly impossible to separate truth from hype, especially because the vast majority of Americans do not have immediate access to scientific journals or people with real expertise.

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It’s time to change the way we communicate about food. We cannot expect consumers to understand food unless scientists work to foster trust and make the science accessible.

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Our click-driven news environment focuses on recommendations that offer quick fixes for weight loss, while starving our bodies of the fuel we need to stay healthy. A current trend involves celebrities promoting diets that cut out glucose, a simple sugar and important energy source our bodies need. These “influencers” encourage followers to adhere to restrictive plans that reduce or eliminate carbohydrates, while binging on saturated fats that clog arteries and damage hearts.

When it comes to our bodies, bad advice can cause real harm. The “clean” craze is one example that’s currently popular with affluent and so-called “aspirational” millennials. Clean eating began with good intentions, based on research, to eat minimally processed, plant-based, nutritious foods. That was fine, until a bevy of social media stars became interested in adopting a “clean” lifestyle, loosely reinterpreting this term to mean extreme restriction. In many documented cases, self-proclaimed “clean eaters” experienced malnourishment, hair loss, and vitamin deficiencies rarely seen in the developed world.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, advertising campaigns have added weight to the already oversized American obesity epidemic. Large, multinational corporations target America’s youngest and poorest populations by offering easily accessible, inexpensive, and heavily processed foods that are saturated with fat, sugar, and sodium. Today, more than two-thirds of U.S. adults are considered overweight or obese, according to the National Institutes of Health.

It’s time to change the way we communicate about food.

We cannot expect consumers to understand food unless scientists work to foster trust and make the science accessible. And there’s more at stake than our individual health during this time of global change. In the coming years, scientists and agricultural producers must figure out how to feed as many people

as possible, with ever more limited resources resulting from increasingly extreme storms and temperatures.

Around 2050, it’s estimated that there will be about 9 billion people living on Earth. Agricultural yield will need to increase by 70 to 100 percent to meet anticipated food demand. That means changing the way we harvest, consume, and waste food, both personally and globally.

Thankfully, some solutions are already available. Plant breeders are developing modern varieties of crops that can grow without fertilizer and survive though flooding. Plant-based meat alternatives and cell cultured meats are swiftly entering the global marketplace; these can have a less damaging environmental impact than their traditionally produced beef counterparts. And, advances in genetic engineering have allowed scientists to modify such staples as rice to supply vital nutrients to the world’s most vulnerable populations. Modern advances like these are encouraging and will help us prepare future generations for conditions on a changing planet, but the lack of public awareness, appreciation, trust, and support for the research involved will hinder scientific progress.

There are also solutions that do not involve technological innovation but can have a significant influence on global food security and sustainability. Food waste accounts for one-third of all food produced for human consumption and takes up 28 percent of the world’s agricultural lands. Such waste costs an estimated \$218 billion every year in the United States (or \$1,800 on average for a household of four). At a time when we are looking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, food waste generates enough methane to rank it number three in emissions were it a country, behind only the United States and China.

Still, Americans are aware of food waste and seem interested in taking steps to reduce their “food print.” Eighty-eight percent of Americans say they try to reduce food waste at home, and 40 percent would be willing to buy a GMO-derived fruit or vegetable that stayed fresh longer

Communicators must help cultivate a culture where more people recognize our foods' origins, as well as our personal and collective "food print" on the environment.

than currently available produce. While so many policy and public discussions about resource scarcity focus on new innovation and technological progress, we can work to reduce what we waste immediately.

To have an impact, food communication must foster trust in experts while improving food literacy among consumers, policymakers, and the public. Communicators must help cultivate a culture where more people recognize our foods' origins, as well as our personal and collective "food print" on the environment.

We also need to work to improve the quality of health, diet, nutrition, and environmental information that makes its way out into broad public discourse. That means bringing academics out of the ivory tower, producers off the farm, and health professionals into an exchange of civic discourse that quells mistrust and promotes mutual understanding. It requires that research institutions and storytellers become less siloed and more collaborative. Most of all, we must take the time to build these relationships, thoughtfully communicate, and listen to one another. ■



**SHERIL KIRSHENBAUM** works to enhance public understanding of science and improve communication among scientists, policymakers, and the public. She has authored two books, and her writing appears in popular publications and scientific journals. Kirshenbaum has been a 2015 Presidential Leadership Scholar, a Marshall Memorial Fellow, a legislative Fellow in the U.S. Senate, and a Next Generation Fellow through the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law. She speaks internationally about science communication and currently co-directs Michigan State University's Food Literacy and Engagement Poll. She also hosts the NPR podcast and digital series *Serving Up Science* and serves as Executive Director of Science Debate.



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*World making or world breaking?: a Black womanist perspective on social media crises in higher education*

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# YOU ARE WHAT YOU WATCH:

## Food Television's Culture War

By Casey Ryan Kelly, Ph.D.

“I just want people to understand that a taco is not just a taco. A taco is culture, a taco is history, and a taco is migration, a taco is resistance, politics, all that stuff. But it's hard because too often in foodie culture, people just want to eat. They don't want to think about what they eat.”

—Gustavo Arellano, Author of *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*

In episode 2 of the Netflix series *Ugly Delicious*, food writer Gustavo Arellano leads chef David Chang and food critics Peter Meehan and Jonathan Gold on a culinary tour of Los Angeles' best taco trucks. Although the episode delivers a sumptuous homage to a diverse and

beloved street cuisine, the group's culinary adventure is much less about providing hungry viewers with a tourist map of where to eat "authentic" regional Mexican food than it is an erudite inquiry into what the taco represents.

