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Food Shaming and Race, and Hungry Translations

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Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America by Psyche A. Williams-Forsion (2022) and *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* by Richa Nagar (2019) deal with food and hunger in relation to the very different geo-

political regions of North America and India. At the same time, they enter into dialogue with each other in exploring how socially situated bodies – othered in gendered, raced and neoliberal systems and discourses – navigate and resist oppressive food politics. As both authors also show, critical approaches to food politics should entail much more than attention to who gets to eat well, or why certain groups are able to waste food obscenely while most of the world’s population starves, cannot make informed and healthy food choices, or inhabits food deserts, those foodscapes of near-starvation created by the corporate food industry’s hunger for profits. As the authors show, exploring the politics of food, eating and hunger should focus also on the languages and attitudes surrounding how these are connected to radical struggles for human freedom. By focusing on the represented and imagined connections between human desires and experiences on one hand and food and hunger on the other, Williams-Forsion and Nagar also encourage us to interrogate and re-imagine our relationships to both humans as well as nature and other living beings. These books’ perspectives from different continents invite us to consider the trans-continental context of multiple subaltern struggles through the lens of food.

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***Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* by Psyche A. Williams-Forson**

Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America, Psyche A. Williams-Forson, 2022, North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, pp. 257, ISBN hard copy:1469668459

Eating While Black is the sort of academic book I love to read, yet rarely encounter. It is incisive and rigorous in arguing that food practices and discourses have been used to humiliate and police black (especially women's) bodies. The author's analysis of how African Americans continue to celebrate culturally resonant and meaningful food practices is also persuasive and compelling. Against the numbing argument that the most significant questions around food for black people should be whether or not they have access to it, the author Psyche Williams-Forson delves deeply into food performances, choices and variety among different black individuals and groups. For example, in chapter 2, she debunks influential stereotypes about what black Americans eat. "Movies, television shows, stand-up comedy and some music regurgitate images of black people eating stereotyped foods like fried chicken and collard greens, and mac and cheese" (p. 59). Her visit to a black community in Western Maryland even leads her to learn something new about black food performance when she encounters dishes such as cabbage and sauerkraut, black culinary adventures that testify to the high concentration of Germans and Scottish-Irish settlers in the area. In her affirmation of black Americans' food performances and cuisine, therefore, the author rejects the idea of static or "authentic" black food. Instead, she demonstrates the dynamics of black cooking and the inventiveness of African Americans in adapting to different environments and food resources and influences. Generally, it is shown that black people's food growing, cooking and eating practices must focus on their choices – motivated by curiosity as well as availability, adaptability, ingenuity, and the defiant refusal of food policing, whether in

the form of white people regulating where black people eat in public because most public eating is considered unsophisticated or unprofessional. Or whether this takes the form of a seemingly well-meaning, yet deeply violent media project using a black child as a study of obesity, and publicly tracking her movements, exercise and eating in order to project a notion of the black body's "lack" and a culturally chauvinistic idea of healthy cooking for health bodies.

In between Williams-Forson's analysis of ingrained racial dynamics in North America's food culture and discourses, the author weaves her own memories, reflections on personal food experiences, stories about those she has known and met, as well as sharp political appraisal of elitist, narrowly health-centred and racist food discourses. This reflectiveness is wonderfully rich because of the author's long-standing fascination with food and, eventual academic interest in the politics of food as material culture. I have often thought that the best writings about food are studies that incorporate writers' personal beliefs and memories, seemingly incidental observations, and first-hand experiences of food performances and practices. This is because, as Williams-Forson reminds us, food disrupts "all the neatness of our lives" (p. 202). Compelling and incisive writing about food requires us to jettison the compartmentalising of our thinking, feeling, intuiting, remembering and knowing selves: a remembered food flavour, the sight of a homeless person trying to obtain food outside a restaurant where highly conspicuous consumption and waste are the order of the day, all become the personalised lenses for teasing out profound and complex analysis. This storytelling echoes approaches in many early and recent feminist studies of food,

where authors, like Williams-Forsen herself, lean on personal reflection and anecdotes as foundations for theorising. This dense layering of arguments about connected power dynamics (what many would describe as intersectional analysis) makes Williams-Forsen's work feminist in ways that are highly relevant, transnational and analytically significant. Rather than bluntly honing in on "gender" or "patriarchy", the author constantly reminds us that attention to power requires attention to a "matrix of oppression".

