

FOOD AS DIALOGUE: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DIETARY REFORM

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ABSTRACT

Over the past five or six years, there has been a clear turn toward food as a site of political action. While humans have always had a strained relationship with food, this recent shift has resulted in a palpable tension around everyday food choice. This paper looks at why we've chosen food as a site for enacting massive social, political and economic change and, after outlining why politicized eating can be problematic, discards the notion of "good food" altogether.

I use a combination of feminist body studies, postcolonial theory and cultural theory to critique the idea of regimented eating as a whole and explore how food is used as a mode of communication. I assert that dietary practices are discursive and therefore never politically neutral: they order the world in particular ways and have the power to sustain social relations and endorse hierarchies. With this in mind, I argue for food as a site of social change with some important caveats inspired by eco-feminist philosophers who reject power-over politics and refuse absolute notions of what it means to be good. In the end, I argue in favour of a dialogic approach to narratives of "good food" and suggest "dietary utterance" as a conceptual means toward rethinking food politics.

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When dialogue ends, everything ends.

M.M Bakhtin

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to investigate the challenge we face in finding easy answers to the question, 'What should we eat?' It is an exploration of dietary roots – of various historical, ethnic, cultural, ecological, ontological, spiritual and social foundations of dietary choice – and an attempt to show that food, hardly a straightforward energy source, is a mighty signifier. In other words, human societies use food not only for subsistence but to communicate with each other. In order to exist as communities, to make interaction possible, human societies develop shared symbolic systems that enable us to convey and comprehend meaning, coordinate with each other in the struggle for material survival and create guides to help us navigate social relationships. Dietary practices – what we eat, who we eat with and how we cook – are symbolic systems. To change food practices with broadstroke ideas about what people *should* eat is to change the way people speak through food and body. I intend to question this practice and show how dietary reform movements meant to change the way people speak through food not only implies unequal access to the production of food narratives (indeed to the production of language) but that it also impacts bodies in a physical sense. What we eat, with whom and where we eat signifies; it says something, conveys our identities and signals one's position in the social world. And like any signifying practice, one's diet can enact social force and social constraint in everyday life.

Above all, this paper is about the challenges associated with making diet the site of social change when it has also been a means of social control throughout history; rule-making in the realm of food consumption is not an innocent practice and food rules have historically been influenced by dominant social and political groups through the production of knowledge about what is and is not "good" to eat. This poses a challenge for oppositional food politics, which often make diet the site of social change by establishing rules about what constitutes radical food culture but which often fail to acknowledge the power assumed in doing so. There is no doubt that language and other aesthetic practices can be used to subvert dominant culture and society. So, if food cultures are linguistic and aesthetic, subversive practices in the realm of food and

eating can be politically effective. But whose language frames the opposition? Whose language do radical food rules speak? In a word, this paper looks at how discourses of “good food” govern social life in particular ways and explains why this is troubling in light of what we know about institutionalized control over human bodies. It also asks what this means for food politics (i.e. oppositional discourses meant to challenge the dietary status quo) that make individual and collective bodies the site of social change and political performance.¹ What follows, then, is a critique of official dietary reform but also a questioning of oppositional dietary reform and an attempt to open up new possible ways of thinking about diet. The goal is to make dietary politics possible without resorting to the colonialist practice of changing others to suit the goals of a relative few and without directing our critique toward the body.

I will also state what this paper is not for the sake of clarity. Food studies and food politics have become the stuff of everyday talk and there has been an accompanying surge in literature, television and media discussion on food. Here is a sampling: in a year-end review of key news stories in 2006, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation identified a spate of food news as a major media event on the grounds that it gave Canadians ample reason to fear the food we eat (CBC, 2007). If organic carrot juice can cause temporary paralysis and spinach can transmit E-coli, the article suggests, what lies beneath the ruddy skins of a Spartan apple or inside an innocuous loaf of bread? More importantly, the article asks who is to blame for food-related crises and who is responsible for food safety on the whole? Echoing the surge of news media on food, the North American book publishing industry has witnessed a boom in popular non-fiction on the subject of food-studies. Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was named one of the top ten non-fiction book releases of 2006 by the New York Times and, alongside Pollan, an entire cohort of journalists, scholars, celebrity chefs and philosophers weighed in on the discussion: philosopher-farmer duo Peter Singer and Jim

¹ Food politics is a broad field and people rightly ask what I mean by the term. Am I talking about policy initiatives, popular uprisings or subcultural resistance? Do I mean farmers' rights, food security, Native food sovereignty, agricultural practices, factory farming, food safety, the right to food or the global food trade? Food is a popular entry-point into discussions about some of the most important social, economic and political issues of our times. To clarify: what I'm talking about here are the politics of diet – discussion, action and decision-making processes related to what we eat and what we consider edible. Decision-making in the realm of diet, like all politics, can involve the use of force, coercive strategies, democratic approaches, conversion efforts, public dialogue, lobbying, campaigning and legislation.

Mason released *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, Marion Nestle published *What to Eat*, her third book on food politics; journalist Samuel Fromartz looked at the commodification of organic foods in *Organic Inc.*; Warren Belasco outlined the historical roots of food anxiety in *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food*, just months after social history professor Madeleine Ferrière released a similar treatise called *Sacred Cow, Mad Cow: A History of Food Fears*; and in a book called *Chew on This*, Eric Schlosser targeted young readers with a funnier version of his now-famous critique of the fast food industry. In theatres, Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* appeared in celluloid form almost a year after *The Future of Food*, a documentary about the risks of industrialized agriculture, was released to Canadian and US theatres in late 2005. Finally, celebrity chefs and food critics released a number of less political but more amusing non-fiction accounts of the hedonistic pleasures gained from *not* worrying about the food we eat: Bill Buford's *Heat*, Anthony Bourdain's *The Nasty Bits* and Gael Greene's *Insatiable* all came out in 2006. The discussion continued in 2007: radio shows, community newspapers, restaurant menus, public lectures, book clubs, video activists, scholars, parents, policy makers and activists are all weighing in on the topic of food.

Michael Pollan's main proposition in *Omnivore's Dilemma* has become quite widely accepted and it provides a reasonable summary of the general tone of popular discussion about food: if we can re-think and change our food consumption practices, we can change our social, environmental and political worlds. His argument is echoed throughout most of the recent literature on food, which encourages people to reconsider the old axiom 'you are what you eat' in socio-economic and ecological terms. While North Americans are used to managing their caloric and nutrient intakes with bodyweight and biological health in mind, the literature asks us to also calculate the social, environmental, political and economic consequences of our food consumption. In other words, the discussion has to do with food consumption as a moral issue. The discussion, of course, has been whispering along for decades. Frances Moore Lappé, whose daughter Anna is now renowned for championing similar ideas, talked about food security and the environmental impact of the modern food system in *Diet for a Small Planet* in 1971; the Whole Earth Catalog, published from 1968 to 1972 with an aim to promote ideas associated with 1960s counterculture, encouraged people to eat natural and organic foods with this sentiment in mind: "Everything's connected to everything.

Everything's got to go somewhere. There's no such thing as a free lunch" (The Whole Earth Catalog, cited in Belasco, 2005: 217); and the fair trade movement, a response to social and economic problems associated with both free trade and protectionism, appeared in Britain as early as 1942 (Lyon, 2006). These earlier food movements were linked to politicized subcultures, which defined themselves against dominant society and culture and chose food as a critical point of entry. By talking about the food system as a potentially destructive force and showcasing the energy-inefficiency of certain foods, the groups were able to launch a discussion about environmental and social issues in a way that resonated with people and provide at least one tangible way of doing something about it. Today, the popularity of food-studies literature and the momentum of popular discussion around food-for-social-change indicates that food politics has come well out from underground. We are learning to be vigilant about the food we eat, to watch the food production system closely for risky behaviour and to modify our shopping strategies as a way to both express disapproval of contemporary food production practices and stimulate actual change in the world via the food we eat.

In light of this recent surge in food studies literature meant to question the ethical foundations of Western dietary traditions and the modern food system, however, I do not want to rehash renowned arguments about, for example, the ethics of eating animals or the social problems associated with importing luxury foods from developing nations for wealthy developed-world consumers or the risks of modifying foods through bioengineering. Although these are important discussions and I will touch on them, this paper is not written in defense or dismissal of these concerns related to food production and consumption in the modern world. Instead, the following discussion is a theorizing of diet, an exploration of dietary regimes and a questioning of social reform based on normative diets that sustain particular values or political objectives.

I will look at Canada's two new food guides, *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* (2007) and *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis* (2007). I will also look at *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: A Resource for Educators and Communicators* (2007), which is a guide to teaching "best" practices related to diet. Since the food guide historically leans toward clear definitions of what constitutes "good food", identifies who qualifies as competent in the realm of food and

eating and, as I will argue, draws conclusions about what constitutes a normal or valuable body – all with a goal to influence what we eat – it seems like a logical place to start looking at the problem of dietary reform. While I aim my critique at the 2007 edition of Canada’s official dietary guidelines, I use this brief case study to illustrate similar problems with popular dietary reform characterized as oppositional. This is not, in other words, a critique of supposed state power imposed on citizens via the guide but a look at how discourses of dietary reform in general produce ideas about “good” and “bad” citizens made visible via the body.

By taking on this critique, especially the secondary line of questioning related to oppositional dietary politics and reform movements, I’ve created a metaphorical knot in my stomach. I align myself with many people whose politics lead them toward dietary dogma and I believe food consumption and dietary practices are reasonable points of entry into the field of oppositional politics in general. Food and diet can be effectively used in non-violent strategies for social change, as Gandhi famously made clear during his hunger strike to protest British rule. Here are just a few of the ways diet can and has been used toward social change. First, different approaches to food shopping – including boycotts, home-based food production and negative shopping (buying things for what they are not) – may rupture the commodity chain if we think the market offers at least some political opportunities. Second, since eating is an aesthetic practice (i.e. a meal is seen as a naturalized set of aesthetic codes, something textual, something that produces meaning and something open to aesthetic judgements), it can be used as a cultural performance to denaturalize dominant dietary practices. Related to this, diet-as-spectacle can establish links between social actors and create social bonds. A third reason for using food for social change, then, is its visibility: since diet brings people together through food preferences, it lends itself to disruptive cultural politics, which rely on solidarity for their fuel (Taylor, 2007). And finally, since food and diet are often on policy reform agendas, official food rules are readily seen as a politically practical way to apply critical ideals through established channels. I will review several examples of this toward the end of this introduction.

My position on dietary reform is partly explained by animal defence philosopher Carol Adams' (1995) respectful recognition of the principal eco-feminist position on hunting. Hunting obviously includes killing animals and requires an ontology that sees animal bodies as edible objects, yet Adams admits that non-cruel animal eating is possible in certain conditions:

Eco-feminists see the necessity of refusing to absolutize, a position consistent with a resistance to authoritarianism and power-over. Thus we find a refusal to condemn categorically all killing. Issues are situated within their specific environments. I will call this emphasis on the specific over the universal a 'philosophy of contingency' (102).

Adams goes on to say that even in the context of a relational hunt, which appreciates the animal's great sacrifice and characterizes the hunt as reciprocal, eco-feminists ought to describe the relationship precisely by calling animal-eating "repugnant" even if it is necessary at times to "eat corpse" (103). After all, it still warrants violence against living bodies. This is one point at which my own argument about dietary reform as a kind of governance over individual and social bodies gets difficult because Adams is right to suggest that control over *certain* human bodies is made thinkable by the same logic that tells us animal bodies can be treated differently (i.e. more violently) than human bodies (18). What this means is that animal-free diets are philosophically rooted in some of the same concerns around governance of the body that I'm dealing with here. The world's largest animal protection movement (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals or PETA)² has made dietary reform one of its top goals: "It's about getting people to address their diet", said one PETA member, leading up to a 2001 forum on animal welfare concerns related to poultry production (<http://www.upc-online.org/forum2001.html>).³ But I haven't encountered much discussion around whether

² I cite PETA in later chapters as well to showcase what oppositional dietary politics might look like. Just as McDonald's, Starbucks and Shell have become what Naomi Klein calls the "celebrity faces of global capitalism", PETA has become the celebrity face of opposition to dominant dietary practices in North America. When a company is in the spotlight, it becomes a ready target for critical scrutiny. In other words, boycotts and other forms of consumer activism actually capitalize on a brand's success by using it to frame the opposition. I use PETA in a similar way, not to pick on the organization specifically, but to help illustrate my argument. If anything, PETA has paved the way for a whole web of social movements that use food as the basis for discussion and action. The movements are promising but problematic, which is the oxymoronic state of affairs behind this whole project.

³ This document also outlines a major debate within the organization and within the animal protection movement as a whole: to reform or abolish.

or not asking humans to control dietary practice as an entrée into the anti-animal-exploitation movement is a bit of an oxymoron. I take comfort in a comment made by social movement theorist Jim Jasper at a recent workshop dedicated to social movements scholarship. “Strategy is rife with dilemma” (Jasper, 2007), he said, adding that oppositional groups with the same ultimate goals often adopt different strategies and that the goal for these groups must be to find “normative ties” rather than divisive elements that drive wedges between possible allies. So, my critique of both official and, by associations I will explain, oppositional dietary reform does not automatically make me complicit with Western dietary traditions or the modern food system. It does, however, suggest that I’m wary of philosophical traditions that perpetuate the notion that we can manifest thoughts (critiques, ideas, values, beliefs) in and through our bodies and that bodies somehow broadcast what’s happening in our minds.

In this paper, I briefly look at what others have said about humanity’s strained relationship with food and summarize some of the prominent explanations for things like dietary taboos and food fears. I organize previous work according to its way of understanding how dietary practices come to exist in the first place – I situate myself within the critical constructivist camp, with a few caveats and a goal to contribute a critical communication perspective to the discussion. I borrow concepts from Michel Foucault, notably bio-power, to problematize our attempts to reign in dietary practices with explicit food rules and I argue that any attempt to control and regulate human bodies through diet can be construed as a form of oppression.⁴ I open the vault of food-centred discourse in an effort to understand why, at this particular moment in time, we’re turning up the volume on discussions about food and diet and why, more specifically, we struggle to define clear definitions of what constitutes “good food”, right food or moral food: why is it endlessly difficult to decide what constitutes an edible? And finally, while still questioning the conversion politics and disciplining of the body that characterizes

⁴ I borrow concepts from Foucault rather than subscribe wholesale to his views. He has been called an anti-humanist left-libertarian for identifying laws and structures that govern our actions without saying how we can establish normative grounds for making political claims (Fraser, 1981). His views on political possibility are considered limited. Related to this, he’s been called relativist and philosophically useless (Prado, 2000: 7-9). Others have defended him, however, by digging up evidence for Foucault’s belief in truth. “Those who say to me that truth does not exist are simple-minded” he apparently once said (cited in Prado, 2000: 8) and his ideas about discursive constructions of truth don’t necessarily preclude all kinds of truth (ibid). The world is largely *made* to mean but there are still daily, lived *realities* of our own doing that we need to face.

many social movements that take food as the site of struggle, I attempt to locate the political potential in using food for socio-economic and ecological change. In other words, I want to explore the possibilities for progressive discursive practices related to food that allow heterogeneity without resorting to relativism. My original research is an analysis of Canada's food guide from a critical communication perspective. I start with the idea that "communication" is not simply about the production and circulation of information through modern institutions (i.e. religion, education, media and government). From a cultural studies perspective, communication is also "centrally concerned with the construction of meaning – how it is produced in and through particular expressive forms and how it is continually negotiated and deconstructed through the practices of everyday life" (Murdock, cited in Golding, 2000: 71). The "critical" aspect of my approach is best explained by Ellen Riordan (2004), who says that a critical orientation starts with "the assumption that social structures are inherently problematic" (347).

As a communication scholar, I am particularly interested in how discursive practices produce ideas about truth and deviance, sanity and insanity, good and evil – a curiosity influenced by Foucault's well-known questioning of what Nancy Fraser (1981) calls "the liberal normative framework of legitimacy" (273). One of my goals is to contribute to popular discussions about diet and to oppositional dietary reform by looking at how discursive constructions of "good food" might actually prevent desired changes. First, there is a practical problem since discourses of "good food" are invariably in dialogue with competing discourses of "good food". But there is also a philosophical problem because we are forced to ask ourselves on what basis we can justify the norms grounding political goals. Without denying the well-documented impact of dietary choice on our natural and social worlds, I question discursive constructions that characterize certain foods as "good" while demonizing others. In the spirit of post-structuralist feminist scholarship and in an effort to avoid normative judgments, I am interested in exploring who we are and why we act the way we do, rather than deliver advice on how we should be. But in the interest of critical scholarship that still takes practical politics seriously, I'm interested in exploring how an ethic of tolerance can also avoid collapsing into a relativist free-for-all. Post-structuralist approaches have been charged with moral relativism, which is a politically paralyzing notion. I hope to avoid a similar charge by

looking at how we can do effective politics at all, if not through normative grounds or established ideals.

I do not argue for a libertarian politics of individualistic self-governance or for private morality without regard for the social, political and environmental consequences of our actions. Libertarianism without regard for others is a self-centred approach to life; it suggests we are entitled to satisfy personal needs and avoid personal pain as a foremost goal despite possible consequences for others (Gelpi, 1989: 8). This celebration of individual freedom and free will fails to recognize that “free will” is an outdated fiction in a world where there are obvious systemic barriers to certain types of success and freedom. An unfettered libertarian approach to food and eating, then, is ultimately antisocial and indifferent to the idea of a collective body or collective well-being. It can result in an insular cultural elite that becomes isolated from the consequences of their dietary practices while others (human, plant and animal alike) bear the burden. Bryan S. Turner (2006) puts it another way in an essay about the “right” to individual control over the body: there is a social dimension to all action and individual rights cannot disadvantage the social collective (228). I also challenge the current rise in conversion politics related to diet and the Eurocentric “tradition of [converting] one’s neighbours to one’s own particular perspective” (Brown-Childs, 2003: 21). Instead, I argue for a commitment to dialogue and a rejection of broadly prescriptive dietary regimes that fail to (or refuse to) recognize the many cultural significances of food and the problematic implications of dietary rule-setting in light of body politics. I also suggest that a commitment to dialogue would benefit from an accompanying awareness that cultural traditions require careful reconsideration in a fast-changing world; an appeal to “tradition” is not inherently innocent. In the midst of so much discussion about what is “good” to eat, I am suggesting there is no definitive answer, despite the popularity of so many convincing polemics that demonize or celebrate specific food cultures. At the same time I suggest that, like all languages, the language we speak through food must be carefully sifted through for words and statements that may be hurtful, harmful or dangerous and that this sifting must happen continuously, without rest and without the conviction that what we’re saying is necessarily true, right or definitive.

Finally, I suggest that cultural politics, which champion aesthetic practices for their capacity to challenge the status quo (McGuigan, 2003: 23), are a viable means of contributing to oppositional movements. This includes oppositional dietary practices, which are aesthetic and therefore count as a way of doing cultural politics. However, I include dietary practices in the realm of cultural politics with two qualifications. The first one is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, whose definition of dialogue precludes the possibility of a single or superior voice. Todorov (1998) explains 'dialogism', which is Bakhtin's theory of language and communication:

All discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place (x).

Through a Bakhtinian lens, what we eat and consider edible can be seen as part of an open-ended correspondence about what is "good" to eat but never the final word. This does not make diet a poor site for doing politics or communicating moral arguments but it does suggest that when a certain food goes into the mouth – the dietary equivalent of an utterance – it can't be seen as a definitive statement that warrants undeniable shame, pride or judgement. The second point of clarity is inspired by Foucault and (mainly) feminist writers who've made use of his ideas to talk about body hatred and body control. The idea that diet is the way to a "better" world could generate a new mode of disordered eating brought on by guilt, fear and shame; it is easy to see how the excitement around food politics and politicized dieting could usher in an era of ethical dieting (read: disciplining the body on moral grounds) as a solution to systemic social and economic issues. This could be a practical solution – food is a necessary resource and should be consumed with care. But it could also turn our bodies into enemies. We'll work hard to control our urges, to deny cravings, to cut out foods, to communicate our goodness by controlling what we eat. As the dairy ad at the beginning of Chapter Four shows, ideas about "good" and "bad" foods and the "good" and "bad" people who eat them have the capacity to alter eating habits. But they also affect the way we think about people and treat people who don't adhere to our own perceptions of "good food". Social movements that make diet the site of struggle participate in discourses of "good and bad" food and "good and bad" bodies – there is no way outside of this discourse; however, they could contribute to the dialogue about food in ways that reflect the importance of struggle over language and thwart the idea of monologue rather than

suggest an urgent need to change our eating habits in specific ways. As Pam Morris (1994) explains in her introduction to Bakhtin's ideas about language as something dynamic, this doesn't mean we end up with a "linguistic free-for-all" (74) where all statements are equally valid. There is still a central force that "[guarantees]... mutual understanding" (74); the central force is the social and historical moment (the context), which allows meaning to exist for the people of a particular time and place.

I will argue that dietary reform, whether official or oppositional, runs into a host of ethical and philosophical problems. Out of this argument, I conclude that the reasons behind any one dietary practices are legion and any movement meant to change what people eat must be careful not to dislocate diet from its cultural and historical roots. To change food practices with broadstroke ideas about what people *should* eat is to change the way people speak through food and body and this can be seen as an act of silencing and a means of exercising power over individual and collective bodies. Our relationship with food is a communicative act; it speaks our histories. To alter this relationship can be to silence, abandon or reinvent language; it can be a way to exercise power over others by making certain stories about food appear more legitimate than others. The practice of reworking language can also be liberating, necessary and politically effective. The challenge – and we see this challenge everywhere today – is in knowing how to liberate without resorting to power-over politics. I hope to show how and why it is politically effective and disruptive to decenter discourses of "good food" rather than recreate monologic approaches to change. While my argument is supportive of contemporary food politics and oppositional dietary reform in their positioning of food as a moral issue, it problematizes any clear-cut understanding of "good food" and critiques prescriptive norms or conversion politics in the realm of diet. In choosing this topic, I hope to contribute to popular discussions about what to eat by outlining the political potential in *refusing* to come to clear conclusions about "good food" while still insisting that dietary practices are loaded with meaning, that they can be a form of doing cultural politics and that cultural politics can lead to tangible change. The closest real-life example of this approach to diet is articulated in a number of position papers created over several years by the Forum for Food Sovereignty, an annual meeting to discuss radical alternatives to the modern food system. I cite the movement toward the end of this paper as a possible model for dietary reform, with the caveat that "dietary

decolonization” describes the movement more accurately and avoids reifying notions of control, rule or power over dietary practices.