In fact, the episode diverges from much of cable and broadcast food television by approaching the taco as a cultural text that illustrates the lived experiences of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and immigrants who settled in Mexico throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rich diversity of taco recipes conveys the unique hybridity and survivance of Mexican and Chicana cultures around the world. For instance, masa and tortillas illuminate Mexico's Mesoamerican ancestry, regional ingredients explain





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Food television has become a genre for consuming the Other while eliding the global economic inequalities, histories of colonialism, and narratives of cultural survivance that are indexed by global foodways.

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the heterogeneity of Mexican identities, and fusions, appropriations, and adaptations of the taco evince both the legacy of Spanish colonization and the contemporary travails of Mexican immigrants who are trying to build community in the United States.

Hence, the Arellano quote above demonstrates how cuisines constitute living artifacts of cultural experience, struggle, memory, and history. As Roland Barthes contends in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” food is never simply nourishment and energy, but instead is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.” Despite the fact that food, culture, and communication remain inseparable, Arellano notes the cold indifference of foodie culture to such nuanced thinking. Most of the time, he laments, foodies are averse to thinking critically about what foods represent, where they come from, and how their consumption is implicated in larger political struggles. Put differently, most seek enjoyment, not understanding. They just want to eat.

Arellano’s comments resonate with me because they capture part of the argument I advanced in *Food Television and Otherness in the Age of Globalization* (2017). In the book, I argued that the recent proliferation of food and travel television has transformed global foodways into commonsense representations of cultural difference that distinguish the “exotic” eaters of Asia, Africa, and South America from the normal and elevated eaters of the United States and Europe. Food television has become a genre for consuming the Other while eliding the global economic inequalities, histories of colonialism, and narratives of cultural survivance that are indexed by global foodways.

I share Allerano’s concern that foodie culture, so profoundly influenced by the sudden ubiquity of the televised food adventure, separates the act of consumption from the people and cultures that produce cuisine. I found that the Scripps-owned *Food Network*, *The Cooking*

*Channel*, and *The Travel Channel* were largely invested in portraying the vicarious consumption of newly discovered global cuisines—dishes elevated by their endorsement from celebrity chefs and travel writers. For the shows’ largely white affluent audience, the globe represented a virtual emporium of exotic edibles and mysterious lands awaiting yet another colonization by cosmopolitan Western foodies looking to spice up their own travel experiences. But, a taco is not *just* a taco; it is also a site of struggle over the meaning of and right to define Mexican and Chicana identity at a political moment fraught with racial tensions between xenophobic nationalism on the one hand, and cosmopolitan reverence on the other. The same could be said for all the cuisines that are the subject of what I have dubbed the “televised culinary adventure”—a genre that celebrates global differences even as it maintains distinctions between the clean and orderly food rituals of the West and the strange, primal, and uncanny cuisines of the rest of the globe.

But since the publication of *Food Television*, I have also observed what amounts to an emerging culture war within the television industry over how to represent domestic and global foodways. This culture war concerns whether food will serve as an aperture into broader political struggles of race, class, nationality, and gender, or as a mechanism to appropriate and consume the experiences of others for the vicarious enjoyment of U.S. television audiences. I have argued that the late Anthony Bourdain deserves credit for creating some of the first programs (*A Cook’s Tour*, *No Reservations*, and *Parts Unknown*) that resisted the shallow tourism, kitsch, and racial exoticism that one regularly encounters throughout the programming of Scripps-owned networks. Although no show is perfect, Bourdain’s programs always featured well-developed portraits of food cultures that offered humanizing commentary on political and cultural struggles refracted through the prism of shared meals.



But Bourdain deserves only so much credit. It has been the labor of people of color and their accomplices within the culinary industry who have pushed back against television’s exoticization of difference. Such chefs include (upper to lower left) David Chang (*Ugly Delicious*, *Mind of a Chef*, Netflix), Tiffany Derry (*Hungry Investors*, Paramount Network), Aaron Sanchez (*Taco Trip*, Cooking Channel), Pati Jinich (*Mexican Table*, PBS), (upper to lower right) Eddie Huang (*Huang’s World*, Vice TV) Niki Nakayama (*Chef’s Table*, Netflix), Ming Tsai (*Simply Ming*, PBS), and the list goes on.

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In part, the new dominance of television streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and others has amplified the voices of people of color within the culinary industry. Streaming networks have done so by producing in-depth, documentary-style programs that approach cuisines as windows into the experiences of the people who cook and eat them. By and large, streaming networks have dispensed with the exoticizing gaze I critiqued in shows such as Andrew Zimmern’s *Bizarre Foods*, a program that invites audiences to gawk, fetishize, and even recoil in horror at the backward cuisines of non-Western nations.

