More Than a Lens: Reflections on Eating, Materiality, and Practice

Maria Kuczera

1 Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg

Published on: Oct 16, 2019
Updated on: Dec 19, 2019
DOI: 10.21428/92775833.0dc24946
keywords | food as a lens, eating, materiality, practice theory, interdisciplinarity

abstract | Is food more than a “lens”? Within the field of food studies, food has been utilized as a “lens” for analyzing manifold aspects of human life. However, I suggest that treating food merely as a “lens” does not necessarily illuminate the particularities and peculiarities of food as a research object. What is specific about food? To deal with this question, I consider a focus on the materiality of eating. Inspired by approaches developed in science and technology studies (STS), food anthropology, practice theory, and feminist materialisms, I reflect on some of remarkable characteristics in the encounter between foods and bodies. My results include thought experiments on danger, destruction, routine, and crisis, as well as a fresh look at questions of digestion and metabolism. In doing so, I demonstrate ways to support the quest for foundational theorization within the field of food studies. Whether seeking theoretical synthesis or epistemological clash, I am convinced that new configurations of interdisciplinarity, especially across the longstanding divide between humanities and sciences, could ultimately help to provoke renewed conversation about food as an object of study. At the end of this essay, the question remains open for debate: what is special about food?
Introduction

In winter 2017, the Graduate Association for Food Studies (GAFS) issued a call for papers, requesting new approaches to food that go beyond using “food as a lens to examine nearly any topic.”[1] This CFP resonates with a broader debate among food scholars: food studies has arrived as a discipline, but there are still burning questions about its identity and theoretical foundation.[2] As Richard Wilk notes, although interdisciplinary research clusters and graduate programs have emerged, “[n]one of these institutions have yet taken on the project of developing a new discipline that places food center stage, founded on a thorough understanding of clashing epistemologies and paradigms that have so hindered interdisciplines.”[3]
Interdisciplinary work is usually rooted in the development of radically new paradigms, but these approaches are not easy to achieve. The constraints of interdisciplinary fields include goal-oriented funding, limited temporal resources, and translational problems among scholars from different disciplines who employ different jargons, methods, and theories. This compartmentalization proves especially strict considering the longstanding division between the food-related natural sciences, such as agricultural science, nutrition, or biology, and culturally-oriented food studies. As a consequence, think tanks deemed interdisciplinary often end up being rather multidisciplinary, and experts from various academic backgrounds ultimately provide independent perspectives on politically urgent issues, such as obesity.

I argue that, as food has grown into a field of expertise, the metaphor of the “lens” has emerged as a way to circumvent the theoretical and methodological challenges of interdisciplinary work. This metaphor comes into play in two ways: either food is regarded through the “lens” of various disciplines, or, in turn, food becomes the “lens” through which longstanding disciplinary debates are viewed. Epistemologically, both notions become problematic if the “lens,” both as the tool of analysis and the regarded object of analysis, are treated as independent entities that do not shape each other in any way. The way that researchers choose their methods and theories has an effect on the way that the object of research emerges as well as vice versa: the object of research has a profound effect on the organization of knowledge and the researcher herself. Rather than assuming that detached observers merely provide perspectives on the inert world, I suggest that the two are interrelated.

To introduce this epistemological problem “on the ground,” I begin my essay with a personal narrative regarding the metaphor of the “lens.” After having highlighted its intuitive appeal, I problematize it with the tools of feminist science and technology studies (STS). Then, I address one specific way that food has been treated as a “lens,” namely for processes of signification. I challenge this approach by demonstrating how the materiality of food bears upon its use as signifier. In particular, I emphasize the materiality of eating as a fundamental relation between foods and bodies. I draw on different approaches to materiality from fields such as STS, food anthropology, practice theory, and the new materialisms. While these literatures on materiality differ in substantial ways, they all emphasize the organic, visceral, sensory, and embodied aspects of both eating and food research. Finally, I would like to stress that, in employing these approaches, my goal is not to make a decontextualized claim about what eating universally is. Instead, I wish to analyze and historicize discourses on eating within one particular academic field (food studies) and suggest how material approaches might benefit it.