The title and subtitle of Williams-Forsen's book may lead some to assume that she is dealing with topics that primarily concern black people living in the US. It is of course clear that she writes from the vantage point of a black American challenging hegemonic North American racist myths, and that the ideal reader is meant to appreciate her views of this context. At the same time, the book is also about the complexities of North American food culture in general. Moreover, it raises parallels between racist North American food cultures and contexts like South Africa, where decades of apartheid and colonialism have pathologised many food cultures, led to the othering of indigenous people through the denigration of what they eat and, especially today, turned the eating black body into a subject for medical and public health intervention. Like African Americans, black South Africans are subjected to surveillance and shaming; in order for them to be considered "properly civilised" and "deserving of a middle-class status" or to be "properly schooled" about health and good eating, they are expected to submit to others' intervention. Williams-Forsen also invites comparisons with India, where the food smells and food preferences of Dalits are – according to a bizarre logic – seen to be "natural" expressions of their socially subordinate status and untouchability.

Apart from the book's transnational import in prompting readers to recognise how food shaming and policing naturalise social hierarchies globally, the book is also methodologically suggestive. It homes in on popular culture, digital communication and the mass media in unearthing the growing force and volume of discourses of

food and embodiment. The author, therefore, draws attention to invisibilised and seemingly harmless texts and messages as communicative forms where bodies are coercively policed in terms of what the French philosopher and writer Michel Foucault explained as social surveillance under neo-liberal capitalism. Writing about food has always required attention to ostensibly "trivial" texts, as anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss or Roland Barthes made clear.

However, the innovativeness of Williams-Forsen's approach is that she is especially alert to the ways in which food features within influential public discourses and messages, especially when it circulates digitally, and through forms of media reporting that – even two decades ago – were unprecedented. The book starts with an anecdote, the story of a black woman employee of a Washington Metro train being called out through social media for eating on the train even though eating on Metro trains is prohibited. The author stresses how this exemplifies ways in which black people are vilified for "living while black" (p. 2) very often in the form of the surveillance of their food practices. To me, an even more incisive and disturbing example of this surveillance is the book's account of a young black girl who is violently subjected to what seems like voyeuristic scrutiny from the media. Seen as obese (she is taunted with the name "King Kong" at school (p. 105)), the media story as Williams-Forsen recounts it, actively works to pathologise the body and habits of a child, who is held up for public scrutiny and disapproval. Only when she passes the test of losing weight by following a prescribed diet will she acquire public approval, have a "normal" body and become a "proper" subject. Williams-Forsen describes how pictures of Latrishia are taken which deliberately represent her as a grotesque and inferior body alongside her playmates who are seen to play comfortably because they have "normal" bodies. Latrishia is shown to be subjected to a disciplining system in which she is taught to eat and exercise in order to correct her pathologically obese body.

These kinds of messages about bodies and food – whether about individuals or groups – have become common in South

African nutritional and public health media reporting and scholarship as well. Here, a newly wealthy or urbanised black middle class is seen to be unable to control its overconsumption, and the growing rate of obesity among black children is confronted with acerbic and personal attacks on individuals' bad choices. As Williams-Forson stresses, eating habits are not formed in a vacuum, and it is short-sighted to address ill health caused by eating by fixating on changing individuals' behaviour. This psychologising of the social, economic and political problems linked to why certain marginalised groups eat in the way they do is a convenient liberal solution to growing health problems among certain groups. It deftly evades the way that corporate food systems – with impunity – flood our world with toxic and cheap foods, especially fast-food, how increasingly aggressive fast-food marketing targeting children locks them into dependence on loyalty to harmful fast-food, and entirely obliterates the fact that bad eating habits often develop in environments where there are very few affordable or practical options.