For example, Chang’s *Ugly Delicious* is a show that explicitly addresses the racial and cultural entailments of specific dishes, such as tacos, fried rice, barbeque, and fried chicken. Over shared meals, Chang invites his guests to discuss how stereotypes and racism operate through differences in what and how we eat. In one episode, Chang solicits the personal experiences of Chinese Americans in the food and restaurant industries to illustrate how Chinese-American food, and consequently Chinese Americans, have been historically maligned as dirty and dangerous. As a Korean American, Chang empathizes by sharing his own childhood stories of his white schoolmates in Virginia mercilessly mocking the strange cooking smells that emanated from his home kitchen. The show then traces how the belief that Chinese Americans eat domesticated dogs and cats and are averse to sanitary cooking practices can be traced back to the anti-immigrant xenophobia that accompanied Chinese migration to the United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In another episode, Chang asks African-American restaurant owners and patrons about the fraught racial history of soul food in the American South. The episode traces the racial stereotypes associated with African Americans and fried chicken to the history of slavery, where slaves were sometimes permitted to keep and sell chickens for their own livelihood.



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It thus behooves us to consider what kinds of cultural assumptions about food, place, and difference circulate among viewers as they transform into participants.

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As these examples illustrate, new programs such as *Ugly Delicious* challenge their audiences' assumptions about the cultural experience of marginalized communities, contextualize food stereotypes in the broader history of racism, and educate audiences about the lived experience of those cultures whose foods they might enjoy or despise. Of course, Chang also gets to eat some pretty amazing food in the process.

The hosts and subjects featured in recent Netflix originals are also more racially and geographically diverse. For example, Netflix's *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* not only offers a sophisticated take on the universal elements of global cuisines that unify rather than divide the globe, but also features a multilingual Iranian-American host (chef Samin Nosrat) and her personal and cultural relationship with different global cuisines.

Additionally, Netflix's *Street Food* offers remarkably dynamic portraits of chefs throughout Asia who make a difficult living as street vendors. We learn less about chef Jai Fai's Michelin-star crab omelet than we do about the precarity of women's labor in Thailand, the personal tragedies and economic conditions that led Fai to become a street cook, and the painful effects of government crackdowns on street businesses in Bangkok. Moreover, the program treats cuisines in Asia with the same reverence and respect food writers once reserved only for haute French cuisine. Although there is a long way to go, these programs speak back to the shallow and highly commercialized portraits of global foods divorced from both people and culture.

At the same time, there still exists another food culture on cable and broadcast television that speaks to those who, as Allerano puts it, just want to eat. This applies as much to the high-end foodie looking for the next trendy global cuisine as it does to the unpretentious every-person who celebrates American comfort foods. Whereas Bravo's *Top Chef* has taught American foodies about insider terms such

as umami, gastrique, and sous vide, the Food Network has promoted those more accessible and familiar foods that engender quotidian (white) American tastes.

For example, Guy Fieri's popular *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* explicitly defies health and gastronomic trends by championing the familiar eats of mass consumer culture. In his travels throughout America, Fieri inverts the logics of elite food culture by invoking nostalgia for the high-calorie treats of American diner culture, including hot dogs, cheeseburgers, chicken wings, milkshakes, and French fries. Fieri also presents himself as a plainspoken, working-class hero and, consequently, speaks to an audience that wants its pedestrian diner food to be treated with the same respect as elite cuisine. Fieri's allure is that he does not bother his audience with too much history or context.

The Fieri brand is part of a much larger American nostalgia industry that sells products and sentiments that are associated with seemingly simpler and less divisive times. *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* presents food without the complications of politics, struggle, or cultural heterogeneity. Fieri represents the emergence of a kind of food populism in which the right to consume without thought, prohibition, or consequence is conceived of as a democratic ideal. In other words, ideal citizen-subjects are implicitly unraced and apolitical mass consumers. Here, people can innocently enjoy their cheeseburgers without the burdens of history or context—narcotized by the warm glow of nostalgia.

The stark contrasts between network and streaming content reflects broader national divisions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism; elitism and populism; open-mindedness and xenophobia. Food television does not merely reflect contemporary political divisions; it actively shapes how Americans address cultural difference and relate to the rest of the globe. Eric Wolf of the World Food Travel Association estimates that food tourism is a

\$150 billion a year industry. A recent industrial report on the market for culinary travel found that nearly three-quarters of American leisure travelers (131 million) can be categorized as culinary travelers, where food is the primary motivation for travel. Most within the restaurant and travel industries attribute the growth in culinary tourism to the advancement of food television and related food media, including food magazines, travel blogs, and social media

sites such as Instagram. Food television has transformed American audiences' perception of culture and place; perceptions that now also structure how viewers navigate and consume the world. It thus behooves us to consider what kinds of cultural assumptions about food, place, and difference circulate among viewers as they transform into participants. After all, a taco is not *just* a taco. Likewise, a food show is never just about food. ■



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# In “Trouble” with(out) Culture: Food Shaming and African-American Foodways

By Psyche Williams-Forson, Ph.D.

**I**n May 2008, *The Washington Post* ran a five-part exposé titled, “Young Lives at Risk: Our Overweight Children.” Because I am interested in the intersections of food and society, many of the articles in the series caught my eye. I was struck particularly by the story of a young, dark-skinned, African-American girl named Latrisha Avery. Latrisha was then 12 years old and described as taller and more full-figured than her classmates. Most of the online segments of the young girl’s story deal with the ways in which she navigates the thorny terrains of her life. She

is teased in school because of her height, weight, and skin tone, and she lives in a relatively impoverished community. Throughout the essay, we are shown pictures of various aspects of Latrisha’s life. We see her at school, walking home with friends across a parking lot backgrounded by liquor stores and fast food eateries, walking to church with her grandmother, and at home with family. While we see these images, we are not privy to many of the nuances of her young life. Implied but not detailed is that Latrisha has experienced a great deal of loss—we know nothing



of her parents, her grandmother has recently passed, and, perhaps, more. It is further implied that feeling isolated and alone, Latrisha turns to food—specifically, to “soul food.”