In the second part of my essay, I move on to examine one way of fostering the quest for food-specific theorization: I discuss Alan Warde’s The Practice of Eating (2016) as a meticulous attempt to provide theoretical synthesis through his integration of practice theories and food sociological research. However, while for some authors, theoretical synthesis seems to be the highest goal for
interdisciplinary work, others emphasize that frictions and incongruities have to be endured, as I argue of Elizabeth Wilson's *Gut Feminism* (2015).\[12\] By exploring different approaches to the materiality of eating, I consider the challenge of interdisciplinary theorization within the field of food studies. Throughout the essay, I examine whether food is more than just a "lens."

**Is Food More Than a Lens?**

I may have just rejected the notion of “food as a lens,” but for quite a while, I used similar metaphors to describe how, since my earliest years, I could not help but “view the world through food.” Food was what shaped my perspective, since I was a synesthetic, and maybe therefore, food-obsessed child. To me the world of sounds sparked rich associations with tastes, scents, or even entire dishes. Whereas the name Schwabach, the German town where I lived as a child, awkwardly conjured up images of fish sticks, the sound of my French teacher's accent left in my mouth the taste of my mom's tomato soup.

Although my synesthesia diminished over time, food became my vehicle to move through and learn about the world. After years of food-talk, food-politics, and food-work, I began to describe food as a “window” (a visual metaphor similar to that of “lens”) through which I would examine other issues. What I called a “window” became so all-encompassing that I decided to turn food into the primary focus of my academic education. However, I did not choose to study food just because I thought that it was a sophisticated “window” through which I could gaze at other things. I thought that food mattered in itself. I was convinced that, because food was so existentially and socio-biologically complex, it was specific and had to be approached differently from other objects. I decided to join a relatively new academic and radically interdisciplinary field, food studies, which promised to foreground food’s particularities.

After some months of studying food, I reached the point of ultimate confusion. I began to wonder whether such a specific and personally relevant thing—food—even existed at all. Somehow, I learned to accept that the thing which obsessed me had been dispersed into millions of pieces. I learned that it is naïve to assume that there is such a thing as “food” per se and that relational dynamics constitute the thing we call food.\[13\] Food stopped being an object. It became a field—a vast and complex field. Even more, it turned into a “lens” to look at other, presumably more important, things.\[14\] At some point I began to wonder whether I might have studied something different, such as music, and used it as a generic lens of analysis for abstractions such as social stratification or global capitalism. Was there anything specific about the “lens” of food?

Here, reflection upon various meanings of the “lens” metaphor proves useful. The lens is one of many visual metaphors that have been the privileged rhetorical tools employed to describe modes of knowing, understanding, and analyzing the world.\[15\] As feminist STS scholar Donna Haraway
describes in her widely-cited article, “Situated Knowledges” (1988), “Western” academic traditions employ visual metaphors to assert the ideal of disembodied, objective representation in an inert world. However, instead of rejecting the metaphor, Haraway demonstrates the situatedness and “embodied nature of all vision and so [in order to] reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere.”[16] Referring to the embodiment of vision, she insists on the critical role of technological mediation:

There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds. All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view, even when the other is our own machine.[17]

Haraway and other STS scholars emphasize that tools of analysis do not just uncover a previously hidden reality—they are constitutive of it.[18] Whereas the tendency within food studies to use “food as a lens to examine nearly any topic” evokes fantasies of universality and omniscience, I am interested in the specificity of food as object.[19] Which reductions, distortions, or particularities does the “lens” of food produce? And, ultimately, how helpful is the notion of the “lens” at all? To consider these questions, I explore the materiality of eating—and its peculiar absence in food studies.

The Materiality of Eating

The interdisciplinary field of food studies emerged from the arts, humanities, and social sciences—a field in which the study of food was profoundly lacking. To make food a respectable topic of inquiry, it had to be demonstrated that, rather than being merely a question of physiological necessity, food was meaningful and socially significant.[20] Notably, the work of two theorists affiliated with structural linguistics became fundamental to this endeavor: whereas Roland Barthes argued that the things people eat are tied to a “system of communication” (or, that the French dish steak frites is not only rich and tasty but also mediates national belonging), Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that foods act as symbols which represent superordinate mental structures.[21] Foods were successfully established as signs, as more-than-just-material-objects. As a result, food research could be incorporated into longstanding academic debates about communication, representation, or identity-creation. Food emerged as a lens—a lens that revealed underlying meaning or significance. Because it became a versatile lens for sociocultural matters, there was no urgent need to theorize what it meant to study food specifically—whether within or across disciplines.[22] Food emerged as a lens, often used in the fashion described above: as a universalist, unsituated, and immaterial tool, suitable for nourishing fantasies of omniscience. Simultaneously, the material dimension of food and eating was neglected. In
the following short reflections, I challenge this tendency. While staying within the realm of
signification, I demonstrate how material approaches foreground the particularities of food, not only
as an analytical lens, but also as an object.