Since this paper is about the problems associated with public discourses around food and since it comes from a communication perspective, which takes public discourses seriously for their ability to impact the way we live and see the world, it is partly motivated by a goal to change the way we talk about food and diet in the public realm. I primarily look at problems with official and oppositional discourses of “good food”; however, implicit in my critique is the need for changes to the way we talk about food and diet through public documents like Canada’s food guide. While I question the usefulness and morality of a national food guide altogether, I also suggest that food and eating are political issues that we should be encouraged to discuss. So, starting with the idea that public documents can be used toward raising awareness and understanding of issues related to food and diet, I would suggest several initial changes to the way the information is produced, distributed and framed. First, I would look to a project launched in the UK called *The Nation’s Diet*; the project was an in-depth, nationwide exploration of what people eat and why. Instead of telling people what to eat, the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council launched a six-year project to find out why people eat what they do. While this could obviously be used toward food industry marketing schemes, it could also provide the basis for understanding rather than prescribing dietary practices and it might encourage more open discussion about a plethora of food issues. Second, I would suggest that Canada is far too large and far too socially, economically and ecologically diverse for one diet to make sense for the whole population. With a grant from the Ontario Women’s Health Council, the Ontario Public Health Association published seven cultural adaptations of the food guide in seven different languages. This could provide a model for future guides and allow communities – the people doing the shopping, cooking and eating – to shape their own food rules. Thirdly, and this is obvious, industry ties to the food guide need to be revisited; perhaps it makes sense for Canadians to support national food industries but the recommended foods are usually buried in layers of empty calories and chemicals by food companies that use health messages to sell product; as I explain later, this sets us up to become moral, social and health failures and, paradoxically, it means the guide is being used in ways that compromise our biological well-being. In terms of changes to the way we produce and

distribute public knowledge about food, these are just three examples of what a practical application of my critique might look like. All three examples, while they still operate within the framework of a food guide, pay homage to the ethics of dietary decolonization I explore in Chapter Five.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One is a story about dietary reform in the 1800s, which went sideways when people refused to eat “healthy” foods if it meant abandoning the social ties sustained through fried foods. The story showcases at least part of the dilemma for diet-as-politics, which I outline. I end the first chapter by briefly outlining the guiding principles behind this study, as well as the theoretical framework I’ve used to help carry it through to the end. Chapter Two is an overview of canonical work on dietary practice from a range of perspectives. I look at the materialist perspectives of people like Jared Diamond (2005), Marvin Harris (1985), Sydney Mintz (1985) and Michael Pollan (2006); I look at structuralist semiotic approaches, which take dietary practice as social code or a system of communication that makes meaning of the world. Roland Barthes (1997), Mary Douglas (1966) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1997) are known for this approach; and lastly I look at critical constructivist approaches to diet in work by Susan Bordo (1997), Carole Counihan (1999), E. Melanie DuPuis (2002), Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) and Carolyn Walker Bynum (1997). The purpose of reviewing previous work on food and diet is to position myself within the literature, showcase my alignments and point out how I might be able to contribute to the discussion in light of today’s popular interest in the socio-economic implications of dietary practices. Chapter Three outlines some of the major concepts and theories I draw from to explain my understanding of diet. In this section I articulate my understanding of “diet” as a language inscribed on the body; this way of thinking about diet makes it difficult to approach everyday food consumption simply. I hope to show here how dietary reform becomes complicated in the face of concepts like bio-power, symbolic violence and somatophobia or “fear and loathing of the body” (Bailey, 2007: 41) and why, at the same time, this doesn’t have to be politically paralyzing. I introduce Turner’s concept of “the somatic society”, which describes any society where major social, political and economic concerns morph into notions of troubled bodies. It is no small coincidence that the inaugural state food guides for Canada and the U.S. came out during world wars if we accept Turner’s idea that our society is a somatic society; related

to this, it is also interesting to consider the rocky start to the present century in light of the growing interest in dietary practices and food issues. Chapter Four is a case study in discourses of “good food” and a brief look at the history of nutritional science, which is often the foundation for these discourses. Specifically, I look at the latest Canadian dietary guidelines to suggest that the discourse of good nutrition enables us to conceive of bodies in certain ways (i.e. as sick, sullied, healthy or fit) and that these conceptions affect how we treat bodies in everyday life. Canada’s food guide is part of a larger discourse of “good food”, so it provides a plausible means of exploring how the discourse impacts individual and collective bodies. I argue here that discursive constructions of “good food” make the body a core site of governance and self-control. Chapter Five re-opens the issue of oppositional dietary reform to showcase how a dietary approach to social change is compromised by my understanding of diet as a language inscribed on the body; at the same time, I hope to show how a dialogic approach to critical dietary practice avoids reproducing hierarchies of power, especially power-over politics related to the body. I end with a brief look at some of the work that’s being done to change the way we grow food, think about food and eat. I am particularly interested in work that looks more dialogic than monologic, which is the approach I am advocating here.

I use several key concepts and theories to glue my argument together. First, I take it as my guiding principle that dietary practices are discursive practices and that the question of what to eat is largely a struggle over meaning. Related to this, a second principle guiding this paper is this: meaning is limited by the dominant social relations of a given time and place and so it appears as a set of discourses; discourses influence our actions and perceptions and, within a given time and place, some are legitimated on a broad scale while others are suppressed and scarcely heard. The ability to shape, circulate or suppress certain discourses is an immense kind of power. I look to Stuart Hall (1982; 1996) and John Thompson (1995) to support this idea. Both men argue that cultural struggle is at least as crucial as economic struggle and that language is a form of power with material impact; Thompson calls this power “symbolic power” and names its abuse “symbolic violence” (1995:17). I establish connections between symbolic power and reformist movements, which are often ushered in by social and political groups with a substantial amount of symbolic power; I suggest that while reform is

politically practical, it isn't free of philosophical dilemmas related to power in meaning-making. I cite Tzvetan Todorov (1982), whose critique of colonialist practices related to language, translation and interpretation points to the serious consequences of adopting a certain, total or particular understanding of the world. I rely on Foucault's (1978) ideas about bio-power for my understanding of diet as a form of disciplining the body and I use this concept to position the food guide as a form of governance over individual and collective bodies in Canada. I draw ideas from Susan Bordo (1997), Mary-ellen Kelm (1998) and Bryan S. Turner (2006), who also see problems with historic and contemporary situations where we find ourselves obsessing over our bodies and others' bodies (i.e. times and places where we find ourselves focusing on corporeal activities like exercise, sex, diet, birthing rituals, death rituals and on actual spaces that bodies take up like residences, workspaces or public spaces). Bordo, Kelm and Turner agree that our bodies are made by language; it's not a stretch for me to say, then, that bodies are made by discourses of "good food" and that dietary normalization is a form of disciplining the body; if diet is a site of social change, the body is automatically wrapped up in the process both conceptually and materially. The question for both official and oppositional dietary reform is whether or not this has been fully acknowledged, thought through and accepted. My contribution to the discussion is an analysis of Canada's food guide to show how a new way of thinking about diet (as a language inscribed on the body) might change the way we do dietary politics. I want to show how meaning-making in the realm of food and diet also impacts the way we see and treat actual bodies and how knowing this might affect the way we do diet-as-politics. Finally, I look to Bakhtin for solutions to the problem of relativism that my arguments seem to sustain. This effort to find some political point of entry somewhere between relativism and essentialism might seem old but in light of the growing popularity of fairly dogmatic approaches to diet, it seems like a good time to try. The possibility of diet as a political opportunity is exciting but nonetheless rife with dilemma. This paper is an effort to think it through.

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM WITH DIET-BASED SOCIAL REFORM

The Social Life of Fish and Chips

In New England, 1889, three dietary reformists launched a food kitchen project designed to feed the poor. Chemist Ellen Richards, an MIT faculty member and friend of A.O. Atwater (who had recently isolated protein and carbohydrates in food items), saw an opportunity to showcase the nutritional science she and her cohorts had been unravelling in the lab. Industrialist entrepreneur Edward Atkinson had just invented the energy-efficient and affordable Alladin oven and saw an opportunity to promote his work. And social justice activist Mary Abel saw an opportunity to identify and provide healthy, low-cost food options for low-income families. The project, called the New England Kitchen Project, was a miserable failure. By 1900, the number of participants had dwindled so dramatically that the project was forced to shut down. The organizers openly admitted that it had failed to alter the eating habits of the poor and that the project actually repelled the very people it was meant to attract (Crotty, 1995: 27-28). Though the New England Kitchen Project aimed to teach "better" eating behaviours according to the new science and make them economically feasible for poorer families, working class communities broadly resisted the proposed dietary ideals.

Meanwhile, in old England, a different kind of kitchen had become increasingly popular with working class diners, despite the fact that it carried only one basic dish. On the docks of industrial England, fish and chip shops could not keep up with demand for the one take-away meal they had to offer: battered cod or pollock fish fried in beef fat with sliced potatoes and wrapped in yesterday's newspaper, which doubled as a carry-bag and a plate. The meal was low-cost, which suited the patrons. The popularity of the meal, however, was rooted in its socio-cultural meanings at least as much as its economic accessibility. The shops were commonly owned and operated by members of the working class, who fried fish to supplement their regular income (ibid: 29). It makes sense, then, that friends and families who sympathized with the low wages and working conditions of labourers in industrial England would support these small family businesses; the story of industrialization is the story of how the meaningful life of the

worker disappeared at the hands of stratified, mechanized labour and how satisfactory work, no longer possible at the level of production, was gleaned from meaningful consumption. But the fish-and-chip experience was important to the social life of the community in other ways as well. In a 1989 paper on the history of fish and chips in the English seaside town of Lancashire, J.K. Walton talks about the social role these food outlets played in the lives of patrons in the nineteenth-century:

[They] reduced women's workloads and the general pressures of domestic labour, and thus may have reduced tensions in working-class families. The fish and chip shop became a centre for the exchange of gossip and sociability, and it opened its doors freely to women and children as well as men... It helped to draw people into the wider life of the street and neighbourhood (Walton, cited in Crotty, 1995: 29).

The story of fish and chips in England versus the story of poverty kitchens in the U.S. illustrates a point I hope to carry through this paper: what we eat is not rigidly rooted in either philosophical constraints or beliefs, social pressures or desires, economic constraints or freedoms, health concerns, physiological needs or ethnic traditions; food choice is far more likely rooted in a combination of all these things and – at different times, in different places, in different communities – certain roots have greater influence on our food choices than others. What the New England dietary reformists failed to recognize is that, for the working class families whose eating habits they endeavoured to change, perhaps optimal health for minimal spending was never the core dietary goal. Their project was largely based on a value judgement “disguised by science” (Crotty, 1995: 31); none of the movement's three founders belonged to the working class food communities they sought to change and had few insights into what kinds of dietary adjustments might be desirable to community members, if any at all. In short, they had little knowledge of the daily realities of the people whose food choices they disapproved of, yet they were so convinced of their belief in a superior way to eat that they developed elaborate programs to change the dietary lives of these communities. At best, the dietary reformers failed to recognize food as a system of communication and commensality as a form of social solidarity. At worst, they recognized the meaning-centred life of food but disliked, misinterpreted or failed to ask questions about the meanings associated with working-class food cultures and set out to establish a new food order on behalf of the supposedly misguided communities.

The New England Kitchen Project is just one example of a dietary reform movement that failed to acknowledge the complexities of food culture and, instead, assumed a position of power in the production of new food narratives. Fast-forward to the 21st century, where dietary reform still struggles to re-invent the way people eat as a means of social change – the Canada Food Guide, as well as the American Food Pyramid, come immediately to mind. The goal of the Canada Food Guide (CFG), which claims to have “your health and safety” as its top priority (CFG, 2007), is to achieve optimum health and vitality for the greatest number of citizens; however, not only are the terms “health” and “vitality” vague and difficult to define but they are individual goals based on values that are not necessarily shared by everyone and on access to a range of material resources (food products, kitchen supplies, labour hours) that are not necessarily available to everyone. As well, the science behind the guide, which will be the topic of later chapters, is still in its youth and many nutritional scientists have admitted it is a work in progress riddled with uncertainty and tainted by the well-known problems associated with the constant quest for research grants (i.e. industry ties and media-driven hype behind all things “discovered”). It is worth questioning why individual health has become a top priority in Canada, why we are expected to embrace vitality as one of our top priorities and why diet is understood as the means to achieve these things in the first place. This is not to say that all experts are venal or that we should approach the science of nutrition with unproductive cynicism; unfettered cynicism leads to an apocalyptic view of the world, an increasingly popular view and the subject of a growing genre of post-apocalyptic literature. Still, despite the questionable science, it seems that in the midst of all this talk about how to achieve health and vitality through food, some important access points to both of these things have been ignored. As the popularity of the fish and chip shops illustrates, when juxtaposed with the downfall of the New England Kitchen Project, health and vitality doesn’t come from “proper” meals alone; things like social solidarity, community ties, gift-giving (i.e. cooking and receiving meals as a form of gifting) and cultural vitality also contribute to health and well-being. Above all, what people eat, and why, is more complicated than dietary reformers seem to acknowledge and all political action in the realm of food must be approached with a certain degree of humility and caution.

Reformist Approaches to Social Change: Common Queries

Sociologist E. Melanie DuPuis studies what she calls “middle-class dietary reform”, which rarely treats consumers to a full discussion about dietary practice and typically presents certain foods as mainly pure or mainly polluted. In a conference paper on “perfectionist food projects”, DuPuis (2006) argues that notions of the morally upright citizen have historically been extolled by dietary reformers, usually people from the middle-class, who strive to educate people about what is safe, good and right to eat. More generally, she suggests, middle-class reform defines what it looks like to live well. She calls dietary reform movements “perfectionist food projects” and illustrates her point by exploring how milk was *made* into a perfect food by dietary reformers and health officials despite its cultural and historical specificity. Milk, now often used by dietary reform organizations like PETA to signify factory farming’s morally questionable treatment of animals, was once widely celebrated for its pure and wholesome goodness. It became known as the beverage of the morally sound American citizen from the mid-1800s through to the 1900s (DuPuis, 2006: 2). For many immigrants and Native communities in America, milk drinking became a sign of successful assimilation into middle-class American life; powdered milk was available for families with smaller food budgets or without refrigeration facilities. The problem, of course, was that not everyone could or cared to make milk the key to perfection. Still, it remained the iconic drink of “healthy” middle-class families for decades and to abstain was to risk ubiquitous disapproval. Images of milk-as-purity are still familiar via the prolific *Got Milk?* campaign in the United States or the *Quality Milk* campaign in Canada. DuPuis’s core argument is that the dietary ideals we hear about are typically espoused by a certain social class (2005: 362). The milk-as-purity campaign required immense symbolic power – access to media and an ease with official forums and paperwork, for example. So there is a certain race and class privilege in being able to decide what’s “good” to eat. This sense of being *able* to make such claims in the first place is not equally available to everyone. The first query about dietary reform, then, has to do with whose ideals get elevated to the status of “best” practices and what kinds of (unevenly distributed) resources it takes to make that happen. Put another way, the question here is whether or not it makes sense for any *one* group in a neo-colonial context to make diet the site of striving for perfection or the site of struggle against power if it also means delineating the particularities of what good dietary practice looks like through privileged access to symbolic power.

As DuPuis (2005) also points out, however, reform movements are hard-fought and politically effective; they have accomplished a lot of the things we now take for granted, such as clean drinking water and sewers in our cities (362), not to mention the abolition of child labour, women's right to vote and countless other social, political and environmental conditions we generally cherish. Her critique doesn't have as much to do with the particular details of what is accomplished through reform; she's more concerned with the idea that social problems and solutions are articulated by a particular social class on behalf of diverse populations and how this might, paradoxically, reproduce the very struggles that reformers strive to ease. A second common query related to reform has to do with the particularity of suggested changes. While most reform is characterized as philanthropic (nobody sets out to change things for the worse), it has also been critiqued for universalizing particular ways of living and eating that simply don't make practical, social, biological or economic sense for everyone. The consequences of universal notions of "good food" are illustrated by the story of fish and chips. As it happens, the story ends badly for the reformers and without consequence for the workers; however, it is easy to imagine an opposite ending: if working class families had taken up the proposed "healthier" foods, they might have dodged a heart attack but they would have missed out on evenings of social bonding and profit sharing down at the docks. Which dietary practices are better in this case? If we do away with the idea that physical health is the ultimate goal and the belief that a specific diet is the way to achieve it, there is no clear answer.

A third line of questioning related to reformist politics has to do with its connections to the welfare state system, which became prevalent after the Great Depression. The resounding sense that capitalism wasn't a fail-proof economic system spawned official administrative efforts to ensure citizens had sufficient means to survive (Druick, 2007: 36). Rather than questioning the economic system, however, welfare societies patch up the cracks to avoid exposing the deep failures of capitalism itself. Reform tends toward a similar way of resolving inequalities and injustices; this is far better than apathy or unproductive cynicism but it tends not to address the generative forces behind an issue. In other words, reform can be seen as more reactionary than radical; it opposes and mends the deepest flaws of a given situation but it doesn't build a

new logic altogether. In fact, it seems to naturalize the idea of an underclass in need of support in the way of diet, education, parenting and so on. As Mariana Valverde (1991) argues, social reform movements in early 20th century Canada actually helped shape the distinction between the bourgeoisie and working class (15). Reformers, says Valverde, investigated “the kitchens, clothes and cupboards of the poor” (21) in order to first identify social “problems” related to the dietary habits of poor families and then teach the poor how to eat on a budget. The problematic connection between the welfare state, social reform and systemic problems within the economic system itself is illustrated by the birth of Canada’s food guide. The guide arose out of social reform movements in the 1920s, when urban women’s groups grew concerned about infant mortality, unemployment and poverty in the cities (Ostry, 2006: 21). Having moved from food-producing farms so fathers and husbands could find work in the cities, women and children in the home were especially vulnerable to hunger and sickness. Infant formula was seen as a solution to problems associated with particular nutrient deficiencies (ibid: 65) and mothers followed expert advice despite the well-known problems associated with pablum and contaminated drinking water: infant death is accelerated rather than prevented when formula is mixed with tainted water or put into bottles that haven’t been sterilized. Women’s groups and social reformers saw the writing on the wall and stepped in with *The Canadian Mother’s Book* in 1923 to promote breastfeeding and warn mothers about medical experts who undermined the values of breast milk (ibid: 65).⁵ Of course, industry had a vested interest in this early food guide as well and there was some discussion of fresh-air and sunlight for cows so that babies could get the best possible milk from the bovine community as well (Champion: 539). Canada’s official food guide came about as a result of this battle to reduce infant mortality; the movement was so well organized and its sentiments were so alarming that it eventually caught the attention of the federal government. The idea of losing citizens, a loss felt in Canada after World War I and feared in the years leading up to World War II, also caught the attention of nationalists and industrialists. All three groups – social reformers, nationalists and industrialists – looked to solve the issue by instituting “best practices” and helping people acquire the skills they’d need to survive harsh times. Few of them,

⁵ *The Canadian Mother’s Book* was also distributed to Native communities that had lost most of their children to residential schools. Similarly bizarre, after receiving the book of advice, Native women were routinely denied additional help from health experts at the point of delivery because their presumed closeness to nature would afford them effortless deliveries and eliminate costs to the health system (Kelm, 1998: 167-68).

however, looked to the generative roots of poverty-related deaths in the first place and instead embarked on a project to patch over wounds that were bound to re-open time and again.

The Dilemma for Oppositional Dietary Reform

Many contemporary food and diet-related movements are a response to the dominant social and economic movement of our times: labour market deregulation, free trade, the concentration of economic power, commercialization and information oligarchies. Rightly, the movements take issue with globalization and its many, well-known consequences. An oft-cited rationale for making diet the locus of action is the fact that everybody eats, so by sheer force of numbers a widespread change in dietary practices can disrupt the very institutions that sustain the global industrial food system and everything it represents.⁶ This may be possible; however, there are several potential problems with using food as a basis for social change. First, as Warren Belasco (2005) notes of 1960s counter-cuisine and Michael Pollan (2006) notes of contemporary organics, subversive consumer behaviours are swiftly and easily co-opted by the market and things like “organic” and “natural” become high selling points for products that are far removed from the initial goals of food activists. Second, as illustrated by Patricia Crotty’s (1995) analysis of the misaligned philanthropic efforts of people like Mary Abel, who recognized the deep social problems in industrial England but failed to see how “unhealthy” foods might provide just the social tonic labourers needed at the end of the day, ideological allies often have incompatible ideas about how resistance should be put into practice. Third, by making food the locus of social change we risk engaging in what Michael F. Maniates (2001) calls “the individualization of responsibility” (33), which is what happens when, in trying to tackle systemic social, political and economic problems, we launch a critique of individuals; we cite things like lack of information, lack of understanding, lack of material access, lack of austerity, lack of political caché and so on to explain what individuals are doing to perpetuate institutionalized inequality. The attack on individual behaviours, says Maniates, is an especially dominant mode of

⁶ Coincidentally, the same rationale is used to justify the food industry. According to Marion Nestle (2006), the production, distribution, marketing and consumption of food is the basis of a trillion dollar annual business in the United States alone due to the inevitable fact that everyone eats (4) and the related fact that so few North Americans have access to non-market food sources.

opposition in North America and it positions individuals as solitary social agents, working alone, “usually as consumers” (ibid: 33). Fourth, by making dietary practice the locus of social responsibility and political change, we embark on a political project that is undeniably implicated in micro-scale body politics, where the goal is to change the individual body’s relationship with the outside world as a way to deal with macro-scale (i.e. institutional or cultural) issues; not only does this seem an unreasonable burden for the individual body to bear but it renders *bodies* responsible for problems that are truly massive and far beyond what can be resolved through a politicized relationship with our bodies; in other words, it requires a disciplining of the body through appetite suppression, which can be politically effective (think Gandhi) but equally self-destructive (think anxiety-ridden girls suffering from anorexia nervosa) and not easily distinguishable from classic somatophobia (especially fear of women’s bodies). Finally, and this echoes Crotty’s commentary on the fish-and-chips diet of the British working class over a century ago, dietary practice is a linguistic activity; we speak our values, beliefs, fears, dreams, identities, histories and social ties through food. To change the way people eat through dietary reform is not unlike the colonialist practice of imposing the dominant language on colonized communities or, worse, failing to recognize that a language, when it seems strange or different, is even a language at all. It is the last two problems that form the basis of my critical analysis of discourses of “good food” and my understanding of diet as a language inscribed on the body. This way of thinking about diet, however, constitutes a dilemma for oppositional politics that make food the site of struggle; while such social movements often aim to liberate through broad changes to the way we eat, the very notion of large-scale dietary change includes possible dangers and even, paradoxically, oppressions.

In a discussion with a Canadian food activist whose main concern is animal rights and whose dietary practices revolve around a rejection of animal products, I was surprised to hear his solution to the “problem” of human communities living in cold, Northern environments where non-animal food sources might be scarce during certain months of the year: there is no excuse, he said, for living there anymore if it means eating animals or animal products to survive (Talking with Your Mouth Full, 2006). In a series of interviews conducted for a research project on contemporary food movements as part of my graduate coursework, a group of us heard this sentiment repeated a

number of times by various individual food activists. The idea is that individuals and communities have no business living in particular regions if their dietary needs can't be met without killing animals. Based on Peter Singer's utilitarian formula for determining how humans can act to ensure the least suffering for the fewest sentient beings, the interviewee's desire to change the way people eat is rooted in moral considerations (i.e. clear and committed decisions to adhere to a specific understanding of right and wrong); this seems like a reasonable place to begin sorting through the problem of how to live and what to eat. But, as our source's comment seems to suggest, Singer's formula also leads to what some moral theorists call inescapable "charges of being dogmatically judgmental, elitist or worse" (Bailey, 2007: 55). Singer's formula is based on calculations of physical pain and it's widely believed that pain is a hideous thing to impose on any creature; it is the reason we never see inside the walls of abattoirs. But there are other kinds of pain and I'm not sure they're quantifiably less important. I'm thinking here of the kind of non-physical pain that leads to physical violence in the first place: feelings of powerlessness and inequality, for example. Who gets to decide what is *good* to eat? Is the growing prominence of dietary politics somehow rooted in what Diane Negra calls "contemporary American whiteness...[that] relies crucially on regimes of bodily discipline and the suppression of appetite" (cited in Bailey: 40)? And isn't there something dangerous about my interpreting your diet as the literal embodiment of your values, an interpretation encouraged by the old adage, 'You are what you eat'? The concern here is that if oppositional dietary reform opposes dominant dietary culture with a singular perspective on what is good to eat and what particular foods signify, it will actually reproduce ideas about legitimate and illegitimate bodies that have led to things like hunger and factory farming in the first place – not to mention the physical removal of bodies from their chosen homes.