In the photo gallery and slideshow that accompanies Latrisha Avery’s story, there is one image showing the young girl with a large salad of lettuce (seemingly iceberg), tomatoes, cucumber, a slice of red pepper, lots of raw broccoli, and a scoop of tuna salad. Latrisha is photographed picking the broccoli out of her salad, stacking it outside the takeout container. In another insert, we see the adolescent

smiling before a plate filled with fried chicken, sliced beef and ham, collard greens, corn pudding, potato salad, macaroni salad, sweet potatoes, and iced tea. Sitting just beyond her elbow is a cake adorned with walnuts, waiting to be cut. Admittedly, the sheer variation (and volume) of food is hefty. But the indirect contrasts are more striking.

The article strongly suggests (as do some of Latrisha’s family members) that if the young girl would just try hard and eat more salads and “healthy” foods, she would lose weight, have friends, and, therefore, have a better life. Also,



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Foods, after all, are cultural products that invoke a range of individual and collective practices and memories. They reveal cultural traditions and culturally transmitted values that govern societies far and wide....

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very much suggested by the images is that the “soul food” Latrisha is consuming stands in contrast to the lettuce and broccoli salad. Left unpacked and unsaid is that Latrisha’s preferred foods are part of a longstanding culinary cultural tradition practiced in African-American communities. This latter point may seem inconsequential until we acknowledge that Latrisha is not eating in vacuum. The article frames Latrisha as having a problem of will power and a very large appetite—especially for soul food. What we do not see is the power of food to convey a variety of meanings and messages, including food shaming and food policing, without any regard for the importance of culture.

My training in American Studies, working at the intersection of race and food, leads me to consider the ways food shaming and policing of African Americans often occurs under the guise of providing helpful health and nutrition information. The reality, however, is there is a constant policing of Black bodies generally; shaming is used as a controlling mechanism. To be sure, food shaming is not experienced only by Black communities; literally almost every race and ethnicity of people in every socioeconomic group have encountered or will encounter food shaming. However, my research centers on African Americans because, since our arrival on these shores, our bodies have been horrifically surveilled and our relationships with food have been maligned. Foods, after all, are cultural



products that invoke a range of individual and collective practices and memories. They reveal cultural traditions and culturally transmitted values that govern societies far and wide. Thus, food events, with their specific gradations, have tremendous power to define social organization, as well as cultural and social identities. So, beyond the association of African-American people with soul food, our food cultures are rooted in continued misinformation and in a perception that Black people are monolithic.

In an interview with Judi Moore Latta, the late culinary historian Vertamae Grosvenor once remarked that every culture has its own “get-down foods”—that is, foods that are considered an everyday part of their cultural lexicon. For many, the dishes once identified by poet and activist Amiri Baraka in response to the statement that African Americans had no distinctive foodways patterns, perfectly fit this bill—grits, hoppin’ John (black-eyed peas and rice), fried fish and chicken, buttermilk biscuits, dumplings, lima beans, tomato and corn, string beans, okra, smoky, hot barbecue, most anything coming from a pig, sweet tea or lemonade, and a large wedge of sweet potato pie. These dishes, which are as much a part of any Southern diet as anything else, comprised some longstanding consumption habits by and among African Americans.

Nonetheless, the diets of African Americans are as varied as our communities. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when approximately 6 million African Americans left the Southern United States to move Westward (to Los Angeles and other Western cities); from Mississippi and Alabama to Chicago and other Northern urban spaces; up the eastern seaboard to the DelMarVa region (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC), and further on to New York, New Jersey, and New England, our foods have also moved, but our traditions have remained, nonetheless. This is important to recognize and acknowledge when prescribing change(s).

Consider a recent debate on Twitter among African-American culinary historians and non-historians alike



where fried catfish was the topic. The number of people suggesting that the most proper consumption was with spaghetti and cole slaw was equaled only by the number who suggested that macaroni and cheese with potato salad was most proper. The conversation reflected tastes as well as regional and cultural practices. Another example is illustrated by Lil’ Dizzy’s Cafe owner, Wayne Baquet, who said in an online interview, “Creole food is...the soul food of New Orleans...We don’t do ox-tails. We don’t do pigtailed... Those things are soul, down home Soul food.” Louisiana visitors may not have the “down home soul” of collard greens, macaroni and cheese, and fried chicken, but they instead may be introduced to stuffed peppers, jambalaya, red beans, and the pervasive gumbo.

Latrisha was eating foods common to the southeastern United States, geographically defined as North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Louisiana. Public health officials have declared the region “the stroke belt” because of high incidences of stroke and other diseases. And while a great deal is made of the diets consumed by the denizens (usually high in fat and sugar), less seems to be made of the prevalence of the very low socioeconomic statuses, lack of affordable and quality healthcare, smoking, and other cultural lifestyle choices. Assuming migration from any of these states, then it is not surprising that she would

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be eating the kinds of foods mentioned above. It is also not surprising that Latrisha’s plate would be filled to overflowing. Large portions of good food were a hallmark of many “southern groaning boards” and this practice often extends to the individual plate.