**Danger**

One way to address this problem is to look at the materiality of signs—an approach which is central to
pragmatist semiotics. Following anthropologist Webb Keane, one question could be: what is the
material affordance of specific foods that creates the potential for their use as signifiers?\(^{23}\) Take the
luscious and crisp apple, which often appears on advertising boards, dietary sheets, and fruit stalls. In
addition to symbolic connotations, such as that of seduction and sin (stemming from the Bible), the
apple might serve as a signifier for freshness and health. Nevertheless, the apple would not serve as a
signifier for freshness, if not for its other quality—its perishability. No perishability, no freshness. Yet,
the perishability of an apple is not a trait in itself. Why would I refer to it as “perishable” if I did not
wish to eat its pulp? An apple, as a signifier for freshness, not only indicates its perishability but also
its potential end: to be eaten.

Notions of freshness and perishability indicate the vitality, but also the danger, related to ingestion.
Things that are eaten can be harmful, even deadly, to human and nonhuman bodies. Perhaps, if it
were not for this particular ambiguity inherent to the intimate encounter between foods and bodies,
the question of eating would not evoke strong emotions, such as fear, disgust, or desire.\(^{24}\) Because
food is a matter of life and death, the management of its temporalities, or its perishability, is
connected to complex sociomaterial infrastructures: today these are globalized late capitalist delivery
chains, food safety regulations, scientific testing methods, and food preservation technologies.\(^{25}\) If
perishability is not a quality of the apple in itself, but a consequential quality that relates to the act of
eating as part of specific infrastructures, the same might be said of freshness. It is only through
political economic and epistemic orders, such as the growth of the horticultural industry, the discovery
of the vitamin, or the paradigm of nutritional thinking, that freshness as it is known today emerged as
a valued and marketable feature.\(^{26}\)

These examples show that the materiality of foods cannot be essentialized, but rather must be
regarded within its sociohistorical complexity. Yet, these examples also demonstrate, that for
analytical reasons, it is useful to keep in mind that things are referred to as “foods” only if they will
potentially be put in mouths.
Destruction

At the level of relation between subject and object, eating entails a phenomenon which is as stunning as it is specific. I see a dish, I appreciate it, I eat it, it is gone—or, in the words of anthropologists Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol: “In the end [the] tomatoes get eaten. And while eating performs tomatoes as ‘good to eat,’ it also finishes them off.” [27] In the context of eating, my liking something leads to the destruction of the very object of my appreciation. Of course, I might eat other, similar tomatoes someday. Yet, they will not be the very same. The aggression inherent in the act of eating has been picked up by different academic fields. Scholars of critical literary studies have explored how “eating” has become a powerful literary metaphor, especially with regard to cultural consumption. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins suggests, cultural consumption “erases the full historical subjectivity of the subject it consumes; eating here becomes the desiring and destructive mode through which otherness is both encountered and destroyed.” [28] Within the field of psychoanalysis, and more recently, new materialist feminisms, scholars have emphasized that questions of destruction and loss, and subject-object relations in general, are often mediated by the gut. After all, it is via food and shit that humans, when they are thrown into the world as babies, acquire a basic sense of “I” and “Other,” subject and object, existence and non-existence.[29]

Playing with the issues of decay, danger, and destruction shows that eating is not a generic lens for just anything. Instead, as the examples above have shown, eating can be powerfully employed as a specific lens or metaphor. Eating does have particular characteristics, related to putting things in mouths, swallowing, and, eventually, digesting, and these have to be taken into account when studying food as an object or employing food as an academic approach.[30] Having discussed the limits of an unspecified and immaterial lens-approach, I move beyond it in the next section.

An Exercise in Theoretical Synthesis: A Practice Theory of Eating

In this essay, I stress that the object of study and the tools of analysis (including the embodied researcher herself) form a co-constitutive relationship. Thus far, I have demonstrated what the materiality of food as an object does when used as a “lens.” Next, I look at the consequences of analytical tools (“lenses”) with the following questions in mind: What does a focus on food do to social theory? And, vice versa, what does social theory do to food research?