Feminist scholar Cathryn Bailey (2007), whose paper defends ethical vegetarianism against charges of white racism, reminds us that moral theorists and social actors who base their actions on ethical claims are generally willing to accept charges of elitism and philosophically muddiness if it means implementing changes they've made a conscious decision to support. Our source's comments noted above seem to disregard the ways in which his own philosophies might somehow align with those of people who engage in the millennia-old practice of consuming animals; they

seem to assume that all animal consumption is based on a model of cruelty. So, although our mutual surprise at his solution to the “problem” of people living in cold environments could be considered a speciesist reaction, I think our surprise was more likely a response to his power-over approach to changing human-animal relations to suit utilitarian logic. Within the framework of this study, I would say that his approach to dietary form is monologic and that there are injustices associated with this way of doing politics. Also, his ultimate solution is to have human populations move or be moved to places where weather conditions enable all-vegetable diets. Within the framework of this study, I would say that this solution is somatophobic in that he sees the fact of human bodies living in cold environments as the core problem: bodies are to blame and moving them is the solution. There has been plenty written on the middle-class privilege associated with special diets; there has also been plenty of rebuttal in defence of special diets with the important qualification that dietary politics need to “take into account the particularities of culture and history” (Bailey, 2007: 40) when thinking about how people eat. I would suggest that this more tolerant approach is partly what’s missing from our source’s thoughts on animal-eating in Canada’s coldest regions. While his fairly extreme ideas aren’t representative of politicized dieters, they help me make a crucial point: foods are words and we are a multilingual species – different foods mean different things to different people. A monologic approach to diet-as-politics stems from an unwillingness to recognize diet as a language and a failure to translate.

If food is a language, the goal here is to avoid conceiving of one particular language as natural and to recognize a diversity of tongues. When Columbus failed to recognize foreign language as language, he vowed to take a few Indians back to Spain “so that they may learn to speak” (Todorov, 1987: 30). Columbus’s inability or unwillingness to see culture and meaning in the communities he visited launched a legacy of cultural colonization, as well as the colonization of physical bodies. The problem with dietary reform discourses, then, is that they often fail to recognize the many meanings of food and embark on what could easily be seen a project of assimilation through language not unlike early settlers in the Americas. Crotty’s book questions orthodox nutritional science and “encourage[s] wider debate about programs advising the general community to adopt particular eating habits” (2). While she takes aim at nutritional science, her critique can be readily applied to any argument for or against a

particular diet that pretends to use value-free facts and statistics to support particular rules that are, in fact, value-laden ideas about “good” behaviour rooted in morality.

Crotty puts it clearly and I align myself with this statement from the opening of her book:

I have a conscientious objection to community-wide dietary reform.... My criticisms of dietary reform are based not only on the shortcomings of its scientific underpinnings but also on its lack of social perspective and compassion.... Community dietary reform is not solely about medical science but equally about values, priorities, vested interests, concepts of morality and conformity (1).

CHAPTER 2: DENATURALIZING DIET: THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF AN EDIBLE

Food as Culture

To introduce the idea of food as culture, I'll briefly explain two major shifts in mainstream dietary practices in France. The shifts are outlined by Madeleine Ferrières (2006) in a book on the history of food fears. Her examples illustrate how ideas about disease combined with the widespread fear of disease can cause major shifts in dietary practices at a certain time and place. She writes specifically about animal flesh that was, at different times, considered dirty or dangerous and therefore inedible. In 15th century France, for example, pigs were banned from human consumption unless they were strictly fed with grains, bran and nuts; the driving force behind the new regulation was the fear of contracting leprosy from pork flesh; pigs fattened on a strict vegetarian diet were considered leprosy-free and the rest were banned from food markets, especially pigs raised by human lepers or fed with fish scraps and animal feed (38-39). We now know that leprosy does not exist in pigs and that this fear arose from a deep general anxiety about that particular disease in 15th century France; human sperm, dirty air, donkey meat and too much garlic were also considered dangerous at the time (19-28). A similar panic erupted four centuries later. In 19th century France, there was a growing public concern that bovine disease could spread to humans. Ferrières says the conceptual pairing of these two things – a basic food and a disease – is a proven recipe for terror and avoidance in the realm of diet (291). As a result, cow's milk lost its value as a food; only the very poor would drink it and only under desperate circumstances (290-292). Both explanations for shifts in French dietary practices are plausible and they illustrate how the momentum for dietary change is often built around collective fears. As these two brief stories illustrate, then, the link between diet and health (or food and body) is a cultivated link rather than a natural link, just as the link between pork and leprosy was cultivated by an intense fear of the disease in the context of 15th century France. This is what it means to see foods as cultural artefacts and diet as a construct rooted in historical conditions. All of the food-studies literature below starts with the idea that dietary practices are cultural and that culture is contested terrain.

The idea that dietary practices, as much as it's related to our material needs as biological creatures, is also part of our cultural experience as social creatures, was noted decades ago by cultural anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss said food must be "not only good to eat but also good to think" (Levi-Strauss, cited in Pollan, 2006: 289). He said, for example, that ways of cooking (boiling, roasting, smoking, frying) are culturally encoded to create distinctions between groups of eaters and to separate human culture from the raw foods of nature: consider the fact that many people roast foods on special occasions but reserve raw foods for quick snacks and casual dining scenarios like picnics; when company's coming, hot foods are often served as a "main" dish and cold foods, if served at all, are relegated to starter foods meant to tide people over until the "proper" meal is served. In a word, eating is much more than a biological process: like any other cultural activity, the way we eat is made up of ideas, images and values that can be questioned, critiqued or celebrated. Where analyses of food-as-culture differ, however, is in how they theorize culture and go about interpreting it. Food-studies analyses are invariably built upon different theoretical perspectives, notably structuralist semiotic, Marxist materialist, feminist, ecological materialist, critical constructivist or a combination of these. Each of these approaches has different ontological foundations, or different ideas about how cultural texts are "written" and how social actors interact with them. In other words, social scientists don't necessarily agree on the roots (causes) and routes (effects) of culture.⁷ What follows is a brief overview of some of the key food-studies literature that has come out over the past 40 years; the goal here is to examine some of the core theoretical perspectives noted above and to position this paper within the literature.

Structuralist Semiotics

Structuralist semiotic explorations of food look to cultural myths and popular narratives to explain how food rules stem from existing social norms. Influenced by both Levi-Strauss and Barthes, who privilege the symbolic dimension of society, Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger* (1966) that cultural narratives sustain organized ways of thinking

⁷ Paul Gilroy, cited in Fornäs (1995), suggests this pairing as a way to understand differences in cultural theory. Depending on one's theoretical standpoint, cultural phenomena are said to have different causes or determinants (roots) as well as different effects or meanings (routes).

about the world and allow societies to control messy moments when the world seems on the brink of disorder. “If food is treated as a code,” writes Douglas in a later paper about how we make the world speakable by establishing food rules, “the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed” (1997: 13). In her discussion of food, Douglas argues that the most contested and carefully-managed moments in our lives are those that involve the perceived mingling of the body’s inside with external substances. Birth, ingestion (of food, air or water), intercourse and death each involve exposing ourselves to the world outside of our bodies. In birth, death and sex, our insides spill out; during eating, breathing and sex (again) the outside enters in. Since the world external to our bodies is said to harbour disease, pain and death, it becomes terrifying to let the outside in and vice versa. To reduce our anxiety, we engage in talk and behaviour that reinforces our sense of order during these moments of perceived threat. Of particular relevance to food studies, Douglas argues that tidy rules about what we should or shouldn’t eat help to alleviate the pain of the unknown. In other words, dietary laws and food taboos are modes of meaning-management that are in line with the existing worldviews of a particular socio-cultural group; they keep things in order and allow the eater to retain a sense of control over his or her world.

In a series of case studies Douglas looked at a range of cultural myths, notably the book of Leviticus, which outlines Jewish dietary laws concerning animal consumption. She argues that unclean foods, like all things considered dirty or polluted, are made symbolically different from permissible (clean) foods to establish social order. In the case of biblical food prohibitions, vegetarian hoofed animals (cows and sheep) are good to eat but meat-eating animals with claws (cats and dogs) and especially meat-eating animals with hoofs (pigs) are unacceptable to eat. The pig is especially abominable in Jewish dietary law and, from a semiotics perspective, Jean Soler (1997) argues quite provocatively that this particular prohibition stems from a culturally sanctioned “refusal of all things hybrid, mixed or involving synthesis” (65). Douglas, more generally, suggests that food taboos function to create a unified society governed by rules and norms by which people can make sense of the world and determine how to act within it. The concepts of dirt and cleanliness exist, in other words, to guarantee moral and social order: “Social order is guaranteed by dangers that threaten those who transgress” (Douglas, 1966: 3). The *roots* of food culture from a structuralist semiotic

perspective, then, are symbolic acts (languages, practices) that constitute an ordered sense of reality. The *routes*, on the other hand, are normative social relations and interactions between individual subjects based on an internalized understanding of clean and unclean foods.

Cultural Materialism: Marxist and Ecological

Like Douglas, structural Marxist food-studies scholars such as Sidney Mintz and Walter Goldfrank see individuals not as social actors but as products of social relationships; however, unlike Douglas, they don't see language as the site of cultural production. Rather than conceiving of individuals as the product of discourse, structural Marxists see the individual as the product of labour relations and economic organization. For structural Marxists, the roots of culture are objective material forces, such as labour or resources, which impact an individual's control over his or her own subsistence. Food-studies literature from a structural Marxist perspective tends to focus on sites of food production; it looks at the division of labour in food production in particular, as well as economic inequality among labourers (i.e. unequal distribution of the material resources needed for survival). Typically, food-studies literature from this perspective traces a particular food product through the production, distribution and consumption process to show that material injustices are carried out along the commodity chain and then concealed from consumers at the site of consumption. Marxist sociologist Walter Goldfrank (2005), for example, looks at the consumption of fresh Chilean fruit in the United States as a way to explore how the relationships involved in fruit production are hidden from consumers: "Today, we've witnessed the emergence of a 'produce stand ethic'...based on the eating habits of wealthy strangers, which allowed foreign fresh food growers to supply the market here" (45). Goldfrank then explicitly draws connections between North American consumers and Chilean producers: "The result today is that the livelihoods of thousands of workers depend on our consumer whims" (52). What Goldfrank suggests here is that the very recent dietary practice in affluent Western societies of eating "fresh" produce year-round, especially tropical commodities and other "exotic" foods, is based on a series of corresponding economic shifts around the world and that these economic shifts came about through government policy, technological innovations and changing values among Western consumers (43-45). Many of us who grew up in smaller communities during the '70s and '80s can remember tasting certain

imported fruits for the first time: kiwis, Nashi pears (known then as, simply, “Asian” pears), giant strawberries, mangos, crunchy red grapes and baby bananas were exciting new commodities less than a few decades ago. These fruits were available for import year-round due to a variety of material changes to the way fruit was produced, distributed and consumed at the time. There were new refrigeration and transportation technologies that kept food cool over long distances; socioeconomic overhauls in places like Chile during the 1970s facilitated a “desperate low-wage labour force” that enabled large food import/export companies like Dole to provide cheap produce for paying customers up North; and there were changes to the dietary values of Western consumers based on the science of nutrition, a longing for longevity, government-sponsored health and fitness programs and an increase in dual-income families who wanted convenient foods that would lighten domestic labour for (mostly) mothers who wanted or needed to work outside the home (45).

Related to Marxist materialism but rooted in another realm of material life, a significant amount of work on food and eating rejects semiotic explanations of diet in favour of materialist explanations based on ecological or environmental conditions. Cultural ecologists believe that cultural phenomena, such as dietary practices, are rooted in our interactions with the natural environment. Cultural ecologists working in the realm of food-studies include Jared Diamond, Marvin Harris, Frances Moore Lappé, Marion Nestlé and Gary Paul Nabhan. Marvin Harris (1997) provides an example of how cultural materialists might explain food rules in his essay *The Abominable Pig*. In an exploration of Jewish dietary law, with a particular focus on the rule against eating pork, Harris refutes Douglas’s argument for the symbolic or semiotic basis of food boundaries. While Douglas focuses on the idea that Leviticun food laws function to naturalize certain ways of eating in order to establish an ordered society, Harris looks at how environmental conditions might have been the impetus for pork prohibition. Biblical laws, argues Harris, are in accordance with the material realities of the way people live. From this perspective, the practice of pork avoidance stems from climate conditions: the hot climate of the Middle East made it economically and ecologically inefficient to raise pigs, which need lots of water to cool their hairless skin; so it was written into the scriptures that pig should not be eaten because it was not a viable food source. In Harris’s terms, “Food taboos in other words always make it easier to keep people well

nourished and never make it more difficult; they justify the economic and ecological conditions on divine or philosophical terms” (79).

Critical Constructivism: Food as Language

For the third approach to food culture I wish to mention here, I look to a handful of scholars who explore how food is used as a means of resistance at the level of consumption. Without denying the ecological, economic and socio-political conditions that influence food cultures, and while still upholding the idea of diet as a cultural mechanism for managing groups of people, food studies scholars like Carole Counihan (1999), Marvalene Hughes (1997) and Jane Ferry (2003) examine food’s role in meaning-making with a particular focus on how people challenge dominant cultural formations through subversive dietary practices. Ferry takes a slightly different approach by analyzing *representations* of food and eating in film; she takes her cue from Margaret Visser’s claim that “dinners [are] dramatic events which [speak] loudly of status, relationships, acceptance and rejection” (Visser, cited in Ferry: 17). With this in mind, Ferry analyzes food scenes starting with the premise that food embodies power and plays a role in maintaining power relations.

Materialist and semiotic accounts of food culture tend to agree that, despite the debatable roots of dietary practices, what we eat says something about our selves and our relationship with the world around us.⁸ Charged with symbolism, food consumption is a “communicative encounter between interacting subjects” (Fornäs, 1995: 3) rather than a straightforward natural phenomenon; every morsel that passes our lips is, as Barthes (1997) suggested, a sign in a system of communication and things like menus or diets are syntagms. Where critical constructivism differs from this take on food culture is in its focus on turning the food system, and its capacity to communicate, against itself. From this perspective, diet is still a mode of consumption (we consume foods and their

⁸ It is worth mentioning here that as much as food is a system of communication, the actual words we use to talk about food shape whether or not we see certain items as edibles in the first place. The English language, for example, is the only one that distinguishes between animals and animal meat in the process of “deanimalizing meat”. We call cow “beef”, pig “pork” and sheep “mutton” (Ferriers, 2006: 67) and we shelter consumers from the butchering process in Western societies, while many people slaughter animals in open stalls so consumers can attest to the conditions of the butchering process. People who see language as a site of resistance often use literal terms to refer to meat products as a way of reconnecting the eater to the eaten (i.e. “I’m having baby cow for dinner.”)

meanings) but it is also productive practice in the sense that it can symbolically challenge social relations by reinventing the meaning of certain foods, dietary practices and relationships built in and around food. I give some examples of how foods can be symbolically reordered to liberate the eater/eaten below and again in Chapter Five.

If food is a linguistic force maintaining the status quo, that same force can be taken up and turned against itself by resistance movements that make language the site of struggle. Counihan, for example, looks at how women use food as part of a larger struggle to dismantle institutionalized oppression of women. Food, she says, is a "readily available battleground" for women's issues related to control and autonomy (Counihan, 1999: 86). So while some women practice voluntary starvation in an effort to gain control over something (their bodies) in a culture that has historically positioned women as relatively weak in most areas of life, others practice vegetarianism in an effort to reject organized hierarchies, notably speciesism. Though these are very different symbolic practices, both can be seen as communicative acts that make food the space through which social actors carve out new, subversive meanings in an attempt to liberate oppressed groups through language. Many subaltern groups have used cuisine as a cultural space through which to assert, theorize and practice collective identities; by reinterpreting food symbols and creating statements through food, this type of resistance relies on the idea that food is lingual. For instance, there have been a number of articles written on "soul food" as an expression of black identity and means of peaceful resistance to dominant culture. In her analysis of the 1997 film *Soul Food*, Jane Ferry (2003) argues that food scenes are used in the film as a "coercive force" meant to encourage African American women to stay in the kitchen; not only does the film miss the point about "soul food" and its relevance to African American history but it constructs black women as subservient Aunt Jemimas (44). Both Ferry and Marvalene Hughes (1997) point out that "soul food" is a political construct connected to slave resistance movements in America. Although racist images of African American characters eating watermelon are well known, the story of watermelons in America is a story of resistance through food. Yam, sesame seeds and black-eyed peas share a similar story: by smuggling seeds into America and planting culturally significant crops, slave communities asserted their intent to "maintain an African identity through food" (Hughes, 1997: 273) and found a way to speak with each other in a way that plantation owners

wouldn't be able to hear. It is this perspective, I would argue, that is largely lost in contemporary popular discussions on food: while audiences are meant to awaken themselves to food purchasing decisions that will "change the world" in a material sense, there is very little discussion of cultural resistance and a devaluing, in effect, of cultural politics that might change the way we conceptualize the world. I align myself with critical constructivist approaches to diet because I start with the assumption that when meanings are reworked – when symbolic and cultural life is appropriated with subversion in mind – we can cause real disruption. In other words, new ways of doing diet jar us out of naturalized ways of thinking about food and power; at the same time, this makes everyone a potential agent of social change. I align myself with this approach, however, with a caveat. I mentioned this in the introduction to this paper and this seems like an appropriate time to say it again: the endless play of interpretation is a politically powerful concept and to a certain extent we should celebrate the idea that food can mean what we want it to mean; this links language (i.e. the meaning of food) back to the people who use it and forces us to acknowledge a diversity of perspectives – a diversity in semiotic codes and conventions that allow food and diet to make sense within social groups. But, at the same time, I'd suggest that all languages, including the language we speak through food, must be carefully sifted through for words and interpretations that are hurtful or dangerous. I've named this section 'critical constructivism' to distinguish it from a wildly liberating postmodern understanding of food and eating. Social constructivism presents an important argument against essentialism but, once it's established that no singular view of the world gets to trump the rest, there must be some awareness of how my actions impact the quality of life for humans and other creatures around me, either materially or symbolically. Without this caveat, constructivism starts to look a lot like libertarianism or hedonism. By adding 'critical' to the term, I suggest that Counihan et al make it their purpose to unmask and denounce inequities.

One particular example of how food is used to communicate is worth noting here. In his work on the class-tinged politics of taste, Pierre Bourdieu (2000) includes dietary preferences in his critique of "choice". A culture that allows people to choose from many possible material goods and life pursuits, he argues, is inseparable from consumer culture; it is a product of late capitalist society that is meant to differentiate socio-economic groups and, ultimately, establish class divisions between those who do and

those who do not have access to certain types of education, fields of knowledge, material possessions, experiences and so on. In this sense, taste is nothing more than “the power of certain classes and nations to select cultural artefacts for special attention and to denigrate as base or savage the artefacts...of alien cultures” (Korsmeyer, cited in Perloff, 2004: 51). For example, we might drink expensive wine because it signifies our economic status or choose microbrew over major-brand beer for its aesthetic status as the beverage of socially-refined beer drinkers; there is even a new class of boozers that could be called “beer activists” who, by paying more money for beer made by small breweries, publicly denounce corporate culture and support cottage industries. Such consumption practices, while they can be seen as practical ways to redistribute wealth and express dissent, are not equally available to all socio-economic groups and any philanthropic intention behind them is somewhat diluted by the politics of taste sketched out by Bourdieu. Another form of beer activism, then, is about consuming readily accessible brands and paying bottom dollar for beer that is beneath one’s economic means as a way of aligning oneself with less privileged groups in a show of solidarity. Food choice, from this perspective, is about positioning oneself within the social hierarchy through non-verbal food linguistics. When something tastes good, from this perspective, the flavour comes from the *meaning* of the thing rather than any inherent qualities. Part of the problem here is that not everyone can climb up, down and around the social hierarchy to position themselves within a certain social class through taste expressions. People with “good” taste tend to have greater access to a range of consumer goods, a sense of security in their own class position and/or training (knowledge) in how to read goods for their aesthetic status; “good” taste, in other words, reproduces social status.

An attempt to eat differently, more wisely or more ethically can degenerate into nothing more than an attempt to express a certain political cachet or “good” taste. The critique of ethical consumption, using Bourdieu’s concepts of taste and cultural capital, is that it can be used to reproduce rather than undermine class distinctions. In a critical take on subcultures, Sarah Thornton (1997) suggests that when subcultural capital is objectified “in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections” (203) it points to the inaccessibility of a *consumer model* of resistance and to the ways that subcultural distinction is used “in the service of power” (John Thompson,

cited in Thornton: 201). Food choice motivated by dissent begs the same question: is it a form of cultural criticism meant to undermine dominant culture and society in myriad ways or is it an elitist display of “good” taste, a kind of faux resistance meant to distinguish the eater from mass culture, put knowledge on display and assert one’s authority to “presume the inferiority of others” (201)? Tzvetan Todorov (1984) reiterates the point in his explanation of how colonizers actively create an Other. He acknowledges how difficult it is to accept difference without simultaneously constructing hierarchy: “The discourse of difference is a difficult one. As we have already seen with Columbus, the postulate of difference readily involves the feeling of superiority” (63).

Food as Power

There isn’t a food-studies scholar in the past 40 years who hasn’t explored the connection between food and power. Feminist anthropologist Carole Counihan (1999) writes, “Food is power in its most basic form because people need it to survive [and] one’s place in the social system is revealed by how much, what and with whom one eats” (7-8). This notion of food hierarchies recurs throughout the literature on food. Roger Burbach, Margaret Mead and Frances Moore Lappé focus on who has food and who doesn’t; they see hunger as the utmost sign of (socially produced) powerlessness and look to power struggles between nations coupled with hedonistic food/land waste in the industrialized world as the root cause of inequities related to food distribution (Belasco, 2005; Counihan, 1999). Warren Belasco, Jeremy Rifkin and Sydney Mintz focus on who or what controls food production and distribution; they see the commoditization of food as the end result of an industrialized food system and are rightly concerned about what this means for workers in the food industry, for the quality of food products and for the natural environments exploited in the production process; and finally, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Susan Bordo, Marjorie Devault, Marvalene Hughes and Carole Counihan, all feminist scholars from a range of disciplines, have looked at how male power is reproduced through food; consider, for example, how women in the 19th century ate tiny meals in an effort to cultivate frail bodies, which signified their unfitness for work and therefore their husbands’ economic success (Jacobs Brumberg, 1997: 172); in the same cultural context, the popular practice of non-eating became known as the major symptom of anorexia nervosa and woman who strived for the ideal body type were characterized as sick (Jacobs

Brumberg, 1997: 172). Although many influential food scholars aren't mentioned here, this sampling of key thinkers is enough to make the point: where food-studies scholars seem to agree is in their conception of cultural roots as something that must be questioned and in their understanding of dietary practice as the stuff of culture; whether or not they see culture and, therefore, diet as something rooted in symbolic systems, labour relations, institutional forces or individual agency, they agree that its roots, as well as its routes, must be scrutinized for signs of injustice, inequality and abuses of power.

