



Veggies and visceralities: A political ecology of food and feeling

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ABSTRACT

The 'alternative food' movement (encompassing both organic and local foods) has been critiqued for its racial and economic homogeneity, as well as its focus on individual choice and 'correct' knowledge. Nevertheless, the movement continues to gain in popularity within certain segments of the North American population (especially among white, middle class residents). In recent years, alternative food has also made its way into public schools – most notably through the guise of healthy eating. School Garden and Cooking Programs (SGCPs) are one way in which a more diverse demographic can become exposed to the claims, practices and tastes of alternative food. Program advocates claim that such exposure equalizes the student body, by giving all students access to healthy food. This paper examines this claim through a political ecology of the body (PEB) framework. Particularly, we use theories of the material, emotional body to explore how motivation to eat 'healthy' and 'alternative' food is a matter of affective relation, emerging differentially from a rhizome of structural and haphazard forces. By relating alternative food and healthy eating to research on emotion and affect, we expand upon the traditions of political ecology in ways that help to stretch the field into issues of bodies and health.

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1. Introduction

Clearly, our emotions *matter*. They affect the way we see (hear and touch...?) the substance of our past, present and future... emotion has the power to transform the shape of our life-worlds, expanding or contracting, creating new fissures or fixtures we never expected to find. (Davidson and Bondi, 2004: 373)

Recently, much scholarly attention has been given to matters of emotion and affect (Anderson, 2006; McCormack, 2003; Thien, 2005; Thrift, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2006), as well as related issues of materiality (McCormack, 2007; Whatmore, 2006) body knowledge (Longhurst et al., 2009; Paterson, 2009; Springgay and Freedman, 2007), and the non-representational world at large (McCormack, 2008; Obrador-Pons, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to expand upon the insights and debates within this varied literature by connecting it to recent and ongoing work in the field of political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Elmhirst, 2011a; McCarthy, 2002; Nightingale, 2011; Peluso, 1992; Rocheleau and Roth, 2007; Schroeder, 1993; Sultana, 2011). Our contention is that political ecology currently offers a framework for analysis that can comprehensively address matters of the body – including bodily matter itself – in ways that

meaningfully and practically operationalize the often ethereal, yet deeply vital scholarship on affect and emotion. More specifically, recent scholarship on the political ecology of health (King, 2010), as well as feminist political ecology, and other "second-generation" political ecology (Rocheleau, 2008), has demonstrated a strong desire to embrace network and relational theories, which dovetail distinctly with material theories of affect (Thrift, 2004; Whatmore, 2006). And yet, political ecologists also maintain loyalty to structural explanations, emphasizing the importance of social position, and the unevenness of power, in the composition of material ecologies. This loyalty speaks more to feminist interventions in the literature on affect and emotion, particularly in the insistence that individual emotional subjectivities, or personal feelings, are never distinct from wider, public agendas (Thien, 2005: 450).

In order to illustrate the importance of these connections, we draw upon our empirical research on school garden and cooking programs, highlighting the ways in which a political ecology approach to emotion and affect can help to make sense of the complex and contradictory nature of food-body relationships. School garden and cooking programs, (hereafter SGCPs) are alternative food initiatives that seek to encourage healthy eating habits in children by offering hands-on, sensorial experiences in garden and kitchen 'classrooms.' Students plant seeds, pull weeds, gather produce, and then chop, sauté, and bake their harvest into a (hopefully tasty) meal or snack. The idea is that through these intimate food experiences, children will be compelled choose healthier foods, including locally

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grown fresh fruits and vegetables. While neither school gardens nor cooking education are necessarily new phenomena (think of Waldorf-inspired schools, or home economics classes), SGCPs have recently gained notoriety and momentum within North America under the converging contexts of ecological sustainability and human health concerns. SGCPs have been lauded particularly for their efforts to curb childhood obesity (Morris and Zidenberg-Cherr, 2002), but they also have come under academic critique, especially in regard to issues of elitism and neoliberal ideology within alternative food activism (Guthman, 2008a; Pudup, 2008).