Alan Warde’s The Practice of Eating offers a paradigmatic example of this kind of theoretical synthesis: by framing eating as a practice, Warde integrates food-related publications with a longstanding theoretical tradition within the social sciences, namely practice theory.[31] While aiming to extend, challenge, and specify practice theoretical approaches, he offers some suggestions in order to grasp the
specific nature of eating. Since the 2000s, practice theories, along with other material-oriented approaches, have experienced a revival within disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, countering a perceived overemphasis on choice and representation.\[32\] By focusing on practices, scholars analyze the mutual orchestration of embodied routines, material environments, and social arrangements. According to Warde, they emphasize “doing over thinking, practical competence over strategic reasoning, [and] mutual intelligibility over personal motivation.”\[33\]

According to Warde, practice theories offer a good comparative framework for understanding how eating as a practice differs from other practices. To consider learning and coordination, he provides the contrasting example of motoring. Drawing upon a comparative analysis of motoring in several European countries and the U.S., he argues that motoring, especially learning how to drive a car, is defined by high levels of formal regulation and legalization. Infrastructure—roads, traffic lights, and street signs—decisively governs conduct. Moreover, transgressions against traffic rules are also punitive.\[34\] In contrast, with regard to the practice of eating, Warde suggests that there is no single set of institutionalized rules which have clearly shaped recognizable patterns of food consumption. Instead, there are primarily loose conventions that shape how eating is performed. Individuals learn how to eat by adhering to many different, sometimes contradicting, conventions or recommendations from adjacent fields, such as etiquette, meal preparation, aesthetics, and nutrition, which guide the practice of eating.\[35\] In addition, seemingly distant factors, such as food safety standards, distribution networks, agricultural production systems, and capitalist labor relations shape the way people eat.\[36\] To sum up Warde’s argument: “[E]ating is not a simple integrative practice but a compound of component practices. The consequence is that eating tends to be weakly coordinated and weakly regulated, leaving much discretion for individuals.”\[37\]

If eating is defined as a compound practice with many factors shaping how it is done, the question arises: how it is that these practices emerge as orderly, recognizable patterns? With regard to the behavioral and cognitive sciences, practice theories suggest that most daily human performances are governed by unreflective, fluent, and repetitive mental and bodily processes, rather than being deliberate or highly-regulated actions. If situations occur in a similar way as they occurred before, or if the environment provides certain sociomaterial cues, actors are likely to repeat the practices that they have already performed.\[38\] This is why you might finish a bowl of soup despite being stuffed.\[39\] This is why you cannot pass that one shop without buying some sweets.\[40\] However, eating situations are never exactly the same. People live in complex and constantly changing environments. To explain people’s capacity to orchestrate their eating performances in an effortless, flexible, and skillful way, Warde emphasizes the notion of routine, the regular repetition of practices in slightly varying settings. In other words, eaters develop a practical sense regarding how to deal with the demands of daily life without too much effort and without always evaluating and strategizing.\[41\] This is how, for example,
In this section, I outlined how Warde, instead of imposing practice theory on food research, seeks to specify and translate practice theory for food scholarship. This method allows him to differentiate eating from other activities. More than the application of the “lenses” of either practice theory or food, it creates a close encounter between two scholarly traditions, resulting in the integration and modification of both. In the next section, I provide anecdotal evidence regarding how to use and extend this approach in research situations.

(Breaking) Routines in Food Research

Following the arguments of practice theory, if most practices were not routinized, mundane activities would resemble journeys to unknown places: overwhelming loads of new information would have to be evaluated, new skills would have to be acquired, and many conscious decisions would have to be made. One anecdote illustrates this kind of scenario. In fall 2017, I went to New York City for the first time in my life. I wanted to eat. I thought of an ordinary kind of shop, like a bakery. I went for a bagel. What an effort! How naïve I was to think that I knew what a bakery would be like! I entered the shop; it was busy. I did not know where to queue, when to order, if the guys behind the counter were addressing me or somebody else, what they meant by “plain or everything bagel” (even though, on some level, I did know what these individual words meant), why I had to pay more than was indicated on the price board, etc. Although my mind slowly rescued me by solving all these puzzles, my concentrated, blushing face and my clumsiness made me feel out of place. I felt like I was catching gazes, disturbing other people’s rhythms, and being recognized as a stranger.