The Feminist Vegetarian Debate

There has been a long-term debate circulating between feminist philosophers who suggest a connection between feminism and ethical vegetarianism on the one hand (Adams, 1975 cited in Lucas, 2005: 150) and between ethical vegetarianism and cultural imperialism on the other (George, 2000, cited in Lucas, 2005: 154). On both sides of the feminist-vegetarian debate, which is just one example of how shared ideological perspectives can look different at the point of praxis, the core problem is about how to align to our food choices with our moral or social goals and what this means for a feminist ethic that simultaneously denounces the oppression of non-human animals and respects cultural diversity in a world where many people see animals as an important and meaningful food source. In a word, Carol Adams (1995) sees a connection between the oppression of animals and women; she argues that patriarchy makes animal consumption fathomable and pits humans against animals by the same logic that pits men against women or one race against another. Meanwhile, Kathryn Paxton George (2000) sees a connection between the oppression of women and a strict dietary ethic that precludes eating meat; she argues that not all women have equal access to a range of vegetable foods and that the notion of refusing any type of sustenance at all is inherently privileged. Adams rejects an ontology that allows us to see animals as edible and positions humans as more powerful (i.e. higher on the food chain). Yet George rejects an ontology that suggests we can interpret *all* animal-eating as a sign of disrespect for non-human creatures. The debate, it seems to me, is about how to develop a normative dietary ethics that rejects racism, sexism and classism while still respecting cultural-linguistic differences in foodways across the globe. Clearly, this is no easy task and I don't intend to deliberate on this particular debate. As a case study, however, the feminist vegetarian debate provides a useful illustration of how diet, as a

cultural strategy, can be used to both resist and/or sustain dominant discourses – and how the same diet can simultaneously do both. My concern with contemporary dietary politics, which take food as the site of social struggle and social change, is that the discourse seems to reproduce hierarchies of power by producing knowledge of what is “good” to eat and inviting people to self-surveil through a new but not innocent set of norms.

CHAPTER 3: FOOD, LANGUAGE AND THE REGULATION OF BODIES

Language as Power

Facts are not created equal: the production of [narratives] is always also the creation of silences.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past*

As should be clear by now, I align myself with feminist scholars who view diet as a socio-cultural construct and who frame dietary practice as a discursive force capable of both resistance and control. As should also be clear, I align myself with postcolonial literary scholars, like Todorov and Bakhtin, who recognize the difficulty in using language (and therefore food, which is a communicative medium) as a site of mass social change without reproducing a legacy of silencing, of failure to translate and of habitually understanding the world through one's own limited linguistic framework. In a neo-colonial context, it makes sense to acknowledge a diversity of languages spoken through diet and to resist a universal language of "good food". I would add to both sets of thinkers that food-as-language, like all linguistic forms, has the capacity to exert physical force on our bodies. The following section explores the notion of diet as a language inscribed on the body by looking at the power of language to shape our actions in the world and at the way food-centred discourse in particular influences our perceptions and actions around our own bodies and the bodies of others. I end this chapter with a brief look at Foucault's (1978) concept of *bio-power* described in *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. *Bio-power* is a useful concept for the purposes of this paper because it helps explain how food rules enable us to conceive of bodies in certain ways (i.e. obese bodies, too-thin bodies, pure bodies, sullied bodies or sick bodies) and understand how such conceptions encourage us to internalize "a... value-laden understanding of the self" (Prado, 2000: 55). By making bodies the site of subjectivity, we control (discipline) the individual body through things like deliberate walking styles (strutting, swaggering, hip-swaying), carefully-planned gestures, body-shaping clothing (control-top underwear, bust-reducing bras and shoulder pads) and, most importantly for this paper, dietary regimens. Foucault calls this an "anatomo-politics" of the human body (139), which describes a situation in which the individual body becomes the focus for regulation and control. I follow this chapter with a brief discourse analysis of *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* (2007) and related documents to show how all

discourse, but especially food-centred discourse, reinforces the kind of politics Foucault is talking about here.

We can begin to unravel the idea that language impacts material life by starting with the concept of *symbolic power*. John Thompson (1995) identified four main classes of power: economic power, political power, coercive power and symbolic power or the power to signify. *Economic power* involves control over the means of subsistence. *Political power* involves coordinating and regulating individuals through sets of rules meant to authorize and prohibit certain behaviours (i.e. laws); political power is typically exerted by institutions comprising the state (armed forces, judiciary councils, schools and churches, for example) and is dependent on the state's ability to wield two additional forms of power: *coercive* and *symbolic*. Closely linked to military power, *coercive power* involves the use of physical force or threat in order to control and subdue citizens; it is used to reinforce political power and ensure obedience to the rules and regulations established by the state. Finally, *symbolic power* is the power to produce and transmit symbolic forms; it is the power to signify (14-17). So, back to the issue at hand, symbolic power is the power to invest particular foods with particular meanings.

Symbolic forms (words, images, concepts, representations) are no more real than national boundaries: they exist because we assign meaning to them in an effort to make sense of the world. Stuart Hall (1982) puts it clearly:

Things and events in the real world do not contain or propose their own, integral, single and intrinsic meaning, which is then merely transferred through language. Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has been *made to mean*. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced (67).

We use symbols and representations to chart our course through the world – call it social cartography. But although this cultural mapping is fictitious, a mode of mythmaking, it influences our actions and therefore has material impact. Hall (1975) calls this phenomenon – this capacity for symbolic maps to affect human action – the law of society and the law of culture: the symbolic world shapes and gives meaning to social life and makes certain life choices appear more plausible to some and more implausible to others. In other words, symbolic life has material impact. This gets to the

heart of what it means to call diet 'a language inscribed on the body': a dietary practice is a discursive practice that makes sense of the world for the eater, says something about the way s/he sees the world and positions him/her socially. Put another way, my diet influences my body chemically (this is obvious) but also symbolically. It is the symbolic dimension of diet that I am interested in here, particularly for its capacity to influence the way we classify, stratify and behave toward corporeal bodies, including our own. In Hall's words: "a discourse [is] a way of constructing meanings which influences both our actions and our conception of ourselves" (1996: 613). Symbolic power, in other words, has the capacity to destroy or preserve, protect or dismantle, respect or discount the experiences, languages, cultures and histories of entire communities or civilizations. Hall reiterates the idea that language has the power to impact cultural and, therefore, physical worlds:

The power to signify is not a neutral force in society. Signification enters into conventional and conflicting social issues as a real and positive social force, affecting their outcomes. The signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understandings are created – and thus the means by which consent for particular outcomes can be effectively mobilized (Hall, 1982: 70).

Diet as a Language Inscribed on the Body

The bodily dimension to this discussion of how language impacts material life is key to understanding one of the major problems associated with discourses of "good nutrition" and "good food". Discursive constructions of "good" diet manufacture ideas about "good" subjects and make it possible for us to classify each other by looking at the shapes of bodies and by observing what people put into their mouths. This calls for a questioning of how discursive constructions of "good food" influence social relations and how the social relations produced through these discourses impact physical bodies. As Mary-Ellen Kelm (1998) puts it:

Bodies are made not just in flesh but also in words. Language itself serves to construct human forms by influencing what we know, what we can know, and what we expect to know about them (xviii).

Kelm adds that we often construct the bodies of those who are different from us as sick, dying, diseased, immoral, dirty or abject and that this negatively affects the way we treat these bodies physically. It is easy to imagine how this way of thinking would encourage

conformity on the part of those who are different (illustrated in Chapter One by DuPuis's account of immigrants in America who drank milk to appear moral in an American context) or spawn projects meant to fix or change bodies that have been framed as "broken". As explained by Thompson and Hall above, the power to signify is the power to shape the way we think about, and therefore act upon, bodies. How we speak of bodies and the way we frame practices related to the body (i.e. diet) affects physical bodies. For the purposes of this paper, the point here is to show that dietary practice, like any other signifying practice, is not neutral and that, like any linguistic form, it affects material life in various surprising ways. Food-centred discourses tell stories about the kinds of bodily forms we should value and about the kinds of diets that signify a normal, valuable body. All of this, in turn, affects the way we treat actual bodies through organized systems where the body is concerned, such as health programs, medical systems, land use policies (which affect our ability to grow food for sustenance), urban planning (which affects our ability to access a highly-stratified food market) and food production/distribution systems (which affect our ability to sustain ourselves through food). Whether dominant or subversive, diet is a mighty signifier and signification is a powerful practice with the capacity to affect the way we treat corporeal bodies. Signification through food and diet, a daily practice in the human world, is something we need to take seriously.

What we eat, of course, impacts our bodies chemically. So, although diets are linguistic, the *performance* of eating "is given material form" at the moment of ingestion and has implications for the physical body (Ashley et al, 2004: 201). This is a point that many critics of the modern food industry take to heart: when we accept advertising that says chocolate can 'give us a break today' or that a burger will 'feed our inner child', we actually get food that's bad for our health. In other words, the way we think of food changes the way we eat and this impacts us physiologically. The "problem" of obesity likely has everything do to with how we think of food; the epidemic, as it is often called, is likely rooted in symbolic life more than anything else. Perhaps the most talked-about example of this phenomenon is the probable connection between obesity on the one hand and a range of socio-cultural and political factors that have altered eating habits on the other. Food ads, the commoditization of nutrients, scientific reductionism in dietary advice, widespread faith in science, supermarket culture, xenophobia and loss of

traditional food knowledge and lands are just a few of the reasons why we might be less lean than we used to be.

Fast food, the usual suspect in discussions about obesity, is a good example of how food meanings influence what we eat, often to our own detriment physically. Typically devoid of nutritional content, fast food is readily bursting with calories and social meaning. There are two dominant explanations for the popularity of super-high-calorie foods: consumer ignorance and poverty. This dual explanation relies on the assumption that either fast-food consumers don't have the knowledge to eat differently or lack the economic means to choose "healthier" foods. Either way, it is capital – cultural or economic – that they apparently lack. In 2004, political scientist Heather Williams criticized the resounding applause for Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004) for its snobby assumptions about consumer knowledge with an equally problematic assumption about the connection between low wages and "bad" diets:

What's superannoying about *Supersize Me* is not the topic but instead the easy BMW-class conclusions about what's expanding America's waistline. Unquestionably, the rise in rates of obesity nationally and globally indicates a genuine epidemic. But what's wrong with the film is that Spurlock wants to suggest that the problem is more containable than it is. For all his upfront corporation-bashing, the filmmaker doesn't look beyond the issues of heavy-duty Washington lobbying and noxious advertising to kids to entertain the idea that maybe, just maybe, the epidemic of obesity might have to do with a global crisis of wage labour. (Williams, 2004, para.7)

Williams' comment points to the duelling explanation for fast food consumption that typically takes place between political economists and cultural theorists; on the one side the problem is framed as a culture war, which sees Spurlock and his counterparts arguing for better information to enlighten duped consumers; on the other side, the problem is framed as an economic issue, which sees Williams and others arguing for equal distribution of wealth or at least the elimination of the working poor. Either way, both camps imply that people are either tricked or forced into fast food consumption and fat bodies. As Williams points out, the reasons behind fast food's popularity are complicated. So here's another possible reason for the industry's success: perhaps people *choose* food that is guaranteed not to nourish for compelling and understandable (yet no less troubling) reasons that have to do with its symbolic meaning to the eater –

not meaning imposed by advertisers but meaning produced by everyday lived experience. Fast food is certainly a major industry with an enormous advertising budget. Yet fast food consumption has also become a kind of social tonic for some; for example, it seems plausible that the popularity of fast food across the globe has a lot to do with the social benefits tied to assimilation coupled with a widespread fear of difference. If we take food to signify who we are and what we think, it makes sense that people would want to be seen eating at McDonald's (the celebrity face of fast food). A fast food diet is a visible, symbolic performance that suggests acceptance into and understanding of the dominant North American way of life. Xenophobia is a known trademark of dominant North American culture and would likely have a profound impact on anyone who has been or is afraid of being persecuted for standing out from the crowd. Fast food, in this sense, can be seen as an important social resource. To characterize those who eat fast food as members of a gluttonous, misinformed, poverty-stricken public misses an important connection between the social need to feel accepted and the pressure to make performances of food and body central to social belonging. We have a history of putting bodies and behaviours associated with the body at the centre of social life, so I would suggest that food industries, rather than having single-handedly created problems associated with over-consumption, have deftly capitalized on already-existing social trends. Ironically, this means that assimilationist documents like state food guides actually help generate the idea that people can establish a sense of collective identity and belonging through food, including fast food: if milk or meat-and-potatoes can signify perfection, why can't a Big Mac do the same?

bell hooks has also argued that fast food and junk food can be seen as a consumerist solution to systemic social struggles. She doesn't suggest that it is a *great* solution but that it can be used to relieve certain pressures. She likens fast-food consumption to an addiction that perpetuates the conditions that often lead to addiction in the first place, even as it provides relief from those same conditions. Junk food and fast food, she says, help to pacify a deep, historic "wounded pride and self-esteem" (cited in Sistah Vegan Project). To recognize fast food as a kind of tonic, however, does not mean people should merrily consume it with no further questions. But if we recognize diet as a practice shaped not only by economic conditions or the systematic

duping of consumers through advertising, we can begin to empathize with and understand dietary practices that, at the level of meaning, seem paradoxical.

In an essay on the history of anorexia, Susan Bordo (1997) suggests that humans often collaborate to sustain oppressive situations in which they themselves are the oppressed (Bordo, 1997: 230). Her comment is helpful for understanding why people might choose fast food for reasons other than ignorance or poverty: in much the same way many women have battled their own bodies instead of targeting the roots of unattainable notions of female beauty, fast food consumers use their bodies as battlegrounds where systemic socio-cultural problems are played out. Bordo looks at how women's bodies have been physically affected by beauty ideals, not through a malicious plot by powerful male elite, but by the general tug of culture that affects everyone, equally. She illustrates the point in a discussion about corsets, which women voluntarily wore in the nineteenth-century, even though they "caused [the] wearer actual physical incapacitation" (230). Corsets, notes Bordo, also "served as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its design on the female body" and, by wearing them, women communicated their complicity (230). A similar analysis can be applied to high-heel shoes. My point here is that the body is caught up in the process of speaking our selves through diet and, as the case of fast food illustrates, sometimes the performance of a moral or social self through body is, paradoxically, self-destructive and imperative at the same time.

The second point I want to make here is this: what we think of what others eat or, more accurately, our assumptions about what diets mean to the people who follow them can change to the way we conceive of and treat the bodies of those people. Likewise, when an entire community shares certain dietary practices, our ideas about food can affect that way we conceive of and treat the bodies of whole populations. While this point is slightly more convoluted than the first, Mary-Ellen Kelm (1998) puts it clearly in a book about how bodies are constructed through language and how this in turn affects how they are treated in everyday life. We have countless words to describe bodies that don't seem to make sense with the dominant framework of healthy bodies; we call bodies diseased, sick, infirm, infant, malnourished infertile, impotent or bi-sexed and, in each case, the word attached to the body changes that way it is treated both by experts

(i.e. medical staff) and non-experts (i.e. friends and neighbours). Kelm's explanation of how language impacts physical bodies is closely linked to Foucault's concept of biopower. As numerous feminist and post-colonial cultural critics have noted, the body has been treated as a formal site of anthropological and sociocultural knowledge since at least the early 19th century (Green, 1984; Bordo 1997; Jacobs Brumberg, 1997). Since the body is easily observed, it is treated as a code or cultural text that bears socio-political significance and diet, understood as a language inscribed on the body, gets caught up in the decoding process as we go about reading each others' bodies. In part, we read or decode bodies by watching and interpreting what others eat. This decoding process, along with the thoughts and assumptions about individual bodies that come out of it, impacts the way we then treat those individual bodies – especially when we read them as different.

In a book about the impact of colonialism on the health and lifestyles of people living on the Atlantic coast of Florida, John E. Worth (2001) looks at the consequences of homogenized dietary regimes and the socio-economic reorganization of food production in post-contact Florida. The entire food system of coastal Native people was overhauled in order to serve Spaniard mission populations, which depended on Native labourers to ensure a steady food supply (Worth, 2001: 4-5). Since coastal groups were myriad and distinct, and since each one had nuanced cultural practices in the realm of food and eating, the impact of dietary homogenization⁹ was significant both culturally and physiologically.

⁹ In this case, changes to the population's diet meant much more than a shift in types and quantities of food through the introduction/imposition of new foods. New domesticated crops and animals from Europe, like wheat, potatoes and cattle had a huge impact in terms of health but also in terms of land use and food production techniques. A modified "diet", in this case, meant changes to the entire food system, to cultural formations related to cuisine and to physical bodies. Consider, for example, the 1884 ban on potlatches in Canada; the ban didn't just change the way people ate but undermined a system of wealth-sharing, status display, communication and so on. "Dietary homogenization", then, alters a range of cultural practices related to food: when, with whom, why and where we eat are all part of the language we speak through food. As well, how we produce food – the division of labour, the distribution of foodstuffs and the economic infrastructure – plays an important role in meaning-making when it comes to "diet". In a word, a change in "diet" is not, as Kelm points out, separate from social, cultural or political issues (3).

The rationale for dietary changes was partly due to the practical needs of the missionary community but it was also partly due to a perceived need for improvement to Native populations. In the context of colonial British Columbia, Native bodies were constituted as sick or dying and in need of European medicines (12). Yet, in addition to actual sickness and disease, it was this very way of looking at and speaking about Native bodies that had a lasting impact on the corporeal health of the population. Just as feminists have argued that the “human body is a signified body” (Gatens, cited in Kelm: 9) constituted as sexed (male or female) by scientific discourses, Kelm argues that bodies are constituted by health discourses that actually compromise the health of certain groups. While it is well-known that pathogens contributed to sickness and death in Native communities during the process of colonization, it is said that continued interventions in the form of medicine, prescriptive dietary advice and Euro-Canadian notions of health actually shaped colonialist views of Native bodies and impaired their corporeal well-being in ways that are much too complicated to explain in any depth here (13-14). As Bordo puts it in her analysis of the cultural factors that contribute to eating disorders, “Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture” (229).

It would be a mistake to ignore anti-colonial struggles in the Canadian context, where a broad range of social movements continually challenge racism, classism and colonial hierarchies related to Canada’s Native communities. As well, the case study in dietary reform that I include in this paper is Canada’s food guide, which includes a supplementary guide for First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. So I cite Kelm and Walsh here to help support the argument that dietary reform, along with related notions of good health, has a history of real human impact (both cultural and biological), that food sovereignty/dietary decolonization is a serious issue wherever there are struggles against power and that governance in the realm of food and eating should not go unchallenged. If government is, as Foucault suggests, the practice of shaping the “conduct of conduct” (Gordon, 1991: 2), then we are without a doubt witnessing an era in which the body is *still* a core site of governance, especially if we accept that diet is a language and that language impacts the way we see and act upon physical bodies. In this sense, broad dietary reform is doubly problematic in that it calls into question the

issue of body ownership and fails to acknowledge the diversity of languages spoken through dietary practices.

If we think of diet as a language inscribed on the body and engage in a reflexive analysis of what this means for dietary reform rooted in discourses of “good food”, we can start to see how discursive constructions of “good food” interact with material bodies in ways that aren’t “good” at all. Often framed within the liberalist discourse of individual choice, many suggested diets – especially those recommended by the state, health authorities or policy initiatives but also those recommended by dietary resistance movements – aim to realign the way people eat and think about food with an overall goal to encourage “better” dietary choices. The result is often a normalizing code of food ethics that establishes clear rules about what we should and shouldn’t eat and fails to address differences – material differences in access to certain foods and philosophical differences in what constitutes ethical or ideologically pure cuisine, for example.

Body as a Site of Governance: The Somatic Society

It is worth questioning whose bodies are governed through dietary reform and why, whenever there are dominant political concerns or widespread social anxieties, new dominant images of the body also appear. Often the images are of disturbed bodies. Bryan S. Turner (2006) calls our society a “somatic society” (224), where widespread social, political and economic concerns morph into notions of troubled bodies; the body is seen as the place where worldly troubles culminate, become visible and where the difficult work of making things right can be carried out. A somatic society individualizes social problems by turning the critical gaze inward, onto our bodies or onto the bodies of others. Since we have a history and plenty of mythology that connects physical (bodily) illness with moral pollution, we tend to see our bodies as somehow sullied by what surrounds us when we’re confronted with a moral dilemma or faced with doubts about the moral well-being of contemporary society. State dietary recommendations, which openly guide the dietary practices of a nation, are obvious case studies in the regulation of individual bodies and populations. And, as I outline in the next chapter, they first appeared in Canada and the U.S. during war. Turner writes about the idea of body as a site of social control and judgement in the introduction to Crotty’s book:

If a body well regulated or governed by a medical regimen indicates the presence of discipline, self-control and moral conduct, then of course an obese body indicates the absence of government and discipline (viii).

Foucault is also interested in the role of bodies in the art of governance. For this reason, his work speaks to any discussion of food rules and dietary conventions, especially where certain dietary practices are equated with good moral conduct and good citizenship. In *The History of Sexuality Volume II*, Foucault (1985) looks at connections between body control and moral purity in ancient Greece. Regimen was important to the Greeks, he explains, and they expressed their capacity for self-restraint by controlling their appetites for food and drink. Purging and vomiting, dietary regulation and other practices associated with rigorous maintenance of the body were seen as outward signs of a healthy soul, properly cared for by the individual (101-103). Dietary regimen, most importantly, was meant to be a practice free of coercion or force:

We must keep in mind that diet was not thought of as an unquestioning obedience to the authority of another; it was intended to be a deliberate practice on the part of the individual, involving himself and his body (107).

In Foucault's work on technologies of power, he speaks of the different means by which governments can guide bodies without exerting force. Surveillance and normalization, for example, are processes through which entire populations become "objects of control who are submitted to certain ends or objectives" (Foucault, cited in Covenay, 1998: 461-462). Foucault was concerned with another form of governance as well – technologies of the self, or "individualized forms of self-regulation" (ibid) like work ethic and self-restraint. The practice of self-surveillance arises from an understanding of the self as an ethical subject; the practice of trying to be "good", argues Foucault, is a legacy of Christian teachings that encourage individuals to seek out the "correct course of action" and build an ethical framework as a way to establish a sense of self (ibid). In other words, the art of government according to Foucault is about coaxing individual ethical frameworks in the direction of government goals (ibid); the art of government is not to impose rules (to repress) but to cultivate attitudes, identities, values, appetites, desires and interests. In a recent essay called "The Death of Environmentalism" (2004), which rattled Western environmentalists, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus conclude much the same thing about the art of government, reiterating what Foucault said a long time ago: the way to ideologically align large numbers of people is to talk

about core values, to avoid telling people what to do in the oppressive fashion of ancient regimes and to rely on people to govern themselves on the basis of established ethical norms. Often the established norms operate through a process of shaming people who deviate from an established set of rules (this is how we govern each other); at the same time, we avoid being shamed by others by adhering to the rules ourselves (this is how we govern ourselves). Obesity researchers have outlined how shaming might work to control population-wide weight gain:

The ultimate social pressure treatment would be to increase the social sanctions against obesity, so that being overweight would be a tremendously shameful thing. In this manner, obesity would be under external social control, as are other behaviours for which society has learned that internal control is not enough for some as in the case of criminal or sexual acts. (Foreyt, cited in Crotty: 11)

For the rest of this chapter, I discuss body as a site of governance that operates through normative statements that encourage self-surveillance and self-disciplining of the body through diet. I use Foucault's theories about power to explore how dietary practices can be used in the service of governance and explain why this is troubling. Diet is a form of self-regulation as well as a site of continuous surveillance by those around us, who measure our dietary choices against a normative index of moral action in the realm of food consumption. Through both processes – self-regulation and social surveillance – subtle forms of government are able to act on individual bodies as well as entire populations. Cultural constructions like “the expert”, “proper nutrition” and “good health”, for example, can guide food cultures and, therefore, bodies across broad populations without overt repression. Keeping in line with my initial concerns related to normative dietary ethics that fail to account for human differences and unreflexive dietary ethics that lack humility, and following from the earlier portion of this chapter, which outlines the power of discourse to construct ideas about body and impact physical bodies, I suggest that such governance is a colonial project that not only silences linguistic diversity where food is the means of communication, but that assimilation projects that make food the site of conversion also impact physical bodies. The concern, here, is related to two familiar political questions about the relationship between bodies and society on the one hand and about a misunderstanding of language as natural (as something that represents the world as it really is) on the other. The questions are: who has authorship or control over bodies and whose language constitutes our understanding of the body, and, therefore, our understanding of what is “good” in terms

of dietary practices? In the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault goes on to argue through his discussion of bio-power that the technique of contemporary governments is to manage individual ethics through the body; by establishing daily routines that involve the body – like eating schedules, food taboos and expected gestures – various modes of governance achieve “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’” (1978: 140). Foucault’s understanding of the art of governance, combined with his understanding of bio-power as a mode of governance that operates through bodies, provides a theoretical backbone for the notion of the somatic society formulated by Turner. Both concepts support my thesis that dietary reform supported by discourses of “good food” turns the body into a site of social control.