In her early essay, “The Rhetoric of Portions,” Amy Shuman writes that “the social negotiations of food allocation relies on various sources of information... the sources reveal that the division of portions is often a serious endeavor with significant implications for social relationships...” She goes on to explain, “the offering of portions as a part of foodsharing may be intended, and often is taken to be, an act of communication; hence, the ‘rhetoric of portions’... Often, indeed, food is apportioned and accepted not according to a person’s wants or needs, but as a means of expressing relationships or in accordance with one’s assessment of an event and its participation... In sum, then, the matter of portions often requires tact and diplomacy and necessitates delicacy in the monitoring, interpreting, and assessing of behavior.” Shuman’s assessment is spot on and important for our understanding of Latrisha’s very full plate. Large portions are not just for important guests or the head of the household, but also to signify comfort and to reflect feelings of pride when good food is served. I have detailed this practice among African Americans in my book, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, where I discuss the apportioning of the biggest piece of the chicken—the breast—to the preacher who visits after Sunday service and to the father, who works hard and thus should “rightly” receive the lion’s share of the food.

What emerges from all of this is the importance of cultural sustainability and the problems that emerge when this variable is overlooked in the name of health, nutrition, ethics, and general “do goodism.” Cultural sustainability is often absent from our conversations about food traditions and habits. Conversations about sustainability are often limited to the three pillars, or the triple bottom

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African Americans have long been engaged in ideological warfare involving food, race, power, and identity.... Stereotypes have been around for centuries and remain pervasive in the contemporary American psyche.

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line—people (social), planet (environmental), and profit (financial). But, in focusing only on these three, we miss the importance of ritual practices and the ways in which people use food and other kinds of expressions to live in culturally healthy ways. So, knowing the various food histories of African Americans and those of broader communities of Black/African Diasporic peoples sheds light not only on our multicomplex food systems, but also on the ways in which gender is central to the furtherance of African-derived cultural traditions and practices, practices that developed under the oppressive conditions of enslavement and have continuously evolved since then.

So, food shaming—showing a young African-American girl with a large plate of “soul food” as her comfort and sustenance, food policing—thinking every African-American neighborhood should have a community garden, telling Black folk what they should eat to be healthy, and suggesting that “eat local” be a daily mantra should not be practices that we employ. As today’s version of the food movement gathers steam, everyone—from pundits to journalists, food scholars to enthusiasts and “foodies”—seems to have some expertise on what is deemed “fresh,” “healthy,” and “wholesome” food. There is a lot of moralizing and righteous indignation taking place around what people eat. While farmer’s markets, bumper stickers, and advocates encourage us to “buy local,” we should remember that even as these intonations resonate with some (maybe even many), they should not necessarily be considered panaceas, any more than the suggestion that a grocery store is a cure-all solution to everything from food inaccessibility to obesity. Rather, the conversations are much more dynamic and complex, as are Latrisha’s experiences.

Thus, I am led to agree with Kimberly Nettles, who in her article, “‘Saving’ Soul Food,” argues “If...the food itself is the culprit, then the answer is simply to stop consuming it. Yet the threat of disease and death fails to quell the urge to prepare and consume foods that are part

of a cultural tradition, that are valued as a positive part of our communal life...The plethora of ‘light’ soul food cookbooks attempt to ‘save’ soul food by encouraging the retelling of narratives that honor family, love, and community while simultaneously advocating personal responsibility and restraint. Even so, they do not go far enough...These books pay very little attention to the problems endemic to our contemporary food system that contribute to disease and environmental degradation.”

African Americans have long been engaged in ideological warfare involving food, race, power, and identity. Most commonly known are the stereotypes concerning Black peoples’ consumption of fried chicken and watermelon. These stereotypes have been around for centuries and remain pervasive in the contemporary American psyche. Such stereotypes, invisible and visible, suggest a need for Black bodies to be controlled lest they become unwieldy and out of control; even obese. So, failure to adhere to a set of rules governing what is considered wholesome and fresh food often results in food shaming and food policing. In responding to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century question “How does it feel to be a problem?” asked by scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois, Professor of Communication, Culture, and Media Studies Ronald L. Jackson II rightly explains, “Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which helped to perpetuate the scripter’s racial ideology. Through these scripts, race gradually became its own corporeal politics.”

As I highlight in *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* and elsewhere, these “scripts” extend to cultural products such as food. Stereotypes and images that have sought to denigrate African-American men, women, and children using images of chicken and watermelon continue to be pervasive, perpetrated through popular culture. As Jackson argues, these narratives that socially assign Black bodies to an “underclass” had their origins in the institutions of “slavery and the mass media.” Today, this includes social media and its ability to reach vast audiences with haste.

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We risk critical and cultural misunderstanding when we forget that everyone’s lives and identities are composed of many overlapping stories.

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So, while every culture experiences food shaming, African Americans have experienced histories of food demonizing and degradation, most often under the guise of having their lives saved and their health “improved.” This is attributable in part to the scripts discussed above, but also to what Nigerian author Chimimanda Adiche describes in her TED talk as “The Danger of the Single Story.” She says, “Show people as one thing over and over again, and that’s what they become.” Further, she warns that we risk critical and cultural misunderstanding when we forget that everyone’s lives and identities are composed

of many overlapping stories. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Not only are they incomplete, they also generally are ideologically infused, often at the expense of common sense, historical context, and people’s everyday lives—people like Latrisha, who rather than being told she needs to give up all the foods that are important to her might simply need to have her portions adjusted. Finding better communication strategies that consider the expressive variables that help to sustain us seems both ethical and logical. ■



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# Family Meals and the *Discourse* About Them

By Amber Kinser, Ph.D.