By highlighting an absence of embodied routine, this moment of out-of-placeness reveals a lot about the moments of crisis, rupture, and reflexivity which matter for food research, especially participant observation, in unfamiliar settings. Participant observation in unfamiliar settings requires researchers to constantly negotiate between embodied routine and crisis, a methodological point that is underdeveloped in Warde’s monograph. When experiencing ruptures in their usual routines and habits, researchers seek to make sense out of this confusion. To return to the above anecdote: every single time I had to pay for my food in the U.S., I was confused why I had to pay a higher price than what I saw written down. Then I thought: “Oh, I forgot—the added tax.” Once, after I expressed my confusion, a friend jokingly replied: “Well, you know, in the U.S., even a grocery bill indicates the public effort to separate the ‘free-market economy’ (the base price) and the ‘state’ (the tax).” In short, this moment of rupture enabled an amusing, yet serious comment on U.S. political economy. If I had been conducting participant observation, this observation would have been more then relevant.
Food research and theory are shaped by food scholars, embodied beings who are constantly negotiating moments of routine and rupture. When studying food, this interrelation is especially important because eating and drinking happens *all the time*—whether at home, on the road, or “in the field.” Food scholars should be attentive to the small differences that they learn to see, perceive, taste, or appreciate in new ways, a point that has been highlighted by authors using phenomenological approaches, such as anthropologists Paul Stoller and David Sutton. Using phenomenological approaches alongside practice theory helps to specify the character of qualitative food research as both a compound practice—through the interplay of routinized habit and crisis—and a field with the need for specific consideration of the sensory and affective body. What both approaches lack, however, is what eating means, not only as embodied practice generally, but as a matter of ingestion and digestion, a question that I pursue in the next section.

**Elusive Eating and the Fear of Reductionism**

The relative absence of the physical aspects of ingestion and digestion in Warde’s book seems to be more broadly the case for the whole field of food studies. Certainly, this lack has to do with the “elusiveness” of eating and, especially, digesting, which is not easy for social scientists to grasp. After all, as Anne Murcott highlights, the object of study, be it food or the act of eating itself, “keeps disappearing,” and the causalities involved in this process remain unclear. Both from a social scientific as well as a biological perspective, it would be too easy to take the link between eating and digesting for granted: what I eat might be influenced, but not determined, by the digestive tract. Similarly, the digestive tract is not strictly responsible for the management of food, given that it also has its neurological, immunological, and endocrine functions.

While these intricacies and complexities have certainly hindered many social scientists from dealing with aspects of digestion, I contend that this reluctance also stems from academic politics as well. As I have argued, early social scientific food scholars emphasized eating as more than a physiological process. They considered it important to demonstrate the complex sociocultural arrangements and practices connected to eating. Simultaneously, they formulated criticisms of natural scientific paradigms, which they thought incapable of accounting for these complexities.

Notably, nutrition science was accused of reducing eating to the ingestion of physiologically-necessary nutrients, an idea that Gyorgy Scrinis has termed “nutritional reductionism.” Since then, scholars in critical nutrition studies, have highlighted that foods are more than nutrient-cocktails and that malnutrition is not the result of scientific illiteracy, but rather, constructed through poverty, access, and the difficulty of translating nutrition standards into lived experience. Although critiques of nutrition science and its reductionisms are still useful, they cannot serve as a generic template for the critique of scientific approaches to food and eating. As sociologist Krishnendu Ray suggests, by
focusing on the critique of scientific reductionism, humanists and social scientists ignore that “reduction is just one tool in the analytical toolkit, as is aggregation, holism and complexity.” [53] New collaborative research at the intersection of disciplines, such as gastroenterology, microbiology, immunology, epigenetics, and enteric neuroscience, suggests that the eating body is about to be redefined in complex ways. Reading sociologist Hannah Landecker, it even seems that some scientists challenged the idea that the human metabolism is akin to a combustion machine as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Old and new biological research illustrates that the boundary between what food is and what the eater is, what is decomposed and synthesized, is less than clear-cut.[54] The relationship between foods and bodies, rather than being a process of decomposition, might be reframed in terms of “environmental exposure” or “tasting,” a sort of sensorial learning about the world.[55] These research areas provide important ethnographic fields for the study of specific shifts regarding how food, eating, and digesting are re-enacted in complex and insightful ways. In addition, the study of metabolism and the gut provides a potential field in which the compartmentalization of food scholarship, especially the divides across the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, might be challenged in order to stimulate the quest for boundary-crossing theorization regarding what it means to study food and eating.