Foucault and the Art of Governance

Governance can be a collective activity, where members of a group agree on how to conduct themselves as a community, team or cohort; it can be a solitary activity where individual subjects manage themselves on the basis of an accepted moral code or another decision-making framework; it can occur in interpersonal relationships or institutional settings, where one individual or a select group of leaders attempts to guide or control the larger group; and it can take the form of a sovereign power exercising control over a diverse group of subjects (such as the citizens of a nation or state), which is arguably the most contested form of governance and an important critical point of entry for contemporary post-colonial arguments against centralized governments of any kind. Although different forms of governance enable or deny participation on the part of the governed to varying degrees, all governance implies the use of power: to author the lives of others or to exercise self-control is to assume a seat of power, to exercise control over something. In short, we are all subjects of some form of governance; we all operate under the influence of some kind of authority, even when authority appears as a technique for controlling the self (as in a self-fashioned ethical framework) (Bratich et al, 2003: 9).

There are two forms of governance I intend to briefly explore here, both identified and investigated at length by Foucault in “Governmentality” (1991) and *The History of Sexuality Volume II* (1985). First, I examine the art of governing at a distance, where the

appearance of an imposing government body is dissolved and replaced by a freeing sense of individual control over one's life and body. Governing at a distance discourages "phobic representation[s]" of repressive totalitarian governments and, to showcase the anti-dictatorial flavour of a hands-off mode of governance, the government itself engages in a celebration of individual choice and a critique of explicit forms of oppression (Gordon, 1991: 46). Within this scenario, however, the governed engage in highly-managed self-regulation informed by certain rules sustained by a whole web of governing bodies and discursive practices. This "art of self-government" is the second form of governance I want to mention here; it ensures that individuals "behave as they should" through a process of constant self-surveillance (Foucault, 1991: 91-92). So there is a tension here between individual autonomy and state regulation: the Enlightenment notion of personal freedom, which is still largely upheld in liberal societies, butts heads with the government's role to manage large groups of people. The problem for any form of governance, then, is to find a way to simultaneously individualize – allow for complete personal freedom – and totalize, or allow for control over free agents (Gordon, 1991: 36; Murphy, 2003: 434).

In this atmosphere of widespread condemnation of oppressive state rule coupled with a celebration of individual freedom, we come to the point where the "power-sovereignty" of old "monarchic institutions" can't operate through prohibitions, laws or taboos (Foucault, 1978: 90). Foucault suggests we have to theorize a different kind of power, a "power without the king" (ibid: 91), where population management doesn't impose itself from on high or demand subservience on the part of citizens but operates through everyday institutions: media, education, hospitals, prisons, families and workplaces, to name a few. Through these environments, the locus of power shifts from centralized state authority (the neo-Gramscian focus of critique) to regional and local contexts, where citizens take on the role of governing themselves on the basis of knowledge and discourses available to them. Knowledge and discourse become a means of normalization or a way of generating an ethical code that people willingly follow. In other words, governing at a distance requires a system of "normalizing power" or "truth-telling discourses" (King, 2003: 348 in Bratich) that help generate a common understanding of what it means to be normal versus nonconformist. This form of governance encourages citizens to govern each other by enacting a normative gaze that

condemns subversion and praises conformity. These are the procedures, says Foucault, for generating the truths of a particular era; without the mechanisms of truth-discourses and the production of knowledge, there could be no evidence for aberrant behaviour and, therefore, no ethical basis for avoidance, taboo or prohibitions in the realm of sex, for example, or eating (1978: 57).

The second form of governance, which operates in tandem with the arms-length mode of governance described above, is articulated by Foucault as a kind of self-control motivated by a desire to behave in accordance with established social norms. By adding this mode of governance to his understanding of modern power, Foucault does away with the idea that power comes from a central source or institution and suggests that power operates everywhere. Self-regulation, although it suggests freedom of choice and individual autonomy, is bound by rules of proper conduct and notions of responsibility encouraged by a whole range of institutions and re-enacted time and again by social subjects. While individuals seem to act out personal choices in a society that abhors violent or coercive methods of government and values individual freedom, self-surveillance relies on a person's competence at following certain rules of conduct, which are either taught, implied, suggested or generally made available as practices in a given society (Hay, 2003: 166-167) through discourses of truth and the production of knowledge.

Foucault (1978) argues that a characteristic focus of governance since at least ancient Roman times has been the human body: "The father of the Roman family [had] the right to dispose of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away" (135). Power over the body was largely framed as the power to seize life or let live (ibid: 136) and, although power over the body has evolved since the classical era, it is still largely the basis of liberal forms of government. In an effort to support a belief in individual autonomy and an accompanying rejection of sovereign power that exercises control over members of a group, contemporary liberal government typically frames itself as a caretaker of the people rather than a controlling disciplinarian. Through health and wealth management, liberal governments promise to help citizens survive through access to resources. Power in the liberal state is no longer manifested in its authority to kill or take life, an idea that is still frequently encountered in

public debates over capital punishment, euthanasia, abortion and other instances where the parameters of life and the individual will to die come under close public scrutiny; instead, the “power of death that symbolized sovereign power” is replaced by power over life (ibid:140), an idea that is also encountered today in cases where life-sustaining mechanisms such as force-feeding and life support machines are used to further the biological existence of citizens, often against their wishes. In Nancy Fraser’s (1981) terms, bio-power is about managing the production and reproduction of life, so it objectifies things like health, sexuality and diet as “resources to be administered, cultivated and controlled. It uses new quantitative social science techniques to count, analyze, predict and prescribe” (279). Poised as an altruistic force that allows citizens to thrive biologically, caretaker governments position themselves like a distant relative that delivers advice at arms length and then lets people go about the business of managing their own lives (on the basis of the advice they were given). In a word, bio-power makes the human body central to issues of governance; the body becomes the site where the tension between individual freedom and sovereign power plays out. In a society that abhors oppressive regimes, the body is a place where power can operate in more pervasive and insidious ways, where subjects themselves reproduce power through ideas about control, deviance, norms, rules, categories, types and “proper” conduct. We learn to catalogue bodies and determine whose body, and whose practices relevant to the body, are appropriate to a certain model of society or indicative of good citizenship. We are what David Green (1984) calls “classified subjects”, which come about through a process of conceptualizing bodies through discourses of difference. Consider, for example, how readily people make it their business to cast knowing glances and then make assumptions about the socio-cultural circumstances of pregnant or breastfeeding women or “overweight” people, especially when their behaviours stray from accepted health-related discourse; we often catch ourselves thinking about how they should use their bodies – what they should eat or drink, for example, where they should walk or how much they should exercise. When difference is visible on the body we view it as a special sign of permission to govern or get involved. Foucault calls this special attention we give to bodies our “biologico-moral responsibility” to make use of our bodies in certain ways.

CHAPTER 4: A CASE STUDY IN OFFICIAL DIETARY REFORM


Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide?

On February 5, 2007, Health Canada released three short, seemingly simple documents for Canadians: *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*, *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis* and *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: A Resource for Educators and Communicators*. When I mention the food guide to people and tell them about this project, most respond by dismissing the guide as having little impact on everyday food choice. They say things like, "I've never even seen a copy of it" or "Do people actually follow the guide anyway?" or "Isn't it just a gentle 'guide' to help us sort through the many choices out there?" While these comments echo my own sense of everyday dietary practices – that they're rooted in a combination of cultural, spiritual, political, environmental, social and economic factors and rarely on the science of nutrition alone or any other foundation for setting rules around diet – the new guide provides a timely opportunity to think about food politics in general (both official and oppositional). And, as I explain below, the guide's influence is neither trivial nor innocent. Alternatively, when I mention that I'm doing a critical analysis of the food guide, some people respond with a knowing story or two about their own frustrations with official food rules: dominant nutritional advice is impractical for families that don't eat animals, for example, and it fails to address the social and environmental impacts of the food we eat, which are decidedly connected to human health. While these are important points of contention, there is plenty of critical work being done on these issues (significant changes to the new guide are presumably the result of policy-oriented critiques) and my immediate goal is neither to refute nor support them directly. Instead, I cite the food guide to showcase how discourses of "good food" work to change the way people eat across a diversity of social, cultural and economic groups and I explore why this might not be a particularly innocent function of any discursive construction of "good food"; hopefully my critical approach is useful and therefore indirectly supportive of anyone who sees food as a site for social, economic and political change, even if it asks tough questions about the morality and effectiveness of tackling big issues via the body and about power in the production of "good food" mythologies.

First, however, I want to address the small problem outlined above: that most people discount the food guide's influence and presence. I disagree. First of all and perhaps most obviously, I would argue that our knowledge of the guide is gleaned indirectly through health practitioners, educators, parents, cookbooks and the market and that this knowledge influences our relationship with food considerably. It took many phone calls and months of waiting for me to get an actual copy of the new guide. So, tired of waiting, I checked with the nutritionist at my doctor's office but even she didn't receive copies until weeks after the public launch. Still, I found myself stumbling into the guide on a regular basis with no effort at all; consider these few examples of how it might find its way into our everyday lives, all of which I encountered over the course of a week. *The Sensible Guide to a Healthy Pregnancy*, published in 2007 by the Minister of Health Canada, includes a six-page section on pre-natal nutrition; it references the food guide eight times and is distributed through doctors, midwives and gynecologists to every expectant woman across the country; *Anne Lindsay's New Light Cooking*, which I found on my parents' cookbook shelf at home, was co-published by home economics writer Anne Lindsay and the Canadian Medical Association in 1998 – it is one of five books in the Anne Lindsay series on “smart” cooking and every page in the 316-page book includes a nutrient table reprinted from the '90s version of the guide; and finally, I came across a milk advertisement (Figure 1) on physician Yoni Freedhoff's (2007) scathing blog about the new food guide; the ad, from *Cosmopolitan Magazine's* April 2007 issue, articulates a connection between the labour needs of industrial society, the economic imperative of the food industry and Canada's food guide. Dr. Freedhoff is primarily concerned with the disconnect between Canada's official advice on nutrition, food industry rhetoric and obesity¹⁰. In line with these concerns, his complaint with the dairy ad is the unexamined caloric content of the recommended two servings of milk (equal to a one-litre bottle of Coke, he says). I would take a different approach to understanding


¹⁰ He makes interesting points about the role of advertising policy in relation to state food guides. For all the guide's hype about whole grains, for example, the food industry is allowed to promise whole grains while giving 30 per cent. According to Dr. Freedhoff, “100% whole wheat” in marketing terms is wheat with 70 per cent of its germ, bran and endosperm removed (bmimedical.blogspot.com). At the same time, the onus is on individuals and families to “eat well”, avoid diet-related disease and shop smartly. In a sea of supermarket products that sound like “wise choices” but deliver very little in terms of nutrients, consumers are set up to fail and then blamed when they do.

this ad. To briefly showcase my analytical approach and my understanding of how the food guide operates in our everyday lives, let's take a quick look:




TWO GLASSES TODAY. BECAUSE THEY'LL NEED IT TOMORROW.

There's no telling what your child might grow up to be. As a parent, you want to do all you can to prepare them for the future. And that includes giving them plenty of milk. Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating recommends kids get at least



two servings of milk, chocolate milk or milk products every single day. Milk, with calcium, protein, and 13 other essential vitamins and nutrients that help your child build a strong, healthy body.

www.dairygoodness.ca



(Figure 1)

In looking at this ad, I would focus on how the discourse of “good nutrition” governs social life by reproducing distinct social classes: the competent, educated class of parents that refuses to impose nutritional risks on its children and the uninformed class of parents that disregards official advice and thus places its offspring in jeopardy. Seen this way, a family’s “choice” to drink milk is more likely rooted in fear and social pressures than faith in the science of nutrition. The ad shows an image of a bare-footed baby wearing a hard-hat, standing on broken black earth and operating an industrial-strength hand tool. The copy, in tandem with the image, articulates a tension between an uncertain but potentially terrible future (“there’s no telling what your child might grow up to be [in] the future”) and a parent’s supposed capacity to control it. For the sake of a child’s best chances for survival in the dark world of heavy labour depicted here, parents are encouraged to feed their children two glasses of milk per day, as recommended by *Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. The idea of sending a naked child alone into the adult world is unthinkable to any parent; this ad, however, makes it thinkable and then asks parents to avoid the situation through specific purchases. The ad also draws unsubtle connections between strong bodies, human capital/labour power and dietary practices; the baby depicted here is at risk of personal injury but his weak body is also a risk to industrial enterprise. So, for personal and social reasons, mothers and mothers-to-be (presumably Cosmo’s core readers) would not want to risk their babies’ futures. But there is an additional weighty consequence to milk avoidance depicted here: the destruction of the future workforce responsible for basic developed-world infrastructures. In all, the ad first invokes notions of an uncertain future, then encourages phobic responses to the possibility of disaster and then offers a solution: a lifelong commitment to drinking milk. The social pressure on parents to protect their babies with certain foods and to deal with perennial uncertainty about the well-being of their children through dietary regulation and smart shopping is clearly represented here; charges of parental (especially maternal, considering the target audience) neglect are implicit in the image of a lone baby on the street who needs milk to grow into a capable adult. So, while the nutritional content of two servings of milk per day is questionable, the problem as I see it is neither the particular food, nor the accuracy of the science, nor whether or not we choose to follow the rules; my interest is in the way this ad helps shape identities, construct political subjects, produce knowledge about what constitutes “good food” and

therefore manage dietary practice on a broad scale. In ways not unlike this ad, state food guides take the nuanced world of eating and propose to turn it into something rational and manageable. With this in mind, I suggest that the three documents released to Canadians last February can be seen as a means of establishing shared notions of how to live and act in the world by normalizing dietary standards. This warrants a closer look at how the guides work.

In this section, I look at Canada's food guide to see how dietary reform functions in everyday life, in part by individualizing systemic social, economic or political problems and thus turning dominant culture and society into the kind of somatic society described by Turner. I will look at how discursive engenderings of "good food" function to establish normative behaviours related to food and body and thus create grounds for both self-surveillance and governance in the name of care and "best" health. To analyze the guide, I will refer to a kind of Foucauldian formulae for doing discourse analysis articulated by Norman Fairclough in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992). First, I look for objects of knowledge constituted by the food guide; in other words, I look for concepts and ideas produced and reproduced by the guide, which have become the objects of everyday social life. Secondly, I look for subject positions associated with the food guide; in other words, I look at how different audiences are positioned as either teachers, learners, observers and so on to show how discourse constitutes social subjects. The point is to show how notions of "good diet" or "good food" are "made intelligible for reflection and guidance" (Bratich et al, 2003: 11) and how this results in changes to the way people eat through social pressures rather than choice. To conclude this chapter, I look at how food anxieties and dietary reform can function to maintain social order and divert public attention from the generative roots of major crises by encouraging us to care for our own jeopardized bodies and/or use our bodies toward social change. I briefly examine the history and roots of food anxieties and the role of nutritional science in establishing food as an enemy and an important focus for everyday critical work. Finally, I connect Foucault's concept of bio-power to the food guide: the guide encourages self-surveillance and characterizes state governance as a hands-off, liberal democratic form of government yet it also frames certain actions related to food and body as aberrant and thus undoable for "good" citizens or "good" parents. To begin, however, I'll look briefly at the history of nutrition and how it became the foundation for national food programs.

Nineteenth-Century Nutrition: A Diet for Workers and Soldiers

Nutrition came into being during a scientific era preoccupied with quantification, measurement and locating the parts of whole substances. Food substances previously considered whole, such as an apple or a bean, were reduced to isolated chemical components; things like water became H²O and a piece of cheese became a conglomerate of fat, carbohydrates and proteins; each component was assigned a role in its relationship with the human body. Around the same time, nutrients replaced food in medical discourses related to health (Ferrierès, 2006: 273) and lay materialist, semiotic and constructivist approaches to diet were broadly pushed aside in favour of the new scientific approach to eating. According to Turner, this trend of reducing wholes to bits coincided with a time when industrializing nations were investing heavily in medical science with a goal to keep the working classes healthy and efficient (228). So the idea that the chemical function of food parts in the human body could be identified was exciting: it meant that eating could be turned into a deliberate means of creating energy in the human body. The new science of nutrition, then, harboured rewards for burgeoning capitalist economies if it could promise to turn optimum bodily functioning (health) into a fine science. The opposite of a healthy, well-fed population is an undernourished population that "threatens the stability of a capitalist state" (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997: 133). There is economic value, in other words, in calculable scientific approaches to health. Beardsworth and Keil put it more plainly: "State diet is motivated by need for workers and soldiers" (*ibid*), who function to keep the social and economic status quo.¹¹

Nutrition advocates came out in droves in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and nutritional knowledge began to shape the new food paradigm advocated by governments in the U.S. and Canada around the turn of the century. The discourse of good nutrition emerged as the dominant voice of dietary management. The science of

¹¹ In late capitalist society, suggests Turner, diseased bodies are the new economic goal. The idea of possible sickness or death motivates huge amounts of spending on anti-ageing technologies and various products meant to increase our longevity. In an economic sense, disease has become generative. Turner questions the ethics, of course, of the quest to live longer. "It cannot be the case," says Turner, thinking of the difference between death and ageing in developing nations versus life-sustaining technologies and increased longevity in developed nations, "that I have a right to live indefinitely at your expense" (*ibid*: 228). In other words, the right to a long life is not equally accessible to all people, which calls "rights" as a whole into question and points to "the social dimension of rights" (*ibid*).

nutrition went public in the United States in 1894, when the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was asked “to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on human nutrition” (Gifford, 2002: 89). In Canada, food adulteration, inspection and surveillance services began to appear that same year but organized nutrition education programs weren’t developed until the 1920s (Ostry, 2006: 20). The first official food guide came out in the United States in 1916. In Canada, the first guide – *Canada’s Official Food Rules* – was published in 1942, when food rationing during World War II created an impetus for launching dietary rules in the name of patriotism. But there were other motivations too. As Aleck Samuel Ostry (2006) puts it, industrialization and military growth spawned major economic, health and security changes in urban centres and nutritional science came along at the right time to help deal with all three. Regulatory systems like nutrition guides and other modes of dietary surveillance were established in most industrializing nations at the turn of the century, as people moved away from land-based subsistence communities to large industrializing cities; self-sustaining food systems facilitated by farming and agricultural labour were being abandoned in favour of wage labour, so governments took on the role of managing food systems that would feed urban populations and keep workers strong without relying as heavily on agricultural output in the countryside (ibid: 11). There were health issues associated with industrialization as well: public health systems were inchoate in young industrializing nations and death rates in the city were high due to infectious diseases; with no land to grow food on and little cash to purchase food supplies, poor and undernourished women and children were especially vulnerable. In an effort to assist impoverished families, women’s organizations in the early twentieth-century launched campaigns to reduce infant mortality. Around the same time, the Canadian military found many men unfit for war and declared public health a security issue (ibid: 23-25). Once the federal government recognized this link between the nation’s diet and the success of the new economic project, the women’s movement earned official support for its infant-mortality campaign. Humanitarian, economic and military interest in diet coalesced. The following comment, made by an unidentified source during the First World War, showcases the importance of ensuring infant health for the imperial project: “Empires and States are built up of babies. Cities are dependent for their continuance on babies. Armies are recruited only if and when we have cared for our babies” (ibid: 26). Fit, functioning bodies were increasingly seen as crucial to national military and economic goals. Here is a similar statement from 1942, which

reiterates a predominant rationale for guiding food choice in Canada: “Canada at war cannot afford to ignore the power that is obtainable by eating the right foods” (Health Canada, 2007c). The connection being made here is clear: a specific kind of diet will ensure the survival of the population and people who eat the “wrong” foods literally weaken the collective body, especially during times of war.

Underlying state diet, then, is the eugenicist’s dream of a perfect and powerful population – a dream infamously upheld by Hitler, as Foucault (1978: 150) and many others have pointed out. The quest for a perfect society riddled public discussion in Canada and the US during the early twentieth century; certain ways of life, everyday practices and inherited traits were demonized for thwarting the dream of a powerful human race. Valverde (1991) cites several disturbing examples of eugenicist discourse in Canada: “A degeneracy appalling in magnitude threatens to destroy this Republic,” said a U.S. doctor in 1912, to which the president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union responded, “We Canadians can claim no exemption from the same cause. Every alcohol-tainted child... becomes a real menace to the development of the highest and best in our national life” (60); in 1920, Canada’s most well-known psychiatrist, Dr. C.K. Clarke, advised the Canadian Council on the Immigration of Women that Jewish immigrant children “should be kept for several days under inspection and the weaklings weeded out remorselessly” (106); and finally, in support of institutionalized sterilization of “feeble-minded” women (women who became prostitutes), the National Council on Women was advised that “the feeble-minded of our land are supplying sixty percent of the illegitimate children” (94) and that prostitutes should see the doctor. Eugenics promoted the idea of what Foucault (1978) calls “biological responsibility” for the survival of the species (118). Diet, sex, birth and marriage and fertility were each positioned as life pursuits of great consequence to the dream of controlled human evolution; as a result, certain actions in each of these life domains were considered vital to the dream of a better species, while others were considered degenerate and socially irresponsible. A healthy diet advocated by the state and the social pressure to accept it, then, is partly explained by the discourse of eugenics – a discourse seen in contemporary framing of obesity as a financial drain on social resources meant to benefit the population.