As an academic trained in and teaching in the area of family communication, I am interested in how the mundane in family life is made meaningful among family members and through the interaction between family practices and meanings in the larger social world. As a feminist scholar, I view families and meaning through a feminist lens, examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that fix institutional and structural meanings in ways that discourage creative individual agency and restrict fluid performativity. As a motherhood studies scholar, I focus on how various definitions of gender, parenting, family, and social location impact women's experience of maternal life. And, finally, as a person for whom food and family have taken on particular, if complicated, significance—as a daughter at my parents' table, a mother with children for many years at mine, a partner who has the luxury now of being fed much more often than I feed—I am especially curious about family meals and how they shape and are shaped by the people who share them and the institutions that presume to direct them.



In recent years, I have found my interest piqued by the heavy-handed emphasis—among nutritionists, physicians, psychologists, educators, policy makers, celebrity figures, corporations, and news and other media—on family meals and the insistence that parents sit down most days of the week with their families for a shared meal. This insistence is rooted in more than two decades of research indicating that such practice will save children from low self-esteem, eating disorders, poor school performance, early sexual activity, alcohol and drug experimentation and abuse, disorderly behavior, poor nutrition, and other problems, including asthma and bullying.

A number of non-academic books that extol the wide-ranging virtues and moral strength of family meals have been released with notoriety, including Miriam Weinstein's *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* and Les and Leslie Parrott's *The Hour that Matters Most*. Online news and information sources such as ABCnews.com, CBSnews.com, NewYorkTimes.com, EatRight.org, Health.com, NPR.org, Telegraph.co.uk, Time.com, USAToday.com,

WashingtonPost.com, and WebMD, among many others, have urged parents to mitigate threats to their children's optimal functioning by eating together more often. A vast array of brands, including Schwan Food Company, Tyson Meats, Safeway, and Kroger; the Dairy Councils of California, Oregon, and Washington State; restaurants such as Texas Roadhouse, McDonald's, Wendy's, KFC, and Chick-Fil-A; major enterprises such as Time Warner Cable, Bank of America, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; as well as the Harlem Globetrotters and the New York Mets, represent some of the vocal and visible corporate involvements in this discourse.

Nostalgia rhetoric abounds as these sources converge to urge a return to and reclaiming of the family meal, in response to the assumed tragic loss of this once-sacred and prevalent tradition, which, as historian Stephanie Coontz makes clear, neither contemporary nor historical U.S. families have known. The presumed decline of family meals functions in the discourse as a metonym for the erosion of the institution of the family, itself a metonym for the



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[But] I am troubled by the ways in which the message “*just do more*” further intensifies cultural expectations for parenting and implicates mothers in particular.

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decay of the nation, whatever that means. As food studies scholar Richard Wilk has pointed out, the family meal is constructed as an “unassailable ideal” with no regard for the political forces and agendas at work, either in how we talk about family meals or in how they get played out in homes.

The data correlating frequent family meals with the outcomes I’ve named above is pretty convincing, actually. It makes sense that positive family routines, daily intimate parent-child interaction, parents

monitoring and facilitating nutritional intake and particular eating habits can, and probably often do, result in good stuff for kids, and that much of this could be facilitated when families routinely share meals. But I am not convinced that the nearly myopic emphasis on *frequency* captures the complexity of such outcomes. I am troubled by the ways in which the message “*just do more*” further intensifies cultural expectations for parenting and implicates mothers in particular. I am discouraged

by the way the discourse and the interventions emerging from it repeatedly fail to focus on anything but the family itself, when what complicates meal provision and frequency are matters quite often beyond the family and its control. Even familial patterns that do stem from the family itself often are grounded in social structure. The heralding of frequency as the critical measure, without sustained attention to the many variables that confound both meal provision and child outcomes, has more recently been called into question by a few scholars, but still those confounding variables receive precious little attention in the literature.

In my own childhood home, an increase in family meal occurrence would have meant more arduous “second shifts” for my mother, to use Arlie Hochschild’s term, more opportunity for my father to wield ugly power and terrorize, and more lessons for the children in overeating by way of the “eat everything on your plate” rule. The only conversation that was permitted at our dinner table was that between my parents. It is doubtful that increasing the number of times we sat down to dinner as a family would have brought about any impressive degree of positive outcomes for us kids. Indeed, the two to three nights each week that my father was at the fire station and our dinners were decidedly unplanned and unstructured were the only nights of reprieve for the children and our mother. The idea that our family could have improved child outcomes, or that any given family could, by “simply” increasing the food labor of meal providers is deeply problematic, despite what the data say, and despite the archetypal image of happy families interacting around a dinner table that dominates the popular imaginary.

The tone of family meal discourse echoes that of other family well-being discourses in that it places, across an array of institutions, children’s struggles as not only the primary, often exclusive, focus, but also the primary and often exclusive responsibility of individual families. With few exceptions, family meal research has

been characterized by a paucity of discussion about ways that frequent family meals might impact the adults—their eating patterns, their self-esteem, their school or job performance, their nutrition, their relationship satisfaction, or any other variable of their well-being—or the ways in which the practice of orchestrating frequent family meals has proven more executable by certain family configurations, and within particular socio-economic ranges. And, it has done little to examine how the practice unfolds in families with special needs family members. It has done little to investigate how disruptive or abusive family members impact outcomes. Nor has it earnestly investigated the variables operating when families who are *not* sharing meals frequently are experiencing positive child outcomes.