A pivotal theme in Williams-Forson's study, and one which the book reinforces in its conclusion is that "Black people do not need saving" (p. 202). The author illustrates this point in two ways. On one hand, she testifies to the sense of collectivity, solidarity and compassion that eating and food preparation have often involved among different groups of African Americans. Reaching back to slavery, she stresses the origins of black struggles for freedom to cook and eat in ways that bestow dignity and give pleasure, and maps out the resilience of black people's

creative and pleasure-giving engagements with food. In this sense, she anticipates the wonderful book by Jessica Harris, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), which demonstrates how many of the best "American" foods, often accredited to white immigrant culture or to European chefs – had origins first in Africa and then among slaves and their descendants.

At the same time, Williams-Forson refuses to idealise or prescribe bounded notions of "black cuisines", foodways, or food performances. At the start of the book she invokes Chimamanda Adichie's (n.d.) *The Dangers of a Single Story*, and throughout her study emphasises that there are very many different stories about human relationships to food, and many different ways of telling these stories. Towards the end of the book she writes:

what we need to realise is that Black people, like everyone else, are complex in our personhood... when we eschew pork products, or choose to eat in a way that makes others feel uncomfortable, or perform social graces about which others may be less familiar, it is not about 'performing whiteness'. Usually it is more about asserting a form of cultural capital and class-based performance... and can also be a form of transgression (p. 202).

I for one would be delighted if far more academics writing on food would follow Williams-Forson's example of avoiding "the single story" by peeling back the layers of the numerous stories that require to be told about food, subjectivity and embodiment.

***Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* by Richa Nagar**

Richa Nagar, *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability*, 2019, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, Chicago and Springfield, pp. 318, ISBN-10 0252084403

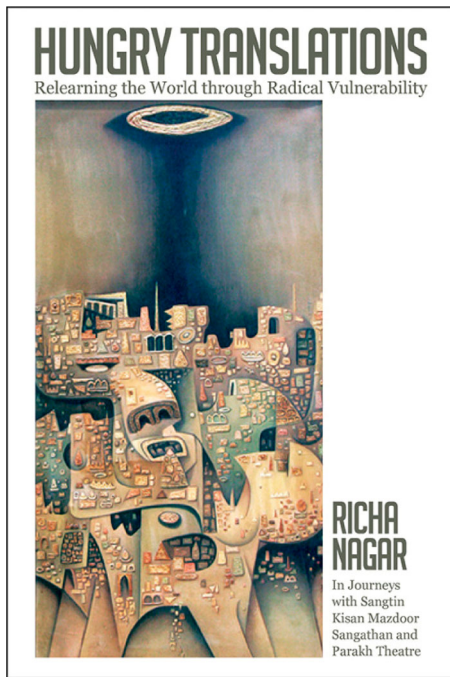
“The hungers for food and theatre are neither equivalent nor sequential” (Nagar 2019, p. 179).

In contexts where “hunger” – only in its literal sense – automatically prompts the need for social justice, Richa Nagar’s book challenges the fixation with what she terms “the hunger of the belly”. It provokes readers to imagine freedoms that are integrally connected to “poetic justice”, and that allow “bread and butter issues” – deemed to be central to “third-world struggles” – to be embedded in the yearnings of souls, hearts and emotions. The author draws on the immediacy of collective struggles in which she has participated – involving the Indian Dalit people’s movement Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS)¹, Dalit *kisans* and *mazdoors* (small farmers and workers), and focusing on the role of theatre, knowledge-making and bodily movement in struggles for social and poetic justice. The scope of the book’s coverage of radical agencies, as well as its efforts to convey relational knowledge-creation and political action result in a generically very hybrid book. *Hungry Translations* includes Nagar’s and her co-activists’ storytelling, journal writing, life history, poetry, photographs and evidence of Nagar’s academic work in seeking to engage students. For some readers, this may be an unwieldy overload; for other more adventurous readers, this is a rousing reminder of the kind of academic writing that is both possible and urgently needed to energise radical academic and political knowledge-making in the present.