Considering the value placed on public health during the transition from pre-industrial rural to industrial urban economies, a value supported by eugenicist discourse

and economic goals in early twentieth-century Canada, the science of nutrition came at just the right moment. Canada was ripe for dietary reform and government accepted the new science as probable cause to advise the entire nation on what to eat in the name of economic and military order. The goal in terms of governance would be to use the trusted language of science to encourage all citizens to eat foods that would “merge national nutrition goals, data from food consumption surveys and issues of food supply and production” (Health Canada, 2007c). Nutritional scientists and food entrepreneurs, of course, readily supported the notion of a state-sanctioned diet. Scientists, whose careers depend on research funding and good reputations, celebrated official sanctioning of their latest discoveries and promptly joined a variety of government bodies to ensure continued support for their work on nutrition. In the U.S., for example, the first efforts to create a national diet based on nutrition were propelled by chemist W.O. Atwater; he connected the science to social problems in the emerging industrial economy and, by making this link, he was able to find official support for his work; he got himself a job with the United States Department of Agriculture (the government body responsible for collecting and distributing nutrition information) and worked there until 1923 (Crotty: 16). He was in a perfect position to ensure continued financial support for nutritional research. Farmers and food industry entrepreneurs supported the notion of a state-sanctioned diet as well. Since their livelihoods depended on selling product, they wanted their wares on the list of state-sanctioned foods. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, for example, wanted a wider market for his wheat and corn flakes; he believed exercise, fresh air, good posture and smooth bowel functions were the keys to wellness and fed his fibrous flakes to patients at his Battle Creek sanitarium (Gifford, 2002: 91). Charles W. Post was a patient at Battle Creek and he had a cereal invention of his own. When the men discovered their common interest in the physiological wonders of fibre, they worked together to ensure their cereals were widely distributed. Both men got involved in developing public nutrition guides, with a goal of course to see their products incorporated into the list of essential foods. As a rule, nobody working in food industries or farming wants the guide to recommend less of the food they produce. So, three powerful groups came together in support of a state food guide all at once: scientists who sought recognition for their work, entrepreneurs who wanted markets for their products and federal governments who wanted assurance that strong bodies were available to serve military and industry. Michael Pollan (2007a) recalls a now-familiar story about the problematic link between industry, science and dietary advice:

[In 1977, a Senate Select Committee on Nutrition] learned that while rates of coronary heart disease had soared in America since World War II, other cultures that consumed traditional diets based largely on plants had strikingly low rates of chronic disease. Epidemiologists also had observed that in America during the war years, when meat and dairy products were strictly rationed, the rate of heart disease temporarily plummeted. Naively putting two and two together, the committee drafted a straightforward set of dietary guidelines calling on Americans to cut down on red meat and dairy products. Within weeks a firestorm, emanating from the red-meat and dairy industries, engulfed the committee, and Senator McGovern (who had a great many cattle ranchers among his South Dakota constituents) was forced to beat a retreat. The committee's recommendations were hastily rewritten. Plain talk about food – the committee had advised Americans to actually 'reduce consumption of meat' – was replaced by artful compromise: 'Choose meats, poultry and fish that will reduce saturated-fat intake.' (para. 8-9)

The final step, once government, science and industry were on board with the science of nutrition, would be to win public support for food advice based on the new science, which will be the focus of the impending analysis of Canada's food guide. Public support would be a matter of convincing people that food's ultimate purpose is maximum biological health, that nutrient calculations are the way to determine food's particular health benefits and that anyone who deviates from the guide is making a significant, if not treasonous, mistake. It was the beginning of a systematic approach to diet and it called for the transformation and regulation of the way people approached food. The tone of the transformation was educational: scientists, politicians, health practitioners and policy advocates had some advice, it seemed, for the underclasses. Atwater, for instance, was particularly concerned with teaching the daughters of the working class to select "good food" and cook it from scratch; this would be the way, he thought, to distribute nutrition information and ensure its survival through to future generations (Crotty: 18). In Canada, the message to citizens in 1942 was dead simple: "These are the Health-Protective Foods," read the guide. "Be sure you eat them every day in at least these amounts" (Figure 2.1). To distribute the information in 1942, the government rolled out a massive media campaign, using radio spots, weekly press releases and magazine stories. And as "Check Your War Efficiency" leaflets were slipped through the mail slot at home, kids returned from school with the same information because public school staff had received lesson plans on how to teach healthy eating (Health Canada, 2007c).

It should be noted, of course, that a complex understanding of the health values of different foods was not “discovered” by nutritional scientists. Humans were not devoid of knowledge about how to eat before nutritional science came along. In an essay on nutrition in India, Ellen Messer (1986) explains that ethnographic studies show how people across cultures and throughout history have developed concepts of “energy balance” and made connections between certain foods and feelings of health or illness; though the language of nutrition was not the dominant means of speaking about food values until relatively recently, people were not without knowledge of food values prior to the discovery of nutrients (60). Nobody, of course, wants rickets or scurvy or any other illness related to dietary deficiencies. Where and when these illnesses arose prior to nutritional science, then, it was likely due to a lack of food sources that could have prevented certain illnesses, rather than a lack of knowledge about food’s medicinal properties. As Pollan (2007a) puts it, “Humans [have been] deciding what to eat without expert help...with notable success since coming down out of the trees” (para. 5). It should also be noted that food guides have been useful for poverty activists fighting to ensure equal access to food for all people. With scientific proof that inadequate nutrients increase one’s chances of death and disease, many social change activists have been able to use officially sanctioned guides as proof of human rights abuses wherever there are cases of hunger and malnutrition. This does not mean all activists agree with the suggested foods or with regulation of the body but it does suggest the guides have been useful to oppositional food movements in unexpected ways.

Canada’s Food Guide Through a Foucauldian Lens

I will now look at Health Canada’s 2007 *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide* and *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis*, along with the 2007 educator’s guide and related media coverage of all three documents at the time of writing. The goal here is to explore how discourses of “good food” or “proper diet” make it our biológico-moral responsibility to use our bodies in certain ways through food. First, however, I will reiterate a point that many Foucauldian scholars have made about the production of knowledge to clarify my own position on ideology theory, propaganda and other ideas about overt domination. C.G. Prado (2000) summarizes a core idea in *The History of Sexuality* when he says that “power manufactures a particular subjectivity by producing norms and self-images that people internalize and take as the truth about

themselves” (85); he also captures Foucault’s belief that power is not “conspiratorial” or “a dark force shaping events” (88) but something that is engendered by self-regulating social agents who participate in a shared and equal process of forming, perpetuating, internalizing and complying with ideas, values and norms. Individuals, according to Foucault, “behave according to norm because they want to” (ibid:89). While mass society theory posits that economic and political elites manipulate the masses and that only an enlightened few can see through the veil of power while most people are incapable of such challenging yet important work, Foucault says we are equally enmeshed in and responsible for the way the world is. I highlight this aspect of Foucault’s thinking to thwart any misinterpretation of my reasons for choosing Canada’s food guide as a case study in dietary reform; I am not suggesting that, because the guide is created and distributed by the federal government, it is a piece of propaganda imposed on unsuspecting citizens from the top down. I would suggest, instead, that it works in tandem with the existing values and behaviours of self-regulating social agents. In other words, it is a cultural narrative with characters, actions, themes and plotlines most people are familiar with. As I outlined earlier, I am looking for two things here: key concepts and ideas, as well as the positioning and characterization of social subjects.

Exemplary Eaters

"The new food guide contains more information to help Canadians make wise choices about the food they eat," said Health Minister Tony Clement at a news conference on February 5, 2007, the day of the guide’s release (CBC, 2007a). The first kind of social subject characterized by the guide and surrounding dialogue is the ‘exemplary eater’, a wise communitarian who is able to make ethical decisions by gaining knowledge about what is right and then educating others on what it looks like to eat correctly. The notion of “wise choices” recurs throughout the guide and was peppered across Canadian news media after its release. The wise communitarian is more explicitly represented in Health Canada’s supplementary document *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide: A Resource for Educators and Communicators*, where educators are reminded of their “strong influence on individual food choices” (2007b:1) and their special position as role models for anyone in their charge. The resource says, “Your actions, such as snacking on fruit or serving healthy foods during events, can strongly support what you tell people about healthy eating and healthy living” (ibid: 10). The resource becomes even more explicit

about the exemplary eater's superior ability to overcome barriers to nutrition-based food rules and his/her special role as a model of "good" eating. This copy from the guide undermines common barriers to "good" eating while it celebrates the educator's superior ability to follow the rules. The condescension is hard to miss here:

Common reasons for not consuming vegetables and fruit are 'it takes too much time' and 'it is too difficult to eat the recommended amount'. Despite your own busy schedule, you likely have a good understanding of the value of eating plenty of vegetables and fruit.... Sharing your list of strategies and tips can be useful and motivating. It can help to teach consumers that, with a little planning, they can get there too (ibid:14).

The wise communitarian or exemplary eater is also responsible, it seems, for saving lives. Throughout the food guide and related media coverage, suggested dietary practices are said to prevent a range of officially recognized diseases. Educators are told they "will help people reduce the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain types of cancer and osteoporosis" (ibid: 3) by teaching the recommended eating patterns and setting a good example. Then, to make this responsibility especially urgent, the resource asks educators to care for students as if they were their own children. "Are you a role model for your family?" asks the guide, alluding directly to the paternal quality of public education. And then:

How do you encourage your own children and family to drink adequate amounts of milk? Do you offer them milk at every meal instead of juice or soft drinks? Do you make puddings and oatmeal with milk? Every little bit counts (ibid: 21).

Exemplary eaters are equipped with the knowledge to teach others how to make ethical choices when it comes to food; they can help people decide what is right and wrong or good and bad. They are also, however, shepherding figurative children (because students are actually quite often adults) away from the dangers of disease and even death. "People may need guidance," (ibid: 27) says the resource and advises educators to guide people by putting recommended eating patterns into practice. Foucault (1979) outlines the ancient history of "pastoral power", which is the kind of power invested in educators here. Pastoral power is illustrated in countless popular narratives about shepherds guiding their flocks to safety. The food guide's teaching resource is an example of what Foucault calls "pastoral technology" designed toward managing large groups of people.

Wise Choices

As noted above, the discourse surrounding the food guide reinforces the idea of “wise choices” and connects individual wisdom with knowledge of nutritional facts. The guide itself reads: “Compare the Nutrition Facts table on yogurts or cheeses to make wise choices” (Health Canada, 2007). By drawing connections between wisdom and nutrition, the guide turns decision-making in the realm of food consumption into a form of ethical conduct. Wisdom is generally understood as the ability to do the right thing, to know effortlessly when to act and how to act. The ethical subject is free to make decisions through what James Hay (2003), citing Foucault, calls “an ongoing process of governing oneself, properly applying oneself, and acting responsibly across every sphere of life” (166). The word “choice” implies freedom to make decisions, yet “wise” implies there are certain rules of conduct that should guide, limit and govern “choice” if the choosing subject doesn’t want to embarrass or endanger him/herself. The opposite of a wise choice is a silly choice or an unwise choice. So, to do anything other than compare “Nutrition Facts” in making food decisions is to act unwisely according to the guide. In other words, people risk being perceived as silly or unwise if they stray from the guide’s recommendations. A “wise choice”, in this sense, is scarcely optional and the concept itself motivates particular actions related to food.

Dietary Rogues

Dangerous foods and self-destructive eating patterns are objectified in the food guide as dietary behaviours that stray from core nutritional advice. The eater risks the possibility of decreased physical well-being or increased chance of death by diet-related illness if s/he ignores the guide’s advice. To accept the risks, dismiss the guide and adopt an aberrant diet is to become a kind of dietary rogue. The short, six-page *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide* first gently invites us to “choose” vegetables with little added fat, sugar and salt, to “choose” grain products that are lower in fat, sugar and salt and to “select” lean meats free from visible fats and low in added salt. The transition toward gently persuasive language and away from dictatorial prose is part of an official position on how to deliver nutritional advice. From Health Canada’s “History of the Food Guide” (2007c):

Canada's Official Food Rules (1942) became Canada's Food Rules (1944, 1949), then Canada's Food Guide (1961, 1977, 1982). Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating (1992) has now evolved to Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide

(2007). The title changes signify an evolution in the positioning and philosophy of the food guide (Figures 2.1-2.5).

The transitions are in line with Foucault's analysis of modern liberal governance, which condemns oppressive rule and celebrates individual freedom. On another page of the guide, however, there is a similarly-toned yet certainly more threatening piece of information: "Following the tips in Canada's Food Guide will help reduce your risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain types of cancer and osteoporosis" (Health Canada, 2007). It's easy to see what the guide is really getting at: if you do not choose to eat in the ways we suggest, you might get sick or die. The idea of risky foods is daunting enough in terms of individual well-being. The guide, however, shows that individual health is not the only thing at stake. Through a series of graphics, the guide positions "choosing" individuals as part of a larger entity: the family. The series of images depicts two children playing, next to a woman of childbearing age jogging, next to an image of an over-50 man cycling. The narrative is simple and common: we start as children, tend to have our own children and then grow old. So, by including images of an active family (they are all exercising) through the generations, the guide suggests that individual food choice is also about protecting future generations. If we don't care for ourselves, we'll be hard-pressed to care for others; if we resist nutritional wisdom, everyone around us has the potential to become sick or die. This is truly daunting and it's a reasonable impetus for following the guide.

Self-Respect and Holistic Health: A Food Guide for First Nations

The generic version of Canada's food guide for 2007 includes a separate four-page document called *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis* (Figure 2.5). This is the first national food guide tailored to "reflect [Native] foods and traditions" (Health Canada, 2007c). The guide is based on nutritional science but includes images and descriptions of foods not included in the generic food guide, as well as images of people acquiring foods through hunting and gathering methods. At first glance, this seems to be the major difference between the two documents: images of how food is acquired and processed are unique to each guide. For example, the Meat and Alternatives section of the generic guide shows an image of an anonymous plucked bird, which reflects the dominant means of obtaining animal products across Canada: at grocery stores, already processed and far removed from any signs of their relationship to

living animals (for Carol Adams, this meat-market version of the 'absent referent' is comparable to pornography's lack of connection to women's humanity). The Native guide, however, includes images of whole animals in the outdoors and depicts people happily hunting and fishing. On the front cover, there are rudimentary graphic images of a grazing elk, a rabbit, a duck, a flock of geese flying through the air, a male and female moose, a pair of bison and a seal diving alongside two fish. Next to these animal images, there are people (presumably Native) hooking fish, gutting fish, drying fish, gathering greens and cooking over fire. These representations of traditional hunting and gathering methods are juxtaposed with images of store-bought foods since, as Health Canada explains in its online celebration of the new guide, there is more to Native cuisine than "moose stew, char, blueberries and bannock" (2007c); store-bought foods are a huge part of Native cuisine, though not without controversy.¹² The difference between animal imagery in the Native guide versus meat imagery in the generic guide warrants further attention and it wouldn't be beyond the scope of this paper to relate these images to the social construction of bodies; in 1961, edible animals look delighted to be in Canada's official Meat and Fish section (Figure 2.3); where did their smiling cartoon faces go and why? The difference between the two guides I'd like to point out, however, has to do with the way bodies are constructed in the Native guide in comparison with the generic one. In the generic food guide, the word 'body' appears three times and always in connection with 'healthy weight'. In the Native guide, however, there are no direct references to 'healthy body weight'. The word 'body' in the Native guide is connected instead to 'self-respect'. "Respect your body", it reads. "Your choices matter," (Health Canada, 2007a). This message is followed up by a list of food choices that are framed as "important ways to respect your body." The guide ends with a plug for holistic health, connecting body, mind and soul: "For strong body, mind and spirit, be active every day." While the generic guide frames "good" food choices as a

¹² Native communities in Canada have created alternative food guides in the past with NGO funding and through independent media projects. I am thinking here of the *Interior B.C. Native Food Guide* published by the BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society and *Dene Bush Food and Canada's Food Guide*, a film I was unfortunately not able to track down. The *Interior B.C. Native Food Guide* uses nutritional science to show that traditional foods are nutritious, acknowledging the dietary "transition" facing Native communities that often find themselves shopping for food rather than producing it. There are obvious barriers to food production and subsistence gathering related to land and water claims in Canada and there are growing concerns around chemical contaminants in traditional foods as well, mainly fish. Besides these alternatives to the national food guide, there are Native food sovereignty groups in Canada working toward subsistence rights, as well as crop production projects that are growing plants unseen for 50 years.

sign of *wisdom* and *knowledge* of best practices in the realm of food and diet, the Native guide seems to position food choice as a sign of self-respect and innate closeness to one's own body. As well, while the generic guide frames the body as a straightforward visible sign of the mind's purity or pollution (of its wisdom), the Native guide conceives of the body as something inseparable from mind and spirit.

In a neo-colonial context, the Native food guide seems especially contentious. In the same way the generic guide generates essentialist ideas about "good" citizenship and "healthy" bodies and shows us how to enact these ideas through diet, the Native guide generates ideas about how to perform Nativeness through food and body. Reference to subsistence traditions and holistic conceptions of the body may or may not represent what it means to be Native in Canada today. Just as the generic guide speaks to an imaginary "Canadian" audience, the Native guide speaks to an imaginary "First Nations" audience. While certainly there are active subsistence communities in Canada and the guide is more than likely meant to be symbolically supportive, it would be interesting to explore how references to food traditions might undermine hard-fought efforts to deconstruct ideas about cultural authenticity. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong (1998) puts it, "I can think of no other group whose cultural 'authenticity' is judged by whether they are living in the ways of their ancestors" (171). As such, *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis* could be riddled with the same problems as Robert Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North* (1922); it is a unified representation of what it means to be Native and is therefore unrepresentative of nuanced socio-cultural groups. At the same time, it operates as a mode of governance through normative statements about how to perform Native-ness and, as I hope I have shown, this encourages self-surveillance and a disciplining of the body through particular dietary practices. On a more cheerful note, the launch of this tailored guide hints at the idea that a national food paradigm simply doesn't make sense and suggests it might be interesting to talk about different approaches to food and diet.

Enemy Foods: Putting the Guide Into Context

It's not a coincidence that the inaugural food guides in Canada and the U.S. came out in the midst of world wars (America's first guide came out in 1916 and Canada's came out in 1942). Placed within the framework of Turner's "somatic society", dietary

administration or food regimes can easily be thought of as something borne out of broad political and economic concerns that sharpen their focus by redirecting our critical gaze onto something more concrete and seemingly more manageable: individual and collective bodies. While the scientific discourse of nutrition has led many of us to self-regulate our food intake with nutrition in mind, food rules based on nutritional science have almost certainly been used to establish moral order and a sense of unity through food and body. We tend to shame those who don't follow the rules and we tend to accept open critique of individuals when we don't agree with their dietary choices. But Crotty's critique of "good nutrition" questions whether or not nutritional science is value-neutral, as it is often presented. The history of nutrition shows that the science is clearly connected to industrial and military concerns. Crotty says much the same thing, arguing that "good nutrition" is largely a cultural issue presented as material fact and that it makes little sense for a relatively unrepresentative group to determine the dietary goals of an entire nation (9), which is in itself an imaginary entity. I align myself with Crotty's thinking once again when she suggests that health and longevity are not necessarily the ultimate dietary goals for everyone and that state nutrition guides, then, make sweeping assumptions about the roots of dietary practices and strong suggestions as to what these roots should be:

Even if there were unequivocal evidence that low-fat diets reduce the prevalence of coronary heart disease, it does not logically follow that low-fat diets are the best kind of diets; that is a value judgement. The superiority or otherwise of a diet has dimensions other than its ability to prevent chronic disease (ibid:10).

As I have argued from the beginning, the reasons why people eat what they do are only motivated in part, if at all, by a desire to be in good biological condition; there are obvious social, economic, political and cultural factors that play a key role in motivating dietary choice and, in many cases, trump arguments for "good health", which is itself a culturally determined notion.

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) identify three paradoxes that have historically characterized human anxieties related to food: first, food can taste good or horrific; secondly, it can give us energy and health or it can cause disease and death; thirdly, food is necessary for the continued existence of the eater but it means ending the life of

the eaten (153), which is an ancient ethical dilemma for the human eater. I would add a fourth paradox to the list: food can be plentiful or scarce and we may either take comfort in finding our bellies full for the moment or it may seem more comforting to conserve food resources for possible food scarcities in the future. Combined, these contradictions lead to some uncertainties in the realm of eating and we have social mechanisms in place to help us cope with the ambivalence. Beardsworth and Keil describe our coping mechanisms as “ready-made social constructs on which the individual can rely to make sense of his or her experiences and to produce a feeling of ease and confidence” through a process of “anxiety neutralization” (154). We have, for instance, familiar spices and flavour traditions that tell us the food we’re eating is familiar and, therefore, safe; when novel foods are introduced, they are usually spiced in a familiar way, usually in line with the culinary traditions particular to a region. We have rituals to thank or apologize to the creatures included in our meals and divine license from various deities who say it is morally acceptable for humans to use plant and animal species for sustenance (154-156). We also have, as many critics of the modern food industry have noted, ways of sheltering ourselves from the fact that our continued existence paradoxically relies on death; for example, we have abattoirs without windows, neutral terminology for meat products (i.e. mutton, beef, pork) and pastoral ad images of roaming farm animals on green pastures from a pre-industrial food past. Finally, to help quell our anxieties, we have dietary guidelines, food safety systems and emergency food storage projects established by states and backed by science. Beardsworth and Keil argue that by accepting these constructs we have, throughout history, freed ourselves from the anxiety caused by so much contradiction surrounding our food. In other words, we have these mechanisms in place to allow ourselves reprieve from the fact that, with every bite, we jeopardize our biological and ethical well-being. Two possible reasons for food taboos and food rules that Beardsworth and Keil fail to mention are articulated theories of food culture mentioned earlier: first, certain food items can become environmentally or economically unfeasible and so, with sustainability as a goal, food taboos are either internalized, written into religious texts or ordained by community leaders; second, food rules function as myth, as a way to make sense of the world. While all possible explanations for food rules are interesting and worth exploring, this paper has focussed on the socio-political explanation for food rules posed by Crotty, Foucault and others.

We have a history in Western society of mobilizing around food crises. When food quantity or quality appears to be at stake, government, scientists, activists, media, families, individuals, industry and consumers rally around the issues. In *Sacred Cow, Mad Cow*, social historian Madeleine Ferrierès (2006) details the history of apocalyptic fears related to food – fears of malicious poisoning, accidental poisoning by natural toxins, scarcity and famine – and shows how an entire nation (France is her case study) will rally around food-related issues, categorize food-related problems, reduce food-related risks and, finally, quell the anxiety. Ferrierès’s goal is to show that anxieties related to food are collective and that they recur throughout history; she also shows that nostalgic longing for a pure food past, a time without any real need to fear the food we eat, is a common popular response to food crises that promotes a history of progress in reverse: instead of seeing human history as a linear chain of events leading from a dark past to a bright future, food anxieties often spawn visions of imminent disaster and widespread longing for an imagined prior existence -- always more serene and bucolic than the present. Her point is not to critique popular food narratives, which could be probed for shades of social Darwinism and questioned for their reliance on oppositional binaries (i.e. pure past vs. polluted present) but to bring the historical perspective into current ways of thinking about food. It’s not the case, she says, that our food fears are the same as those of our ancestors but neither did our ancestors live without these fears. In other words, while fears about the quantity and quality of food may be well-founded, they are also ancient and in trying to understand our present concerns related to food, we might find support from the past (Ferrierès, 2006: 1-8). Dietary regimes play a social role in the way they alleviate food-centred fears, delineate what it means to be fit for membership in a particular community (i.e. bestowed with knowledge of what constitutes acceptable behaviour in the community) and establish a collective sense of stability (through a kind of macropolitics identified by Foucault as bio-politics of the population) and identity (through a kind of micropolitics identified by Foucault as anatomo-politics of the human body) through food. The point of analyzing the guide is to understand how, by establishing imperative behaviours related to food, a food regime functions to normalize and synthesize the social collective. In Foucauldian terms, then, a food regime is a bio-politics of the population meant to manage and regulate whole populations by managing perceptions of body; perceptions of body are then materialized in the way we treat corporeal bodies. As I have already argued, we speak our selves through food and we make assumptions about social subjects based on established

ways of reading bodies and body-related activities (i.e. diet). Our perceptions of the people whose bodies we've read then affect the way we treat them physically. So food regimes are doubly problematic. First, they operate through discursive constructions like "good food", "exemplary eaters", "enemy foods" and "dietary rogues" with little regard for nuanced food languages spoken by diverse socio-cultural groups and with the effect of exerting social pressure equally on everyone. Secondly, they produce scripts for performances of health or sickness and familiarize audiences with visions of fit, healthy bodies that can be seen ingesting certain foods and refusing others; then, any food performance that deviates from the established set of rules indicates a sick or sullied body and this in turn changes the way such bodies are actually treated.

