

Digesting Femininities: The feminist politics of contemporary food culture

By Jovanovski, Natalie

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A Book Review by

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Natalie Jovanovski's book, *Digesting Femininities: The feminist politics of contemporary food culture*, is an accessibly-written text which would serve well in introducing this topic to the interested, intelligent, general reader as well as Ph.D. students in the discipline looking for an overview of the field. Prior studies in the field include contributions from Avakian & Haber 2005; Parker, Brady, Power & Belyea 2019; De Souza and Gottlieb 2019 and Cairns & Johnston 2015.

Jovanovski articulates her primary objective as filling the gap in the current literature by examining alternative cultural discourses for the different ways in which body surveillance messages are normalised and perpetuated. Jovanovski mobilises this concept to refer to how one relates to the aesthetic appearance of one's body. The normalizations of these messages are allied to the media's role in the construction of reality as opposed to it being a reflection of it. The theoretical framework embraces a feminist understanding in the sense that one acknowledges the social construction of gender and the ways in which power and hegemony operate throughout language. Taken in this context, the role of the female with respect to their relationship with food and cooking is often embroiled in a discourse framing women as predisposed to care for, cook for, and serve others.

The methodological tool for data analysis is stated clearly as a, "feminist critical discourse analysis" (6). This is conducted on popular diet books, cookbooks and iconic feminist texts with primary emphasis on the body-policing food femininities they espouse.

An interesting aspect of the application of a feminist critical discourse analysis is the open-endedness of its use in the sense that there is no standard analytic procedure for conducting a feminist CDA. Rather, Rogers (2004) states that 'the use of feminist CDA in research is flexible and depends on how the analyst defines critical discourse within their own particular study.' The application of feminist CDA focuses on the pervasive power of gender in oppressing woman. Jovanovski, however, applies Fairclough's five-stage-model of CDA to her own project which draws on Roy Bhaskar's work on Explanatory Theory. Of particular interest is Jovanovski's questioning of how the application of a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis may lead to social emancipation.

The function of the open-ended-nature of a feminist, Critical Discourse Analysis appears to be coterminous with Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and it would have been interesting to see

how Derrida's toolkit may add to and/or augment the theoretical framework of feminism in terms of providing another pathway to aid with the social emancipation from oppressive discourse.

The second chapter gives cursory acknowledgement to the arena of social media without any elaboration as to how this social tool can be analysed to assist with interrogation of the problematic. Jovanovski (2017) argues that,

In a contemporary Western context, it has become visually impossible to flick through a magazine, watch a TV show or *navigate the online world of social media* without coming across some reference to why are bodies are imperfect and our food choices are wrong (p. 17; author's emphasis).

The eight chapters that comprise the manuscript has been conscientiously balanced with the four chapters containing theory on 'body policing' being supplemented by discussions of food discourses, gender politics and food culture, gender, patriarchy and the neoliberal subject, and radical feminist food consciousness. Elaborating on each in turn: First is a discussion of how food discourses aimed at women often fosters body anxiety on the part of the female subject. Second is an analysis of how food is marketed to woman through the lens of gender politics and food culture drawing on the study of how this marketing may lead to the perpetuation of harmful gender norms. Third, in the chapter on gender, patriarchy and neoliberal subjectification is used to call for the production of a counter-narrative to the subservient framing of woman that is based on a culture of female 'obedience' and pressure to maintain the perfect bodily aesthetic for male pleasure (which can lead to issues of low self-esteem and even the dangerous practice of purging oneself to maintain these standards in a pathogenic culture). Finally, in the chapter on radical feminist food consciousness, Jovanovski employs an immanent ontology when she asks us to imagine a genderless food culture and asks women to consider engaging in political discussions on food and eating.

Chapter eight, the most interesting part of this book in my opinion, provides an innovative and creative synthesis of information drawn from disparate sources to construct her argument. Elaborating on this point, Jovanovski provides a link to popular culture and the concept of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphic food has been prevalent in such movies as *Sausage Party* and in the Christian stories of *Veggie Tales*. It is here where Jovanovski provides light relief and a contextual example of relevance to the lives of potential interested readers who lack an academic background. This is contrasted with the more serious discussion of bulimia and anorexia nervosa which effect woman of all shapes and sizes. Furthermore, Jovanovski's argument allying hedonism with the maintenance of a diminutive figure, devoid of fat, is reflected in the current contemporary culture by television shows such as *Love Island*, where the bodies of the contestants are very different from the average man or woman.

This brings me to an area of the book that appears to be lacking. Jovanovski seems to ignore the proliferation of gendered discourses which circulate on social media channels. An additional chapter or section would have balanced the traditional approaches of analysis that she relies on (e.g. cookbooks) and may have helped to provide a contextual reference for young women who are exposed to the ideologies underlying their relationship to food through this form of media. This intervention could provide an analysis of how woman interact with and discuss discourses allied to food and eating within in chatrooms, on blogs, within posts and tweets.

The book's concluding thoughts relate to the importance of impact – a buzzword which proliferates and circulates around the academia, to use my own food analogy, 'like the smell of lemon

meringue pie', with the oven being the virtual and conceptual – the mere act of opening the door actualises the conceptual theory and allows it to impact upon society in the sense that,

Rather than simply remaining at a theoretical level, the evidence found in feminist research should be used to foster an emancipatory cultural discourse, aiming to free women from gender oppression (203).

It is as Jovanovski says, "My intention for this book is to prompt the beginning of a radical, genderless food consciousness" (*ibid*). It is through this intervention that Jovanovski concludes her project by arguing that,

The findings in this book are merely one step in achieving this goal. By identifying the need for a feminist consciousness in discourses on food and eating, we have half the ingredients that we need to create radical social change (*ibid*).

Reflecting on Jovanovski's point, through an analysis of the sexist language used in promoting food to woman, alternative uses of language which reinforce positive ideologies, messages and behaviours towards food and cooking is paramount. If the pathogenic culture of self-harm through bingeing and purging is to cease, a language allied to enjoying food in moderation must proliferate throughout society. Directions for future research, in my mind would be: what is the shape and function of this feminist consciousness? To what disciplines can it be applied, what does it look like in practice, and how might it evolve to account for the inculcation and evolution of new technologies and discourses around the gastronomic goals of society as the twenty-first century continues to advance?

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About the Reviewer

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