Further, public education efforts have targeted “parents,” to which, given the abundant and well-established assemblage of research showing that women remain responsible for family feeding work, mothers are most likely to be responsive. The rhetoric of *families* and *parents* functions here much like the rhetoric of “shared parenting” in family law. That is, as law professor Susan Boyd has argued, such language obscures the gendered patterns that mark these labors, and thereby fails to prompt any interrogation or equitable distribution of them. Such obscuring ensures that the discussion of family meals in public, professional, and policy domains will be incapable of speaking to the actualities of family meal provision and its myriad related variables. Consequently, it will be ineffectual, finally, at minimizing costs and maximizing benefits of family food provision, and ineffectual at meeting even its own goal of increasing family meal frequency.

Perhaps it is not surprising that family meal research has been slow to challenge the ideology of family meal-as-panacea, given the strength and pervasiveness of neoliberal thought and its assumption that problems with any component of the family is wholly solvable by the family. Research that more effectively nuances the questions it aims





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If, in fact, increasing family meal frequency is a goal worth pursuing in support of healthy children, then families need to be differently positioned, and institutional and societal levels are where that change must be initiated.

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to answer could discover ways that responsibility for family member health and well-being could be shared with the institutional forces outside of families that greatly determine what goes on within them. Such nuancing would make media reporting complicated and irreducible to taglines, like “The Magic of the Family Meal” and “Family Meals: Small Investment, Big Payoff.” It would uproot the long-established and still flourishing idea spanning multiple disciplines that family meal sharing functions in nearly endless positive ways and holds minimal potential for negative outcomes unless it is just plain done wrong.

Despite the limitations of family meal research and other discourse, and though improving the well-being of adolescents is notably more complicated than modifying the single variable of family meal frequency, we do know a thing or two that could serve as jumping off points for intervention. Even though “frequent” has not been consistently operationalized, the data do show that frequency of family meals correlate with the quality of child outcomes. For families that eat together a few days or less each week, it does seem that increasing the number of shared family meals may generally help to improve some outcomes for the children, especially for adolescents. Although parents are rarely versed in the benefits of family meal frequency that have been identified by researchers, they do tend to find shared meals an important and positive part of family life. Likewise, adolescents generally report interest in sharing meals with their families regularly. It seems that families, and especially meal providers, do not need to be convinced of the *value* of frequent family meals by nutritionists, public health advocates, psychologists, or educational and family policy makers. As experts themselves in many ways—on their own lives, on their families—they’ve decided for their own reasons that family meals have value and are desirable. That research-identified benefits are not the source of their motivation shouldn’t pose a problem. In fact, instead of energy and funds being poured into public health messages that are designed to

*make* them their motivation, perhaps those resources could be redirected toward helping families overcome the *barriers* to feeding their families in this way.

In my own research on family meal experiences and perceptions of working-class and middle-class mothers, what the mothers generally indicated they needed more than anything else was the *capacity* to execute the meals. Specifically, they needed more or different time—time that was not devoured by work and school and children’s activities. And, they needed affordable, healthy food. Their greatest-felt deficits for meeting their own goal of providing routinely shared meals for their families were the time and money to do it. These are problems that are solvable. But they, and others related to family meals and positive family member outcomes, are solvable only with institutional changes that acknowledge how various industries and institutions—federal and state government, education, the food industry, motherhood or parenthood, work, health care, and others—position families, and meal providers in particular, and that focus on situating families in ways that make shared family meals more attainable.

In the larger body of family meals research, time, work, and family member schedules surface repeatedly as primary barriers to family meal sharing and frequency. Arguably, some of this conceivably could be managed within the family, perhaps with time management interventions. But the roots of time scarcity are firmly grounded outside the family system—number of parents’ work hours, shift work, intensity of work, inflexibility of work time; children’s school, homework, and extracurricular activity and demands of parental involvement in them; parents’ own school demands; responsibility for extended family health care. Increasingly intense employment, parenting, and elder care demands are matters that need attention from their corresponding industries and institutions, as well as policy and social service support.

These are profoundly complex components of the social order, to be sure. But they are primary

determinants for what families are able to accomplish. Relieving the constrictions on family time lies beyond the capacity of parents and meal providers; it must be taken up at institutional and societal levels. Food cost and scarcity are also significant barriers to frequent family meal sharing, and these, too, are often outside of family capacity to change. If every ounce of familial energy were directed toward the cleverest of time management and

food budget proficiencies, time scarcity and/or food cost and scarcity still would hinder parents’ efforts to ensure that their family members sit together to share a meal most days of the week. If, in fact, increasing family meal frequency is a goal worth pursuing in support of healthy children, then families need to be differently positioned, and institutional and societal levels are where that change must be initiated. ■



**AMBER KINSER** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication and Performance at East Tennessee State University, where she also directs the Communication & Storytelling Studies M.A. program. Her work inside and outside the classroom is focused on communication and story as they relate to interpersonal interaction, health and well-being, and human equity. Her research interests are in food studies, mother studies, and communication in health and aging. She is the author, editor, and co-editor of three books on motherhood. Her work on research teams has focused on family dementia care and women’s cancer survivorship in southern Appalachia.