CANADA'S OFFICIAL FOOD RULES

These are the Health-Protective Foods

Be sure you eat them every day in at least these amounts.

(Use more if you can)

MILK—Adults— $\frac{1}{2}$ pint. Children—more than $\frac{1}{2}$ pint. And some CHEESE, as available.

FRUITS—One serving of tomatoes daily, or of a citrus fruit, or of tomato or citrus fruit juices, and one serving of other fruits, fresh, canned or dried.

VEGETABLES (In addition to potatoes of which you need one serving daily)—Two servings daily of vegetables, preferably leafy green, or yellow, and frequently raw.

CEREALS AND BREAD—One serving of a whole-grain cereal and 4 to 6 slices of Canada Approved Bread, brown or white.

MEAT, FISH, etc.—One serving a day of meat, fish, or meat substitutes. Liver, heart or kidney once a week.

EGGS—At least 3 or 4 eggs weekly.

Eat these foods first, then add these and other foods you wish.

Some source of Vitamin D such as fish liver oils, is essential for children, and may be advisable for adults.

(Figure 2.1)

Canada's FOOD RULES

These foods are good to eat. Eat them every day for health.
Have at least three meals each day.

Milk



Children (up to about 12 years) at least 1 pint
Adolescents at least 1½ pints
Adults at least ½ pint

* * *

Fruit



One serving of citrus fruit or tomatoes or their juices;
AND
one serving of other fruit.

* * *

Vegetables



At least one serving of potatoes;
AND
at least two servings of other vegetables, preferably leafy, green or yellow and frequently raw.

* * *

Cereals and Bread



One serving of whole grain cereal;
AND
at least four slices of bread (with butter or fortified margarine).

* * *

Meat and Fish



One serving of meat, fish, poultry, or meat alternates such as dried beans, eggs and cheese.
Use LIVER frequently.
IN ADDITION:
EGGS and CHEESE at least three times a week each.

VITAMIN D—At least 400 International Units daily for all growing persons and expectant and nursing mothers.

Approved by the Canadian Council on Nutrition, 1966
Nutrition Division
Department of National Health and Welfare, Ottawa

(Figure 2.2)

CANADA'S FOOD GUIDE

THESE FOODS ARE GOOD TO EAT.

EAT THEM EVERY DAY FOR HEALTH.

HAVE THREE MEALS EACH DAY.

MILK



Children (up to about 11 years)	2½ cups (20 fl. oz.)
Adolescents	4 cups (32 fl. oz.)
Adults	3 cups (24 fl. oz.)
Expectant and nursing mothers	4 cups (32 fl. oz.)

FRUIT



Two servings of fruit or juice

including a satisfactory source of
vitamin C (ascorbic acid) such as
oranges, tomatoes, vitaminized apple juice.

VEGETABLES



One serving of potatoes.

Two servings of other vegetables,
preferably yellow or green
and often raw.

BREAD AND CEREALS



Bread (with butter or fortified margarine).

One serving of whole grain cereal.

MEAT AND FISH



One serving of meat, fish or poultry.

Eat liver occasionally.

Eggs, cheese, dried beans or peas,
may be used in place of meat.

In addition, eggs and cheese each at least three times a week.

Produced by the Department of National Health and Welfare, Canada,
by authority of the Minister, the Honourable Allan Rock, M.C. (1987).

(Figure 2.3)

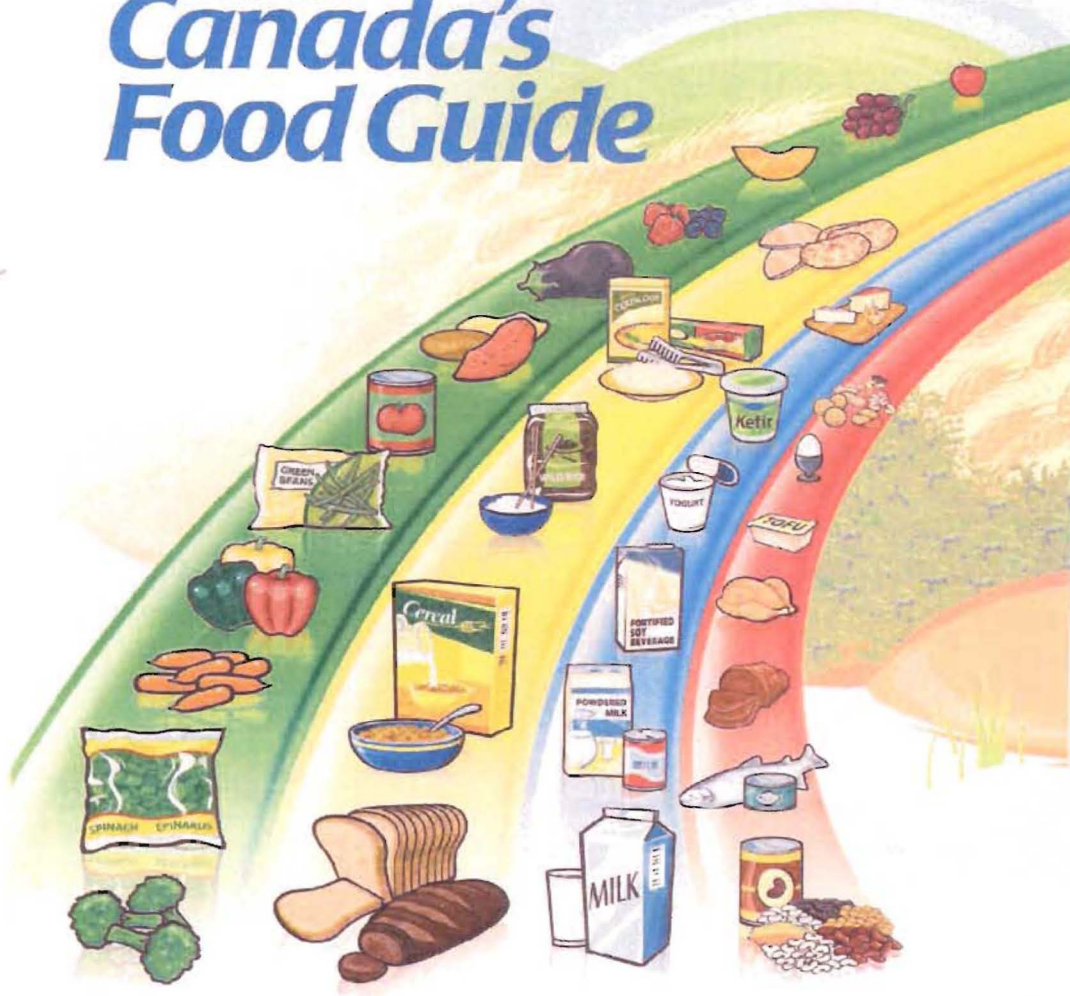


Health Canada Santé Canada

Your health and safety... our priority.

Votre santé et votre sécurité... notre priorité.

Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide



Canada

(Figure 2.4)



Health Canada / Santé Canada

Your health and safety... our priority.

Votre santé et votre sécurité... notre priorité.

Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide

First Nations, Inuit and Métis



Canada

(Figure 2.5)

CHAPTER 5: OPPOSITIONAL DIETARY REFORM: A RESOLVABLE DILEMMA

Undermining the Green Revolution

Some of the most pervasive changes to dietary practices and the food system occurred as a result of the Green Revolution. From the 1930s to 1960s, a series of land reform policies, agricultural policies and technological changes across North America witnessed the mass industrialization, specialization and commoditization of the food system. The revolution was fuelled by an odd trio of circumstances: first, new farm machines and chemical agents (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides) allowed (some) farmers to alleviate the backbreaking work of growing food while producing even higher yields; second, the promise of a high-yielding food production system coupled with a widespread fear of hunger and concerns about a growing population meant that public support for a food revolution was relatively strong; and third, there was an economic imperative in the food and farm industries to produce and sell more food – higher yields and mechanized labour is a well-known recipe for profit, so of course the revolution seemed promising to industrialists. In everyday life, the Green Revolution appeared as a new and amusing world of choice at the supermarket. The cornucopia was made possible, however, by a complex web of capitalist developments that have since been broadly criticized, including market deregulation and the relocation of production facilities to the developing world. Many of today's food movements, then, rightly take aim at the food system and the so-called revolution that spawned it: vegans and vegetarians (though some vegans loathe the thought of this common grouping) take aim at factory farms and related practices that treat animals as lesser beings; local foods advocates reject the ecological devastation associated with the system's reliance on global transportation systems and aim to reconnect consumers with producers in an effort to defetishize food commodities; and the organics movement opposes adulterated foods, including GMO (bio-engineered) foods and foods grown with chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which pose risks¹³ to the

¹³ Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) popularized the idea that modern society is a "risk society" characterized by an increase in invisible, democratic risks (risks that affect everyone, equally and on a global scale, like damage to the ozone layer); risk society, he argued, has generated a new kind of social solidarity built around anxiety and changed the way we organize ourselves to cope

consuming public as well as the producing communities. Critics of the Green Revolution have shown the world how seriously food systems and food choices affect people, animals and the natural environment.¹⁴

It's undeniable that the alimentary industrial complex has had negative consequences. The statistics are well-documented: ecological damage, socio-economic devastation in producer communities, exploitative business practices in poor countries, abusive treatment of non-human species, a growing food security crisis due to near-complete dependence on technology powered by oil and the poor health of individual consumers are just some of the major problems associated with the current food system (see Halweil, 2004; Nabhan, 2002; Lyson, 2004). But with few exceptions what is missing from most of the literature on food, past and present, is a critical take on the politics of food as a social movement. It is my contention, and I hope I have shown this, that dietary practice is rooted in complex socio-cultural and material factors and that no single edible is clearly pure or polluted. It is my hope, however, that some important concerns raised by oppositional dietary reformers can still be addressed seriously by re-examining the cultural roots and routes of dietary practices. While every dissenting bone in my body wants to agree with each and every challenge to the modern food system, it seems that too few people post their challenges with a seed of doubt or a nod to the social, cultural and economic complexities of why people eat what they do. It's not that oppositional dietary choices are "wrong"; it's that there is a problem with presenting them as "right" and thus perpetuate the notion that it's okay to govern bodies through "good" ideas about "better" diets. As I tried to show by analyzing Canada's food guide through a Foucauldian lens, political technologies can be used to produce and deploy information for the purpose of governing collective bodies or populations; however, subjects themselves reproduce certain forms of governance by complying with norms and even by establishing new "natural" or "normal" ways of life. In the same way that the food guide maps ideas about ideal citizens, politicized diets often map ideas about ideal

with the possibility of severe disaster on a massive scale. Risk communication, a subfield of communication studies, looks at disagreements around what constitutes risk. The idea that we live in a "risk society" is not the main focus of my paper but it provides an interesting subtext.

¹⁴ This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of the goals, motivations and philosophical underpinnings of these movements. Exhaustive descriptions of the movements are available elsewhere and the point here is to give just an overview of popular concerns related to our food system.

opposition; this merely creates new political fictions rather than a call to question how fictions are made in the first place. I'll briefly review the dilemma before I suggest a possible solution.

Two Small Case Studies

Most groups associated with the oppositional food movements I have mentioned are cognizant of the complexities of distinct food cultures and wary of the social and material risks of fundamentalist approaches to dietary change. Some oppositional groups, however, make diet the focus of critical energies and attempt to change the way people eat by establishing clear rules around what is and isn't "good" to eat. The most popular strategies seem to oscillate between reformism and abolitionism and both types of approach to social change are easily illustrated by looking at how PETA does politics. The goal for PETA is complete animal liberation and, therefore, vegan diets for all humans (an abolitionist stance) but the approach is often reformist or welfarist. Distinct from social movements that make food and diet the site of small-scale, nuanced cultural and/or material struggle, this type of approach to social change is relatively macroscopic in scale; in both cases, radical collective social change is the goal, but the practical approach to change is quite different. Reformist projects are responsible for some of the most important changes of the last century and we know there are often costs (including philosophical and moral dilemmas) associated with mass social change; in fact, most social change advocates accept certain costs as part of the political process. Cathryn Bailey (2007), for example, recalls the costly public response to a PETA exhibit. The exhibit showed images of black slaves next to tortured animals to draw comparisons between human and animal exploitation; the exhibit, Bailey explains, was deeply offensive to some passers-by who found it reminiscent of racist comparisons between humans and animals (a comparison non-racists also make) and one chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in the U.S. scolded PETA for appropriating images of black pain (41). As Bailey explains, the "animalization of Africans and Native Americans" was a symbolic means of justifying their subordination and this was made possible because animals were already seen as inferior to humans (2007: 44). So, PETA's exhibit is meant to question the kind of hierarchical thinking that made it possible for people to accept and rationalize slavery in the first place – the same kind of thinking that makes it possible for humans to eat animals. The point is that the

logic behind slavery and animal consumption is the same and, since we are still eating animals, we haven't eradicated the *thinkability* of slavery and racism. Still, it is equally reasonable to interpret the exhibit as an act of symbolic violence because it deeply wounded some observers. Perhaps more importantly, it failed to win support for PETA's cause. As a symbolic strategy, it failed to self-reflect on its own symbolic power and capacity for symbolic violence; it failed to see itself as a statement within a much larger dialogue.

The problem that PETA faces in trying to achieve mass change through dietary reform while also accepting that certain individuals and communities will find their tactics painful is, as David Pepper (1993) puts it, rooted in an old debate about social movement strategies: should we approach social change as a collective, as individuals, through mass revolution, through policy reform or through small-scale, community-based struggles? This debate is clearly implicated by the problem of dietary reform; I don't expect to resolve it here or even wrestle with it to a significant extent. I would like to suggest, however, that whenever diet is used as a site for social change there will be significant potential for the kind of pain felt by the passers-by noted above. This kind of violence is antithetical to the ethic of tolerance and respect for difference associated with many feminist approaches to social change, especially those that advocate a personal-is-political approach meant to inspire mass change by example without mass imposition of a particular set of ideals (ibid). As a kind of cultural politics, an animal-protection diet (i.e. vegan) works beautifully because it challenges hierarchical thinking as a whole, including the thinking that allows humans to see animals as edibles. Abolitionist and reformist approaches to animal-protection diets, however, actually reinforce hierarchical thinking by making assumptions about what it means to eat animals. The problem is illustrated by the idea of "soul food", a form of culinary (i.e. symbolic) resistance that turns inedibles into edibles. To make "soul food", subordinate social groups subvert dominant dietary forms by assimilating the dominant group's food scraps into their own unique edible cuisine:

Black 'soul food'... was traditionally made with the parts of animals that white masters did not want to eat. It becomes a show of ethnic pride to reclaim what was previously despised (Bailey, 2007: 46).

As the case of "soul food" suggests, symbolic resistance is an important and useful

means of subverting dominant culture and society; however, it also illustrates the dilemma for oppositional dietary reform. There is no way to delineate what specific foods mean or what resistant diets look like for the purposes macro-scale collective action without centralizing the means to produce narratives about food (i.e. through established organizations and media technologies). In other words, diet-as-politics would be hard-pressed to determine the particular details of resistant dietary practices without also taking a top-down approach. As Ellen Riordan (2004) explains, consumption is “an integral part of the reproduction of capitalism” but also a means of pleasure and resistance for “many politically, economically and socially disenfranchised groups” (347). For this reason, I would suggest that the refusal to eat animals is ideologically aligned with the resolve to find gizzards delicious. This is part of the dilemma for oppositional dietary reform: two different diets can be political partners.

Here’s a final example of a social movement strategy that positions diet as a site for social change but, at the same time, encounters problems along the way. In a documentary film that unravels popular mythologies that characterize sharks as villains, Canadian filmmaker Rob Stewart (2006) depicts the serious ecological risks of harvesting sharks for food and then tells us why we don’t care (but should). He says the tale of the mean, man-eating shark is a cultural fiction amplified by the movie *Jaws* and his film, *Sharkwater*, represents the softer side of sharks in an effort to undo the damage. In *Sharkwater*, sharks are represented as dolphin-like creatures, a man’s-best-friend of the sea. Stewart swims with them and touches them to show his audience how the shark-as-demon myth prevents us from seeing sharks for the peaceful creatures they are. The main problem with the film is not that it questions our tendency to love baby animals but fear scaly ones, or that it critiques the destructive harvesting methods used in the shark fishing industry, or that it cites the ecological risks of a depleting shark population, or that it examines the role of consumer capitalism in driving the whole sharking industry forward (he talks about shark fin soup as a status symbol due to its outrageous price tag). As I see it, the main problem with the film is its unwillingness to fully examine the social and symbolic significance of sharks for the people who use them or the socio-economic significance of poaching (i.e. stealing). Presumably many shark hunters would like to make a living wage without the risk of going to jail and presumably many shark eaters would like to be relieved of social and financial pressures related to shark consumption. Or maybe not – but the film begs questions about the *roots* of our

desire to hunt and eat shark and then leaves the (complicated and multiple) answers completely unturned. Stewart's film is a lesson in commodity fetishism from an environmental perspective and a convincing eco-political interrogation of the way we think of and treat sharks. As a polemic and a cautionary tale, the film works. But as a work of fair and honest socio-cultural research, the film falls short. Did the filmmakers examine, for instance, everyday lived experience for the Guatemalan fishermen whose boats they attacked? Did they explore the possible roots of status-seeking consumption, which is what makes shark fin soup seem so yummy? The problem I'm outlining here isn't new: salmon fishing in the Pacific Northwest and Inuit whale hunting in Northern Canada brought to life a similar problem in the 1990s. Ideas about humanity's environmental responsibility to sustain the sea's fish stocks came head-to-head with ideas about the cultural/symbolic and material rights of Native communities to carry out subsistence activities. The question, it seems to me, is about whose perspective becomes favoured at a particular time and place and whose perspective is allowed, therefore, to trump the rest. Dietary reform, both official and oppositional, confronts this question for reasons I've explained.

Contextual Vegetarianism: Accepting the Dilemma

Cathryn Bailey (2007) articulates a new dietary ethic that takes into account the semiotic life of food. In doing this, she accepts the dilemma of oppositional dietary reform and poses a new way of thinking about diet-as-politics. While she doesn't make apologies for people whose dietary practices ignore the wounds and experiences of all creatures, she doesn't see a solution in linking particular foods with particular ideologies. She refers specifically to vegetarian approaches to politicized eating; however, her "contextual vegetarianism" concept could be adapted and applied to various politicized dietary practices:

The theory of contextual vegetarianism is not about privileged white theorists condescending to 'permit' disadvantaged women and people of color to eat meat. Imagining that theory necessarily functions this way is itself elitist and colonialist. Rather, we can understand contextual vegetarianism as recognizing that killing animals for food may not always have the same meaning (53).

The notion of contextual vegetarianism is refreshing because it takes into account the signifying capacity of food; it suggests that animal consumption, rather than something

to be “pardoned” only when material conditions are sufficiently abject, might signify something other than a patriarchal sense of human superiority; it also suggests that a poor person’s vegetarianism may be a moral decision rather than a material necessity. Ultimately, Bailey concedes that “calls for universal vegetarianism are overly simplistic” (55) and that there is a larger political critique underpinning ethical vegetarianism that cannot be reduced to a list of unbendable rules. Contextual vegetarianism does not establish a paternalistic set of rules but, instead, relies on small-scale (i.e. individual, small-group or regional) assessment of what we consider edible, why and how this might vary depending on context. She adds, however, that “context” should not be abused for personal convenience and that there are both trivial and profound contexts.

Beyond the Quagmire

The problems of relativism and essentialism throw us into a moral, political and intellectual bog when it comes to finding answers to the question, ‘What should we eat?’ There have been many scholarly attempts to climb out of it and some useful concepts have materialized. Crotty quotes sociologist Peter Berger in her own attempts to sort out the strange pairing of philanthropy and value judgements in the creation of dietary guidelines:

Regardless of their technical merits and health consequences, nutrition programs like all political actions represent a range of vested interests. As Berger points out, to recognize this is liberating rather than crippling, as it helps us make moral judgements about programs. He refers to this as striking a morally defensible balance between having power and doing good. Berger speaks of a ‘calculus of pain’. He advocates calculating the cost of a policy by assuming that it is inevitable that someone will pay a price and asking whether the causation of that pain is morally defensible (33).

In other words, the problems with using diet as a site for social change do not have to be politically paralyzing; the contradictions and difficulties associated with diet-as-politics can be incorporated and reworked. There are many ways of thinking about politicized eating that offer momentary respite from the dilemma. Here are just two possibilities, neither of which are my own but both of which likely arose out of a similar goal to thwart political paralysis and come to terms with the types of contradictions I have outlined.

Strategic Essentialism

One useful concept here is “strategic essentialism”, which is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s term. This approach asks us to bracket postmodern challenges to authenticity in cases where the collective “we” isn’t necessarily tied to notions of totalizing sameness and normality. Hertha D. Sweet Wong’s (1998) work on post-colonial autobiography helps as a way of understanding the concept, although she doesn’t specifically use the term “strategic essentialism”. This approach, she says, is often used in autobiographical work that invokes notions of community by writing in the first-person plural (“we”). The goal is not to establish authentic performances of self or suggest that members of a community have to do, say and think the same things; rather, the idea is to call together people who share *something* – a shared vicinity, shared histories or shared interests, for example (172). This provides a way of thinking about diet-as-politics as well, especially if we think of food as a way to build collective identities. Voluntary abolition of imported foods or GMO foods or food with eyes can be the thing that brings members of a group together, an expression of solidarity through dietary practices. As Sweet Wong says, “there are quite tangible and pragmatic reasons to posit a unified community, a strategic political positioning to counter colonial conditions” (272).

By adhering to certain dietary practices, oppositional groups agree to normative ties that bind them together as a group. They claim authenticity. If dietary practice is the key to belonging in any group, however, and if we accept the premise that diet is a language inscribed on the body, collective identities built on dietary practices must also agree to collective governance of the body as well as the centralization of meaning-making apparatuses – at least within the particular social spaces where group identity needs to be established. As part of a larger strategy for social change, this kind of “strategic essentialism” can be used to establish community at the outset, as Sweet Wong explains. Strategic essentialism could also be seen as a way to amplify the spectacle of opposition: the more people agree to use food to express dissatisfaction with the way things are, the more visible and effective diet is as a cultural performance. In terms of strategies, this makes sense if we accept Verta Taylor’s (2007) understanding of spectacle, ritual and other types of performance. Spectacle, she says, is a form of political mobilization, something that is not “just” symbolic but policy-changing and disruptive. I have already explored the material consequences of symbolic power and would suggest that symbolic resistance works in much the same way; it can invoke new

ways of seeing, which can change the way we interact with the people and things around us. Warren Belasco (2005) says a shift in diet is provocative and controversial because food is social and eating is a shared experience in addition to a physiological need (217-218).