Hungry Translations reminds us of the entrenched oppressions that restrict our

envisaging of social justice that transcends voting, having material resources to live and work, or having civil and civic “paper rights”. Instead of hunger for social justice requiring that certain bodies “be fed, developed, or aided during humanitarian crises” (p. 19), it demands that we all – irrespective of our social status and material circumstances – work to improve our relationships to human and non-human others in ways that are simultaneously political, ethical and moral. This call is especially prescient today, when global neoliberalism makes a mockery of democracy by insisting that laws and policies alone guarantee freedom. Or, when it normalises profit-making motives that have created historically unprecedented imbalances between levels of poverty among the majority and a minority’s grotesque affluence. And celebrates aggressive forms of individualism and empowerment where some persons uplift themselves at the expense of others. Invoking Indian writer and translator Alok Rai’s argument, Nagar insists that some “aspects of justice can be legislated ... and dignity and recognition ... cannot be legislated”, with dignity and justice being embedded “in the cultural and aesthetic realm through which poetic justice emerges” (p. 178).

Nagar’s book has already received many reviews, most of these broadly focusing on its expansive attention to social justice. Considering how frequently and provocatively she focuses on how bodies and minds can be fed, and on expansive conceptions of hunger, I find it useful to home in on what *Hungry Translations* raises for critical food studies.



The book registers the way that seemingly progressive teaching and scholarship in the academy has turned into industries of specialist research – monopolised by proprietorial experts, de-radicalised in institutions, and serving individual researchers as symbolic capital. This is why Nagar’s attentiveness to “radical vulnerability”, the researcher’s location, investments and relationships with those among whom she works is so important. Nagar argues that we cannot write ethically about social justice if we insist on positioning our “subjects” as those about whom we must theorise. Meaning-making is a collaborative activity, involving many different interlocutors, necessary conflicts, dialogues and exchanges – as the range of recounted exchanges and relationships in her book reflect.

Many forms of food studies, especially the developmentalist and narrowly specialist social science work on food in the global South, *do* emphatically write about others, assuming that their “hunger of the belly” must be a subject for the writer’s intervention, and that the main role of the researcher is to fix

other’s problems. In contrast, critical food studies, especially feminist food studies, confronts the structural systems in which we all live and think. Addressing patriarchy and the range of local, national and global power relations with which it is entangled, this work acknowledges that all social subjects are located in power relations, and that to single *some* out for salvation is grotesquely arrogant. Related to this is an awareness that writers’ vantage points not only need to be made transparent, but that this transparency vastly enriches humanities and critical social science work. This awareness is evidenced in some of the most compelling food studies work, including work by Carole Counihan². “Hungry translations” refers not to the way in which the researcher correctly or cleverly communicates what others’ articulate, but to the complicatedly relational process through which knowledge is crafted among different interlocutors. In this sense, the qualification of “translations” with “hungry” conjures up a sense of yearning and hope, the longing that we have for deeper, richer, profounder and more fulfilling ways of living and engaging with one another physically, emotionally and ethically; a translation is never complete, but always “hungry” – in the same way that embodied subjects, even when literally fed, will still be “hungry” for other human needs.