The empirical work highlighted in this paper stems from eight months of in-depth qualitative research within two SGCPs, one in rural Nova Scotia, and the other in Berkeley, California. Research methods included semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and leaders of the SGCPs, as well as focus groups and in-class activities with students, and many hours of participant observation in the kitchen and garden classrooms. Through these methods, we sought to understand the motivational function of SGCPs across lines of social difference (particularly gender, race, class, and age). We theorized bodily motivation to eat certain foods (and not others) as something that is variously and contextually produced through a wide array of social relationships, intellectual engagements, and material attachments, which give rise to explainable but not pre-determined affective/emotional encounters. Motivation (or lack thereof) might therefore be narrated as positive (pride, excitement), negative (guilt, disgust), and/or neutral (ambivalence, boredom), but is most surely uneven (between bodies), inconsistent (within bodies), and personal (though indeed also political). A focus on motivation allows us to interrogate the claim that exposure to alternative foods through SGCPs gives all students 'equal access' to healthy food. While SGCPs seem to momentarily side step issues of geographic and economic access to alternative foods (by giving students a chance to plant and eat foods while at school), a focus on bodily motivation reveals a more complex kind of *visceral* access that arises out of specific bodily histories and prior and current affective/emotional relations with alternative foods, which are not easily evaded in the classroom.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, Gardening and Cooking, we begin by exploring the affective/emotional work of SGCPs. This includes both how program leaders conceptualize the programs' motivational function (in universal terms), and how social difference nevertheless comes to matter (quite literally), despite a focus on "common ground." Through this discussion, we highlight key scholarship on affect and emotion in order to draw attention to the interplay between representation and non-representation that exists in the production of diverse food-body encounters. In Section 3, we move on to specify the importance of political ecology in making sense of such bodily matter(s). Here we outline a methodological framework, which we call political ecology of the body (PEB), that facilitates an analysis of the always affective/emotive body that is simultaneously structural and post-structural, material and discursive; it is a framework that offers attentiveness to the rigidities of our socio-political world and yet remains open to the new possibilities that affective encounters may allow. Finally, in Section 4, we briefly illustrate the empirical utility of the PEB approach by re-framing food access in bodily terms, *vis-à-vis* our work with SGCPs. This discussion of the emotional/affective body as fundamental to food access, highlights the capacity of the PEB framework to make sense of complex and contradictory food-body encounters, and offers a new way to imagine and practice alternative/healthy food in the classroom and beyond. Lastly, in Section 5, we conclude by exploring the implications of this work for other academic, activist, educational, and policy-oriented projects related to food and bodily health.

2. Gardening and cooking: educating the body and mind

We think, and thus socially construct, with our bodies.... we cannot divorce mind from body when talking about knowledge/s, understanding/s and perception/s of the world... (Carolan, 2008: 408)

The education that school garden and cooking programs offer surely involves both the body and the mind. Of course, *all* education arguably involves both the body and the mind – or perhaps more correctly the minded-body – but SGCPs offer a style of education that is both expressly hands-on, body-centered, and sensuous, and at the same time decidedly cerebral. In regard to the latter, as SGCPs have emerged within the broader rubric of healthy food alternatives, they have come to reinforce some of the key tenets of this broader movement. Like so many other alternative food projects, SGCPs have emerged as initiatives that seek to counter an imagined ignorance and apathy in the broader population by encouraging an intellectual awakening in regard to the origins of our food. Furthermore, through mechanisms of nutrition education such as food pyramids or good food/bad food lists, distinct 'shoulds' of eating are now encountered not only as social or environmental necessities but also as scientific and biological truths. The scientific backing of alternative foods has helped to universalize and naturalize the tenets of alternative consumption, promoting local and fresh eating as a natural and apolitical act, rather than something that is both social and questionable.

Despite the strong socio-cultural connections between healthy, alternative eating and middle-class, white, slim culture, many alternative food leaders involved with SGCPs insist that we think of food as a "common ground," and eating as a "universal experience" (Waters, 2008). Such assertions were in truth our initial impetus for taking on this SGCP research, since we viewed these statements as potentially detrimental to the success and progressiveness of the alternative food movement, especially in addressing issues of social difference. Beyond the mundane fact that we all have to eat, however, we came to discover that the reasons for this homogenizing approach lie in the ways in which hands-on, body-centered education is imagined to work. SGCPs are often considered to be equally accessible to all students, or even more, to be a great equalizer among students from different cultural, racial, or economic backgrounds. The imagined key to this equality is, quite interestingly, the body. As one teacher from the Berkeley SGCP explained:

The value of sensory based [education] is that it is accessible. You are not doing lectures, you are giving equal access and equal opportunity for students to engage with food.

SGCPs are thus conceived as a sort of education for the senses, one that will magically unlock 'correct' emotional responses to food just by allowing students to use their bodies. Indeed, many leaders imagine SGCPs to be equality-producing because the programs *only* or at least primarily require students to taste, smell, and touch food, as opposed to intellectually or rationally engaging with food, which may be more difficult for some students (to do well, or 'correctly'). But, there are at least two problematic inferences here: first, that prior to entry in these programs (some) students (i.e. the ones going to McDonalds for their food) are not using their senses properly (or have forgotten how to); and two, that students' sensory modalities exist as a natural/essential category that is both prior to and distinguishable from their social experiences and intellectual development.

It was these assumptions that first compelled us to seek out research on affect and emotion, unhappy as we were with such static and purified notions of bodily judgment. Looking backward, it was clear to us that one's emotional/affective responses to food

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