I have already mentioned the shady philosophical roots and historic traumas associated with manipulating bodies and controlling appetites and dietary politics might gain credence by acknowledging this dilemma more often. It seems built into the idea of diet-as-politics that bodies, by way of diet, are a site for counter-hegemonic expression. As Alan Warde (2004) points out, far from a simple site of historic oppression and control, the body is also an important site “for conveying self-identity, for it is deeply implicated in the performative and cognitive aspects of class [and race]” (cited in Ashley et al: 201). Perhaps there is something to be said for a “strategic disciplining of the body” along the lines of “strategic essentialism”. It’s worth noting, of course, that Canada’s food guide can be seen as a kind of “strategic essentialism” too, especially if we think of the guide as part of a political strategy rather than an innocent sharing of scientific evidence for certain dietary practices. The food guide establishes official culture from a unified point of view to build a collective national identity, which is enacted through food and body. Oppositional dietary reform, then, could be framed as counter-hegemonic essentialism or a counter-hegemonic disciplining of the body; instead of situating itself within the dominant order (i.e. a society obsessed with control of the body, dietary regimens and discourses of “good food”), perhaps it assimilates the codes and conventions of the dominant order for the purposes of subversion.

Symbolic resistance comes with risks, which I mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Belasco, who has been thinking and teaching about counter-cuisine for years, frames one of the major risks as a mainstreaming or marketing of dissent: “urban industrial capitalist society [profits] from discontent with urban industrial capitalist society” (219). In other words, subversive symbolic and cultural practices can be resituated within dominant frameworks of meaning, such as consumerist or capitalist discourses. The industrialization and mass marketing of “organic” food, then, is a source of frustration for oppositional dieters because the discourse of “good food” from an organics perspective is intrinsic to the building of new food narratives. Michael Pollan articulates what “organic” means in oppositional discourses of “good food” in *Omnivore’s*

Dilemma: “A certified organic label tells a little story about how a particular food was produced, giving the consumer a way to send a message back to the farmer that she values tomatoes produced without harmful pesticides or prefers to feed her children milk from cows that haven’t been injected with hormones” (136). Pollan’s chapter on “big organics” looks at how the “seductive literary form” (137) of the pastoral is also a classic in marketing circles. It is no wonder, then, that when Wal-Mart effortlessly shape-shifted into the hero of the story by rolling out an organics line, oppositional dieters were upset; Wal-Mart is the archetypical villain in food narratives that are opposed to the dominant food system, yet the company has the symbolic power to reframe the story and reproduce the very problems counter-cultural diets attempt to tackle. Wal-Mart’s easy assimilation of dietary resistance where organics are concerned has been popularized and publicly grieved in media stories about the “Walmartization of organics”. The attack on Wal-Mart’s attempt to court green-conscious budget shoppers is explained in a white paper written by The Cornucopia Institute, a family-farm advocacy organization:

The worst-case scenario for the organic industry is for Wal-Mart to first destroy competition, as it has a history of doing in so many other market segments, and then create an abbreviated product line that ignores the ethical expectations of consumers.... Will organic sales continue to flourish at the historic premium prices...if consumers no longer feel that their premium dollars are supporting superior food quality and environmental practices, humane animal husbandry, and economic-justice for family farmers? (Cornucopia Institute, 2006: 4)¹⁵

In other words, Wal-Mart has the power to change what “organic” means to people and people are starting to distrust the term across the board. In a way, however, the “Walmartization of organics” has turned up the volume on discussions about dietary politics and ethical consumption as a whole and the discussion itself can be seen as a

¹⁵ Globe and Mail journalist Margaret Wentz has been called cranky and conservative for her questioning of the resistance to Wal-Mart’s organics line in the Globe’s May 20, 2006 story *Puh-leez, it’s Food Artisan, Not Farmer*. She wonders whether Wal-Mart’s decision to roll out an organics line could also be seen as a way to democratize organics. The feel-good story of organics, she suggests, is expensive and there are shades of class-based snobbery in the strong reaction to Wal-Mart’s organic line. Does the accessibility of organics make them lose their meaning for people able to afford boutique prices? Wentz isn’t wrong about this: organics are more almost always more expensive and they exist in a symbolic system where the taste for certain goods is wrapped up in the price of those goods. Of course, Wentz’s critique doesn’t tell the whole story. She doesn’t talk about how “mass organics” is an impossible scenario, for example. She brings up an important point, however, about the accessibility of symbolic resistance and the desires of Wal-Mart customers to voice their concerns through consumption. The bigger question, I think, is about the political potential in “ethical consumption”, which seems to reproduce the very problems it is meant to solve. The Wal-Mart story is a case in point.

form of resistance. It seems to that Wal-Mart's organics line and the reaction to it problematizes the discourse of "good food" in ways that could actually *help* oppositional dietary politics. If the goal is to disrupt the status quo, to undo the generative forces that reproduce things like inequality, risky foods and environmental destruction via the modern food system, the dialogue and the struggle over the meaning of "organic" is a resolution in itself because it disrupts naturalized ideas about what our food means and where it comes from. The notion of dialogue is important here and it is the second possibility I want to suggest as a way out of the quagmire.

Dialogism

Bakhtin's *dialogism* is the concept I want to highlight here for its usefulness – its buoyancy – in working through some of the challenges for oppositional politics I've tried to highlight. I've pointed out similarities between official approaches to change and oppositional approaches to change through diet; although the comparison is disconcerting, I think Bakhtin provides some relief. His theories are useful for official policy as well because they explain quite precisely why unified ideas about what people should eat aren't broadly put into practice. Alternatively known as translinguistics, or a mode of understanding characterized by *multivocality* or *heteroglossia*, dialogism is described by Sweet Wong as a notion that "challenges any monolithic construction of identity that does not acknowledge its own plurality" (169).

Bakhtin's object of study is the utterance, which has five features. With Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) book *The Dialogical Principle* as a guide, I'll explain the utterance as it applies to diet. First, it has boundaries, which are marked by the beginning/end of a statement, a sentence, a paragraph, a document, a conversation or a meal. Second, it is complete in itself since there is a possibility of responding to it. Third, since it is marked by intonations, the utterance is not merely a series of words or foods but an expression of the subject (i.e. an expression of the author of the utterance, whether an individual speaker or Health Canada) and the expression, or intonation, is a subtle, audible cue to the speaker's evaluation of the thing being uttered: "the intonation abuses [the object of the utterance] or flatters it, belittles it or elevates it" (46). Fourth, the utterance is connected with past utterances and it anticipates responses or future ones and, in that sense, it is only "complete" insofar it precedes and follows another utterance.

And fifth, it is always addressed to someone (53). All communication, says Bakhtin, is an exchange of utterances, which is called a dialogue (44). And all dialogue is “contaminated by rudimentary social evaluations and orientations and it is precisely with them that the creative process must struggle” (48). In other words, communication and understanding – enacted through utterances – only makes sense in its dialogic form and it is therefore always oriented by context.

Bakhtin uses a cosmic metaphor to illustrate what dialogism looks like. A monologic approach to meaning and understanding is like a Ptolemaic understanding of the universe: it puts Earth at the centre. “A Ptolemaic linguistic world [is] unified, singular and closed,” suggests Bakhtin (15). This is the opposite of a dialogic approach to meaning, which is more like a Galilean conception of the world: it puts the sun at the centre and is characterized by a “multiplicity of tongues, mutually animating each other” (15). Bakhtin describes his dialogic model of communication as the linguistic equivalent to Galileo’s universe: “[It destroys] the finitude and closure of the old universe, the finiteness of mathematical values and extend[s] the boundaries of the old geographic world” (15). In other words, dialogism does for our understanding of how signification works what Galileo did for our understanding of the universe: it disrupts the codes and conventions (frameworks) within which signs (a nation, a meal, a diet, a food) make sense. It casts doubt on any certainty of some predetermined link between a sign and its signified. It makes interpretation and understanding more of a struggle because it means recognizing that language is “stratified” through multiple ways of seeing the world (Morris, 1994: 73). The fact of different generations of people, of different professions and of entirely different historic eras renders straightforward translation undoable. With dialogism, the conventional dictionary becomes useless because, without the difficult work of interpretation and empathy and understanding, we can’t quickly know for certain what an utterance means. We can only try to understand it through dialogue and empathic efforts to sort through its relationship to prior and future utterances.

To help ground Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, let’s get back to the notion of diet and the hope that dialogism gets us beyond the relativist-essentialist quagmire. First of all, it needs to be said that dialogism is not the same as relativism. As Pam Morris (1994) explains, we still have to be able to understand each other.

It would be a misunderstanding to perceive 'dialogism' or 'heteroglossia' as opening the way to total linguistic freedom. Heteroglossia is certainly perceived as the constituting condition for the possibility of independent consciousness in that any attempt to impose one unitary monologic discourse as the 'Truth' is relativized by its dialogic contact with another social discourse, another view of the world. However, Bakhtin stresses that the force of centralization is indispensable to the life of language in 'guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding (74).

In other words, communication requires some mutual understanding of what we mean by each other. Within a particular social setting or at a particular moment, for example, my Big Mac or my refusal to eat a Big Mac can't have infinite meanings. There are 'centripetal' forces, says Bakhtin that give life to language; a centripetal force can be seen as a worldview or the rules of discourse generated by a certain socio-ideological context – a day, a school, an epoch, a social group or a genre are all possible centripetal forces, he says (ibid: 75). In other words, there are elements within individual creative acts (i.e. utterances and dietary practices) that make them comprehensible; this relational character of the utterance is brought to life in what Bakhtin calls "speech groups". In plain terms, "speech groups" are communities united by the ability to comprehend one others' utterances (27); norms are accepted in such cases because they make mutual understanding possible. For oppositional dietary reform, the creation of dietary norms can be seen as having a communicative function in this sense; discourses of "good food" can be seen as utterances, collective creative acts or meaning-making activities that allow everyone to understand what others in the group mean by their food choices; special diets can be said to be "linguistic facts" in the context of speech groups (also social groups or speech communities).

These centripetal forces, however, occur alongside centrifugal forces or the social and historical conditions in which an utterance occurs. This explains the tension, I think, between PETA and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People described above. Within PETA, as a speech group, the comparison between caged humans and caged animals made sense; the centripetal forces that unite PETA members and supporters allowed the speech group to understand the oppositional and anti-racist meaning behind the exhibit. The exhibit, as an utterance or anti-racist discourse, meant something within the strategic "unitary language" of a particular animal protection movement (ibid: 5). However, the utterance was part of a "social and

historical heteroglossia” (ibid); the exhibit meant something else entirely to other speech groups, who simultaneously saw the exhibit as racist and deeply hurtful. Bakhtin points out, this makes language a “fleeting”, “contradiction-ridden”, “tension-filled” process that is always “open to dispute” and “charged with value”. Both PETA and PETA’s critics were right about the exhibit’s meaning: it was racist *and* anti-racist. This doesn’t make signs meaningless. It means, however, that assumptions and assured interpretations about what others say (through diet) are always fallible and often disconnected from the speech genre situating an author. In a blog posting published on September 10, 2007, a self-identified “female vegan of the African Diaspora” articulates the kind of empathy I think Bakhtin is advocating; the blog’s author acknowledges rather than dismisses different understandings of “animal” and seems aware of generational and racial differences between speech groups. The author describes a conversation with a much-older family member about what it might mean to eat an animal:

[My loved one] kept on talking about how her teachers would call them ‘animals’ during her K-12 schooling experience... For her, she saw the PETA ad as suggesting that blacks are ‘animals.’ Her perception of ‘animal’ is connected to being called or seen as ‘dirty’ or a ‘nigger’... It is absolutely impossible for me to explain to her the concept of speciesism because she has been so thoroughly traumatized by racism and what it “means” for someone to suggest that ‘her suffering’ is the same as an ‘animal’. For her, ‘animal’ has a different ‘meaning’ than it does for many people like myself. You should have seen the hurt, anger and sadness in her eyes as she tried to tell me why ‘animals’ can not be paralleled to the experiences of people who have lived through racism, genocide of their people. I tried to get her to go deeper into this, to suggest that we look at the meaning of ‘animal’ in a way that hasn’t been tainted by her experiences with racism. However, it wasn’t successful (Sistah Vegan, 2007).

Dietary Reform as Utterance

Canada’s food guide positions itself as a centralized, serious, official and unified vision for state dietary practices. In ways I have explained, the guide turns one approach to diet into *the* approach to diet and attempts to imagine Canadian citizens as a mammoth speech group. The food guide is set up to fail as the final word on diet, of course, because it is one utterance within a multitude of discourses of “good food”. It is not the final word on what to eat but a “generative force” (Bakhtin, cited in Morris: 74) for linguistic struggles over the meaning of food. It plays the important role of participating in a conversation about what to eat. This is a partial explanation for its failure to establish predictable, manageable ways of eating. This is also a partial explanation for the less-

than-enthusiastic response to my interest in the guide I mentioned in the introduction to this paper: the guide can't possibly undermine the diversity of opinions on food and approaches to diet, my friends said, and in the end I agree. But the guide still speaks in terms of "best" foods and "good" diets, a framing of everyday behaviour that is replicated often. As I also explained in the introduction, the guide's influence gains authority through experts like doctors and nutritionists and journalists. My argument is that discourses of "good food", like Canada's food guide and some of the dietary reform movements I have mentioned, operate by presenting themselves as ideal, as the model for "right" living. According to Todorov, citing Bakhtin, this positioning of a world view or a way of eating as the ultimate view or the best way of eating is rooted in fear of oppression by dominant groups and dominant ideals: "It would be easy to assert that leaving the 'safety valve' of the [opposition] open is the best means for the dominant class to perpetuate its tyranny" (80).¹⁶ Bakhtin empathizes with subversive politics and aesthetics that position "the people" (opposition to official, dominant culture) as a "supreme" oppositional force (79) or as the "official opposition". As Todorov explains, however, Bakhtin's preference is for a "mixture of [oppositional] styles and an irreducible heterogeneity" (80) that deconstructs the idea of "best practices" altogether and undoes rather than recreates the possibility of rigid dogma.

An approach to dietary politics that illustrates a Bakhtinian or dialogic mode of resistance is found in social movements claiming to decolonize food systems and dietary regimes, as well as food sovereignty movements. Rather than prescribing new dietary norms, food sovereignty movements and dietary decolonization aim to ensure diet is biologically and culturally appropriate so that nobody is hungry or encouraged/forced to eat foods that undermine a sense of self or community established through diet; a second core goal is to eat foods produced in fair conditions and avoid eating foods produced in neo-colonial conditions, such as those where farmers' wages are too low to feed their families; a third core goal is to revalue the skills and vital contributions of food-producing individuals and communities, as well as to ensure the memory of multiple food

¹⁶ Todorov uses the word "carnavalesque" where I've used "opposition". For Bakhtin, "carnival" is a spectacle – often found in popular culture that laughs at the dogma found in serious and official culture (Todorov: 80-81). Pam Morris (1994) explains "carnival" in Bakhtin's terms as a place where folk culture can create a symbolic world that challenges the "official realm" (194). "It is a complex system of meaning existing alongside and in opposition to the authoritarian world of dominant orthodoxy" (ibid).

systems stays strong; a fourth core goal is to preserve food lands through ecologically sensitive production methods; and a fifth goal, as evidenced by the movement's annual meetings and accessible online discussions, is to decide how to do all this through regular and ongoing discussion between "organizations, peasants, family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest communities, women, youth, consumers and environmental and urban movements" (Declaration of Nyeleni, 2007). An earlier report, drafted at the Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2002, defines the movement in terms that echo Bakhtin's ideas about the political potential in heterogeneity. Although the language is problematic (i.e. "rights" are socially defined and questions about 'whose values' comes into play with any one version of "rights"), the movement is about ensuring that diet is made political first and foremost and that food/diet is defined contextually:

Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. Finally, "one size fits all" policies like those emanating from the World Bank, WTO and IMF must be replaced with a vision of "one world with room for many worlds," where strength and human dignity are built through solidarity and respect for diversity, and all countries and peoples have the right to define their own policies (Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2002).

In Bakhtinian terms, the forum statements seem to understand themselves as creative acts occurring within a speech group (i.e. at a conference, in a certain year, with various but certain members of the group) with respectful awareness of multiple speech groups and the need to perpetuate discussion on the issues set forth. The food sovereignty movement, it is important to add here, is policy-oriented but positions itself as an utterance in a sea of utterances rather than the final word. While the food sovereignty movement is clearly committed to humanism and possibility of agency, a *decolonized* dietary politics might also explore why it is that people eat what they do and then begin the discussion about why a particular diet within a particular context might be more complicated and problematic than it seems at first. This would also acknowledge, as I have argued, that there are real social pressures and symbolic barriers to "choosing" certain foods.

CONCLUSION

Health Canada is clear about the motivations and guiding principles behind *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* and the companion documents. The web site states that, for the purposes of reviewing and revising the most recent guide, “twelve individuals were chosen for the varied perspectives they would bring from public health, health policy, nutrition education, disease prevention, industry and communication” (Health Canada, 2007c). It's an honest statement in that it offers no pretensions about the social and cultural considerations that might have gone into the guide, except where they were used for “research and analysis... [of a] communications nature” in order to deal with “issues related to terminology, target audiences and graphics” (ibid). Interestingly, *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: First Nations, Inuit and Métis* is said to recognize “the cultural, spiritual and physical importance of traditional Aboriginal foods as well as the role of non-traditional foods in contemporary diets” (ibid). Though I haven't explored this yet, I imagine there's quite a varied response to this sort of recognition; I imagine a special state food guide isn't exactly considered a major coup for individuals and communities involved in decolonization movements and that the dietary guide, as an utterance, doesn't capture the complexity of indigenous diets but suggests only one approach. In any case, both versions of the guide as well as the educator's manual are narrative accounts of an imagined Canadian diet.

At the same time, however, fictions have what is known in literary theory as “truth value” (Abrams, 1993: 64) or what is known in cultural theory as “symbolic power” (Thompson, 1995). Literary critic M.H. Abrams (1993) suggests that “truth values” are “subject to the criterion of truth or falsity” (64) and I have suggested what these criterion might be; namely, if fictions have the ability to inscribe themselves on human bodies by constraining our everyday movements and impacting the way we treat the corporeal bodies of human and non-human creatures alike, they clearly have sufficient “truth value” or “symbolic power” to become coded as real and used to guide our actions in the world. To make assumptions about the many narratives spoken through diet and to abuse symbolic power as a way to change dietary practice is neo-colonial in two ways: it

fails to recognize foreign (read: different) language (read: diet) as anything but misinformed, senseless or primitive (Columbus vowed to take a few Indians back to Spain “so that they may learn to speak”); and it leads to a desire to change others to suit one’s own interpretative framework; in terms of diet, it leads to the desire to reinvent dietary practice across broad populations so that diet, as a communicative act, can be coded according to normative ideals, usually those of dominant groups.

By recognizing the symbolic life of diet and the complex meanings of food, both official and oppositional dietary reform might benefit. Toward the end of her book, Crotty recommends asking people about extra costs associated with recommended diets, about how food guides change food preparation routines at home and how they might affect single parents or working parents (105). I would add that talking to people about what food means to them might be useful; a look at what particular meals, foods or ways of cooking symbolize in the context of the home or at school could help explain, at the very least, why the idea of “good food” from a nutritional perspective is often discarded. In the introduction to this paper, I listed several approaches to public documentation and discussion about food/diet that might address some of the problems I’ve outlined.

What I hope to have shown through this paper is that dialogue is in itself a political act with the potential to disrupt the status quo. What this means for the discourse of “good food” is that, while a powerful myth, it might be more powerful – as a way toward politicizing diet – to blow the myth apart. Neither state dietary guidelines nor dietary reformists nor oppositional dietary politics are the final word on what to eat and it is a practical mistake to mythologize a particular diet as especially “good”. A monologic approach to dietary change is readily set up to fail because it ignores additional forces at work in shaping what we eat. As Bakhtin suggests, the dialogical system impedes the totalizing efforts of monologue: prior utterances, future utterances and the centripetal forces at work in particular social contexts all prevent unified understanding. When we become conscious of dialogue, says Bakhtin, “national culture [is forced to] shed its closure and its self-sufficiency” (66). “National culture” can be interpreted as a stand-in here for any concept that makes sense of the world through symbols and representations that become accepted as “the way things are”. Bakhtin is aligned with Stuart Hall (1982) who says, “The world has been made to mean.

Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced (67). When a monologic form, such as “nation” or “good food”, becomes aware “of itself as only one among other cultures and languages...a verbal and ideological decentering occurs” and this awareness saps the power of myth (Bakhtin, 1984: 66).

EPILOGUE

As a final note, I want to offer a glimpse into my own speech communities. I have been meditating on the issue of what to eat for over a decade now and for years I've thought dietary approaches to social change were riddled with contradiction; my sense that discourses of "good food" are deeply problematic and that social awkwardness around the question of what to eat is a misdirected form of anxiety has gone unresolved for a long time. I see something hopeful and disastrous at the same time; I see both political opportunity *and* mass somatophobia or neo-colonial control over corporeal bodies. This tension is the driving force behind my paper. I grew up drinking far more milk than water; I always had "meat" and potatoes for supper; I reluctantly ate various leafy greens pulled from the garden in our backyard or purchased by my mom from nearby farmers' stands, a fresh-food treat I now miss but didn't appreciate then; McDonald's was mainly out of the question, except on rare occasions like birthdays. Certainly my childhood diet had something to do with my mom's profession as a registered nurse and her exposure to the nutritional messages of the day. But my parents were also part of the National Geographic set; they loved to travel and they took my brother and I with them at times. I saw dead goats and cow's heads hanging from hooks in Kathmandu, waiting for buyers; I saw families squatting on undeveloped islands off the West Coast of Vancouver Island, eating whatever fish, molluscs, sea greens, rainwater and island creatures they could gather; my dad would often play hunter-gatherer and head out in his kayak to harvest things from the sea or from the lake near our home. At times like this, I ate what places and the people who lived there had to offer. As a literature student in the early '90s, I was excited by post-modern notions of never-ending interpretive play. Around the same time, through a process of denaturalizing my own dietary practices, I recognized the complicated web of social, political, economic and ecological factors that shaped my family's diet and influenced these "other" diets I experienced and observed; I watched most of my friends reject certain foods and practices related to food production too, likely through a similar process of denaturalizing their own dietary practices. I created personal food goals too but I found myself constantly tripped up by the contradictions and I eventually abandoned the idea of ideological purity altogether. Rather than finding

clear answers to the goodness or rightness of any one diet, I found that, whether “right” or “wrong”, the various dietary practices I witnessed, imagined and engaged with at various times made contextual sense. In an article about the criticisms that vegetarian food activists have come up against in trying to establish a universal ethics against animal consumption, Cathryn Bailey (2007) suggests a contextual approach to eating and I align myself with her way of thinking. She warns, however, that an appeal to “context” can be used to excuse animal consumption in an endless range of circumstances and suggests that some contextual factors are trivial. The trick is to determine when and where it is appropriate to apply one’s own particular dietary creed and to keep in mind that diets rooted in ethical considerations are not free of their own ethical challenges. A Bakhtinian dialogic approach to understanding why we eat what we do, I think, helps us make politicized decisions about what to eat without becoming trivial or dogmatic. It’s not an easy approach to deciding how to live but the difficulty is what makes it particularly disruptive and decidedly hopeful.

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