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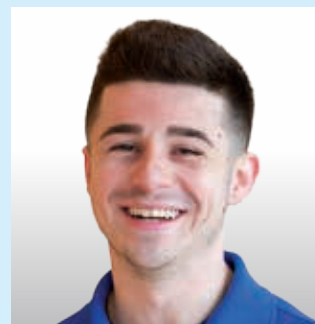
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## Assistant Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences The Pennsylvania State University

The Department of Communication Arts and Sciences (CAS) seeks to hire a tenure-track assistant professor who will build capacity in the Communication, Science, and Society Initiative (CSSI), a joint undertaking of CAS and the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences.

The full-time position will be filled by an assistant professor who complements the CAS department's mission with regard to either the scientific study of communication or the study of rhetoric. The successful applicant will also contribute to theory and research that advances the goals of the CSSI: (a) to improve the individual and collective well-being of humanity through Communication scholarship in collaboration with life scientists, (b) to foster transdisciplinary collaboration, especially with the life sciences, driven by concrete social exigencies and opportunities, and (c) to exercise national leadership in communication theory, research, and practices through these activities.

The Huck Institutes' mission is to catalyze and facilitate excellence in interdisciplinary research in the life sciences at Penn State. The Huck Institutes include research centers that promote cutting-edge, interdisciplinary science on topics such as neuroscience, biological embedding of stress, ecological systems, genomics, and biomedicine and health sciences, including reproductive health. It is imperative that the applicant identify the research unit in which they could participate and elaborate on their fit with that unit. A list of Huck research centers and institutes, graduate degree programs, and core facilities can be found at <https://www.huck.psu.edu/>.

The successful applicant will have a demonstrated record of scholarly achievement, be well-grounded in the Communication discipline, complement and strengthen core interests of faculty in CAS, and be willing to collaborate with the broader university community, especially the Huck Institutes. A Ph.D. in a related field is required at the time of appointment.

Candidates should provide clear evidence of scholarly and teaching excellence and service to the discipline. In addition to conducting research and teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, responsibilities include course development in the area of specialty, supervision of theses and dissertations, and involvement in other departmental activities. Additional considerations in reviewing candidates include interest in grant-based research,

the desire to engage in interdisciplinary research, and an appreciation for working alongside diverse colleagues in the humanities, the social sciences, and the life sciences.

Applications must include a letter of application describing research, teaching, and any graduate mentoring experience, along with a CV, representative publications (typically three), evidence of effective teaching, and the names of three references who may be contacted to provide letters of recommendation.

Inquiries may be sent to Professors Bradford Vivian at [bvj113@psu.edu](mailto:bvj113@psu.edu) or James Dillard at [jpd16@psu.edu](mailto:jpd16@psu.edu).

Review of applications will begin August 1, 2019 and continue until the position is filled. The start date for the position is August, 2020.

Apply online at <https://psu.jobs/job/88692>

### CAMPUS SECURITY CRIME

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### Tenure-Track Assistant/Associate Professor, Public Relations Bentley University

Bentley University invites applications for a tenure-track position in the areas of Public Relations and related fields to start in fall 2020. We seek a dedicated scholar and strong teacher who would join the interdisciplinary faculty of Bentley's department of Information Design and Corporate Communication.

The reputation of our undergraduate program is grounded in educating students in new and existing forms of digital and social media PR and its application to: communication strategy; public relations practice by business, government; nonprofits; PR writing;

creative thinking; the creative industry sector; the intersection between PR, organizations and society.

We are interested in candidates who can develop and teach existing courses relating to public relations and in particular social and other emerging media PR at the undergraduate level. An interest in Crisis PR is also highly valued. Limited graduate level teaching may also be a possibility. Applicants will have a strong dedication to research and lively, engaged teaching. Exceptional teaching is important to IDCC's mission.

Bentley University leads higher education in providing transformative business education grounded in the liberal arts and sciences. We instill in our students a deep sense of corporate social responsibility and prepare them to succeed in a future shaped by rapidly changing technology. We seek faculty and staff who represent diverse backgrounds, interests and talents, are dedicated to high ethical standards and have a willingness to embrace change. A team-oriented work environment promotes personal development and professional accomplishment.

Candidates are encouraged to learn more about our program at Bentley by visiting <http://www.bentley.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/information-design-corporate-communication>.

### Minimum Qualifications:

Candidates must have evidence of research ability and experience with teaching. A Ph.D. is required. Dedication to scholarship in the field is necessary for promotion and tenure.

### Special Instructions to Applicants:

Applicants will be required to submit a cover letter and CV upon application.

Please note that applications are evaluated on an ongoing basis.

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HOST NAMED FOR NEW

# NCA Center for Communication, Community Collaboration, and Change

## THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO'S

**(UNCG) DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION** has been selected to serve as the host of the new NCA Center for Communication, Community Collaboration, and Change (CCCC).

The CCCC is a two-year project aimed at facilitating partnerships with community-based organizations that create sustainable change for underrepresented and/or vulnerable communities through the production and application of communication-related scholarship and practice. The Greensboro community is confronted with issues of racism, racial inequality, voter suppression, a lack of affordable housing, and inaccessibility to food and health care. As a result, the CCCC will work with community partners to improve issues related to race, poverty, and sustainability.

UNCG Communication Department Chair Roy Schwartzman submitted the proposal to host the CCCC, and will help launch the new effort. Communication Professor Spoma Jovanovic, whose teaching and research focus on methods of meaningful participation in civic life to advance social justice, will serve as the CCCC Director.

