

Exploring Food, Drink, and Place: Exam 1

Alvin Lin

August 2016 - December 2016

It is popularly believed that “you are what you eat”. Based upon the chapters that we have read for the class, would you agree or disagree with this assertion? Please be sure to explain your point of view.

The assertion “you are what you eat” can be argued from a cultural and physiological point of view. In a literal sense, your health and what you are composed of depends on the food you consume. However, from a cultural point of view, a person can be defined by the food they consume. Their background and identity can be derived from their foods, methods of preparation, and acquisition thereof. Thus, “you are what you eat” applies culturally as well.

One primary example is the Japanese obentō, as discussed by Anne Allison in *Japanese Mothers and Obentōs: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus*. In this article, Allison discusses how the obentō is a key method of cementing a woman’s identity as a mother and a child’s identity as a student of a school. It provides a social structure by identifying a “producer as a woman and mother, and the consumer as a child of a mother”. In addition to nutritious value, the appearance of the food prepared plays a major role as well. The Japanese have strict standards of exactness and perfection for the obentō boxes, such as small, individual portions, complementing colors and shapes, and even the containers that the food is served in. All of the aforementioned play a role in defining the mother and reflecting on her sense of responsibility and commitment as a parent as well as defining the child as a member of society. The value of social conformity is reflected by whether or not the child consumes the entirety of the obentō box. In fact, this is so important that nursery school teachers will enforce the consumption of the entire obentō. Allison here notes that it represents the child’s ability to “follow directions, obey rules, and accept the authority of the school system”. Thus, “you are what you eat” is reflected in the Japanese obentō since they play a major role in defining the identity of a mother and child.

Another noteworthy example is the case of punks in Seattle, as discussed by Dylan Clark in *The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine*. Clark discusses the preparation and acquisition of food here by punks as ritualistic and indicative of their ideologies. Many punks believe that the industrial production of food represents “White, male, corporate supremacy”, and “fills a person’s body with the norms, rationales, and moral pollution of corporate capitalism and impe-

rialism". A punk's identity can be defined by their food choice and how they acquire the food. As noted in the article, punks will grow their own food to make it less commodified, or purchase food in "brandless bulk or directly from farmers". They will also steal and salvage food from garbage dumpsters, a process which they believe purifies corporate or mainstream food. This example alone reflects the adage "you are what you eat" the most, cementing a punk's identity based on his culinary choices and practices.

In short, "you are what you eat" applies culturally to many different groups of people since they can be defined based on their food choices. A person's identity is reflected by how they acquire and prepare food, since it reflects their ideologies on what the food represents when prepared and consumed.

What is food activism? Pick two of the chapters from our text and show how these chapters illustrate how you have defined food activism.

Food activism is an awareness of where our food comes from and how it affects us when we purchase and consume it. Food activists work to reduce environment damage caused by large scale industrial food production and its use of chemical fertilizers and monocultures, and improve access to healthy food, fruits, and vegetables to people of all incomes. Society is improved by approaching food consumption and acquisition from a economic, agricultural, and environmental point of view.

Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi define food activism in *Ethnography of Food Activism* as a people's effort to "make the food system or parts of it more democratic, sustainable, healthy, ethical, culturally appropriate, and better in quality". It is a conscious effort by people of different backgrounds and occupations to improve society by taking control of food production, distribution, and choice. Counihan describes food activism as "a fruitful term for examining ... the diverse forms of dissent and resistance practiced by political activists, farmers, ... producers, and consumers" and summarizes how the efforts of activists around the world work to close the gap between farmers and consumers through local food markets. Food activism is defined here as the efforts of many different groups of people working under different motives in order to improve access to healthier local food.

In *Food Activism in Western Oregon*, Joan E. Gross discusses her experiences interacting with food activists in Oregon. She defines food activism by first emphasizing its importance since Oregon had one of the highest hunger rates in the nation, highlighting an obvious problem in the system of food acquisition and movement. One important example that demonstrates food activism is noted in the experiences of one activist who made a choice to eat local meat instead of going vegetarian despite the humanitarian appeal of eating lower on the food chain. In her words, "better to eat a local chicken from down the street than tofu that caused a rainforest to be cut down in Brazil". This shows an awareness of the origins of the food one consumes as well as its impact on the environment and demonstrates how food activism involves choices that take

into account all the effects of our food purchases and choices.

Both the above chapters clearly define food activism as an effort to move away from the industrialized capitalist nature of modern food production in search of a more ethical, healthy, and local way to produce food. They discuss the importance of being aware of the societal, environmental, and economic impact of local food. By being aware of where one's food is sourced, one can make better choices about food purchases.