Like Nagar’s other work,³ *Hungry Translations* proceeds through storytelling and retelling stories. The idea that storytelling is an a-theoretical and, from a scholarly point of view, inferior form of knowledge remains entrenched in academia. Yet this is roundly contested in the many articles, books and chapters that use food as a lens for exploring a wide range of concerns. In the pioneering collection, *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies* (2005), editors Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber draw together an interdisciplinary array of essays that foreground both the authors’ life narratives as well as stories told about others’ food performances, cooking and eating. More recently, American writer and journalist Michael Pollan’s compelling storytelling in numerous books about relationships between humans and food reveals how narrative

and storytelling yield profound cultural and social insights as well as innovative research. Overall, Nagar's consistent use of, commitment to, and defence of storytelling, identify the epistemological force of a form that is central to rich and complex explorations of food.

Hungry Translations frequently raises questions about what embodied struggles, needs and desires are. In Nagar's argument that "the hungers for food and theatre are neither equivalent nor sequential", the writer homes in on a well-known fallacy in much social science and social justice work about the global South, and possibly, especially India and South Africa: the prevailing argument is that focusing on issues such as poor, hungry people's desires for edifying knowledge, spiritual sustenance and artistic and imaginative endeavours is indulgent; what groups such as Dalits in India or poor rural women in South Africa most need, the argument goes, are the means of survival and material tools that measurably improve their lives. This reductive reading of embodied needs and social justice is thoroughly debunked, especially in Nagar's attention to the role of theatre. In a powerful discussion that follows an account of the making of the play, *Hansa* in Mumbai, Nagar writes:

Whereas the hunger that burns one's stomach must be extinguished, the creative and collective hunger for political theatre seeks not to be extinguished, but only to be fuelled and refuelled. The challenge posed by the entangled hungers is inseparable from the ongoing possibility of creativity and critique through political theatre (p. 184).

It is noteworthy that theatre, like the cooking and eating of food, involves the integration of bodily movement, cognition and the senses. It is this complex interplay of the body, affect and the mind that the more interesting examples of food studies focus on: attention is paid not so much to the satiation of the body in physiological terms, but to the way that cooking and eating address needs that cannot be neatly measured or identified, such as the desire for pleasure, joy, conviviality, relationality, connectedness to other humans

and to nature. Psyche Williams-Forsion's book, reviewed above, repeatedly stresses this when this well-known food studies scholar focuses on the embodied desires that certain foods offer many black Americans. Condemning an industry in which "healthy" foods are prescribed to bodies that are deemed obese or unhealthy, she draws attention to social beings' craving for the resonant tastes, memories, smells, senses of collectivity and belonging that are stirred by certain pathologised foods. Scholarship using food as a lens to explore complex human experiences therefore squarely confronts the role of food in embodied experiences that are simultaneously cultural, spiritual, political, sensory and creative.

It is clear that Nagar's work refuses to privilege the hunger of the belly over poetic justice. Does this mean that she is implicitly or explicitly slamming critical food studies? I don't believe so. Nagar's work exemplifies and endorses imaginative and transdisciplinary efforts that refuse, as Williams-Forsion puts it, the reduction of human and social complexity to the telling of a single story. The call that Nagar's book makes – for socially engaged writing to address human dignity, the mind, soul and emotions – not as these are pitted against bodily ones, but integrated into them – is an irresistible invitation at a moment when obsessions with increasing the production and consumption of resources and commodities, or with medically or nutritionally "fixing" the human body looms so large in hegemonic global efforts to achieve social justice and wellbeing. Critical food studies writers, together with all other scholars seeking to debunk this, need to swim against this tide.

Notes

1. SKMS, as a major focus of Richa Nagar's collaborative learning, creative work and teaching-learning, is an Indian people's movement originating in the Sitapur District of Uttar Pradesh.
2. Works by Counihan that foreground the author's location relative to contexts and people include *A Tortilla is Like Life* (2009), *Around the Tuscan Table, Food, Family and Gender in Twentieth-Century Florence* (2004), *Italian Food Activism in Urban Sardinia: Place, Taste and Community* (2020).

3. See: *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (2014).

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