

Diffractions, Issue 10: You are What you Eat: On Food, Culture(s), and Identity

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DIFFRACTIONS

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'You are What you Eat': On Food, Culture(s), and Identity.

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Few sentences can express the significance of food for our being human as concisely and pointedly as 'You are what you eat'. This saying is found in different languages and could be one of those transversal notions that has existed in some form throughout history. From French gourmand Brillat-Savarin to German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, belief in the entanglement of food habits and identity can be observed across time and cultures, in that food constitutes an indispensable aspect of human existence, serving not merely as sustenance but also as a mirror reflecting culture, history as well as individual and collective identities (Shapin 2014, 377). Culinary traditions, rituals, and practices have profoundly influenced how individuals dine, socialize, and forge connections with one another. As a potent medium for expressing cultural identity and safeguarding traditions, food embodies a compelling narrative about humans, encompassing countless social aspects that vary across regions, communities, and even individual households.

Food can also be a measure of prestige within a given social order: it can serve as a symbol of power within social hierarchies and status structures. Interestingly, the cultural interpretations of its symbolism are intricate and sometimes conflicting. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) delved into this complexity in his culinary triangle, suggesting that boiled food signifies refinement and sophistication compared to roasted food. However, the consolidation of gender roles reversed these associations, as boiled dishes are often linked to familial intimacy and traditionally prepared by women. At the same time, roasted fare is associated with public celebrations and a more masculine domain. Not only have these assumptions shaped gender roles within families, but they have also shaped the male-dominated world of fine cooking in terms of prestige and social status^[1].

Looking at the brighter side, food acts as a unifying force, nurturing a feeling of camaraderie and inclusion among people. Regardless of cultural background, the act of cooking or partaking in a meal carries significant symbolism, deeply intertwined with rituals and ceremonies. Certain dishes are important in religious and cultural contexts and are crafted with utmost respect and attention. These culinary practices frequently serve as a means to pay homage to ancestors and deities alike, commemorate significant life events, and express profound convictions. Beyond nourishment, these traditional foods are vital in transmitting cultural heritage and strengthening familial bonds (Fieldhouse 2013).

Patterns of migration significantly shape and sometimes come to define culinary landscapes. Assimilation theories suggest that as individuals adapt to a new culture, there is a corresponding cultural exchange that occurs. This exchange becomes visible when mainstream societies include culinary practices originating from outside ethnic groups who have been excluded from access into the prevailing society – whether previously or currently (Boch, Jiménez, Roesler 2020 64-65). The culinary traditions brought by migrant communities have often been subject to alienation by the mainstream surrounding society, being perceived as unclean or too ‘exotic’. This is the case for Chinese and Italian immigrants who settled in the U.S. starting in the mid-1800s. Up until the 1950s U.S.-American society perceived the “newcomers as barbaric” (Inness 2006, 41) and as not integrated. Nowadays, many of those dishes that were introduced by those communities have become a staple of the mainstream culinary habits of U.S.-Americans. On the other hand, for migrant communities, traditional foods provide a tangible connection to ancestry, recounting historical migrations and cultural interactions. As ingredients, methods and tastes blend, fresh culinary customs develop, fostering lively and evolving food scenes. One example among many, Louisiana’s Creole cuisine history exemplifies this cultural fusion, drawing from French, Spanish, African, and Caribbean culinary legacies to create a uniquely multi-layered and symbolically loaded culinary tradition (Smith 2013, 423).

We look forward to receiving contributions addressing these or related questions. Topics include but are not limited to:

- Culinary Traditions: Delving into the intricate tapestry of traditional food practices, rituals and customs within specific cultural contexts, as evidenced in literature and various cultural artifacts.
- Food and Identity: Investigating how food shapes both individual and collective identities, from the culinary memoirs of immigrant communities to its symbolic significance.
- Representations of Food in Media and Literature: Analyzing depictions of food across different forms of media – the arts, literature, film, television – and their influence on cultural perceptions and practices.
- Globalization and Food Cultures: Examining the ramifications of globalization on culinary traditions, including the dissemination of cuisines, culinary fusion, and the commercialization of food in today’s fast-paced world.
- Food and Power: Scrutinizing the complex dynamics of foodways, especially in relation to social inequalities and justice as portrayed through literature and cultural narratives. How do gender, race, and class impact culinary heritage? Who decides what is ‘palatable’?
- Food Rituals: Exploring the deep-rooted significance of food-related rituals, festivals, and ceremonies as reflections of cultural values and beliefs, as depicted in arts, literature and/or liturgy.
- Food’s Role in Memory and Heritage: Investigating how food shapes personal and collective memory, nostalgia, and cultural heritage, as seen through literary reminiscences and historical narratives.
- Food and the Climate Crisis: examining the environmental footprint of food production and consumption practices and exploring cultural responses to sustainability challenges through literature and cultural representations.
- Food and Health: the intersections of food culture, nutrition, and public health policies, as portrayed in literary works and cultural discourses.

Submission and review process

Abstracts will be received and reviewed by the Diffractions editorial board who will decide on the

pertinence of proposals for the upcoming issue. Authors of accepted abstracts will be invited to submit a full article. However, this does not imply that these papers will be automatically published. Rather, they will go through a peer-review process that will determine whether papers are publishable with minor or major changes, or if they do not fulfill the criteria for publication.

Please send abstracts of 150 to 250 words and 5-8 keywords as well as a short biography (100 words) by MAY 15th, 2024, to info.diffractions@gmail.com with the subject "Diffractions 10", followed by your last name.

The full papers should be submitted by SEPTEMBER 30th, 2024, through the journal's platform: <https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions>.

Every issue of Diffractions has a thematic focus but also contains a special section for non-thematic articles. If you are interested in submitting an article that is not related to the topic of this particular issue, please consult general guidelines available at the Diffractions website at <https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions>. The submission and review process for non-thematic articles is the same as for the general thematic issue. All research areas of the humanities are welcome.

[1] A survey by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics has shown that 81.5% of head-cooks and chefs in the US were male in 2008. As of 2023, the percentage of women employed as head-cooks or chefs increased by only 4,8% (23,3%). (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm> and Carolan 2012, 298).

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CFP: Diffractions, Issue 10: You are What you Eat: On Food, Culture(s), and Identity. In: ArtHist.net, Apr 18, 2024 (accessed May 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41680>>.