**Digestion, Metabolism, Gut**

How can scholars address digestion and scientific explorations of eating, without losing the critical approaches developed within food studies? First of all, the relations between eating and digestion, or between food and the gut, cannot be taken as pre-existing but must be understood as historically and socio-politically produced.[56] The gut is elusive, neither easy to train nor control, so humans try to access it in many complex ways. Digestion is a matter of bodily techniques, such as dieting and shitting, and complicated assemblages constituted of humans and nonhumans, technologies, and legislative frameworks.[57] Digestion is also enacted by means of epistemic practices, such as those found within gastroenterology, technologies such as pharmaceutical products, and even databases like the Human Microbiome Project.[58]

In order to facilitate transdisciplinary conversations that go beyond adding up perspectives (“lenses”), the question of translation is key.[59] In contrast to Warde’s attempt to seek theoretical synthesis, here the quest for integration cannot be as straightforward because epistemologies might be fundamentally disparate. Consequently, I suggest that Elizabeth Wilson’s *Gut Feminism* provides an inspiring example regarding how to deal with such differences. Drawing on critical theory, psychoanalysis, and biological research, Wilson engages with psychopharmacological data, especially with the metabolism of anti-depressants. Challenging the dichotomy between body and mind, Wilson establishes the periphery of the metabolic body, especially the gut, as a site of mindedness. A main concern of her work is to
contest the reluctance of many feminist theorists to deal with the biology of the body, beyond deconstruction and criticism—a tendency reminiscent of trends in food studies. Simultaneously, Wilson also warns against falling into the trap of uncritically adopting scientific premises and results. Whereas she calls for scientific literacy as a basis for good research across disciplines, she is suspicious of seeking theoretical synthesis, which would come at the cost of depth. Instead, she advocates for carving out and retaining theoretical contradictions as a way to enable profound investigations, while simultaneously acknowledging differences. Her critical and psychoanalytically-informed reading of psychopharmacological data offers a stunning example that points to a metabolic understanding of depression.

The gut, rather than being the deepest inside of the body, emerges as an inside-outside, a space of “exposure” or “mediation,” vital for humans and nonhumans, not only to survive, but also to know the world. In Wilson’s account, the gut has to do with much more than food, but it cannot be isolated from the human interaction with food. Within the field of food studies, from time to time, it would be beneficial to remind scholars about one very simple thing: that everything called food, at least potentially, is made to suit the gut. With this analytical reduction in mind, scholars may might want to explore gutted complexities.

Conclusion

Given their ubiquity, eating practices might serve as a “lens” to shed light on the many puzzles of sociomaterial lifeworlds. However, when utilized in an uncritical way, the metaphor of the “lens” is limited and limiting. The metaphor of the lens, which evokes a clear view through a translucent window, obscures the situatedness of research. It seduces scholars to forget about the specific characteristics of their analytical tools. Following feminist STS, I ask: what is particular about the “lens of food?” Food-centered approaches come with their own shades, bends, and peculiarities, and should, I argue, be foregrounded. This need for more foundational theorization is especially true within the field of food studies, which, by taking food as its constitutive object, seeks radically new understandings that contest disciplinary borders.

In this essay, I demonstrate how approaches that have used food as a “lens” for meaning-making have distanced food from its sociomaterial characteristics. In order to explore these traits, I focus on the question of eating and its particular materialities. On this journey, I explore the following: danger—the effects and arrangements related to the potential harm inherent in (not) eating; destruction—the awkward fact that eating makes the object of appreciation disappear forever; digestion—the ambiguous links between foods and our metabolic selves. Furthermore, by framing eating as a compound practice, I stress the complexities and regularities of eating skills, and by introducing the
concept of *broken routines*, I celebrate the ephemeral treasure of sensorial clumsiness while doing participant food research.

In addition to outlining my ideas regarding the particularities of food, one of my central concerns has been to seek theoretical approaches that support the quest for foundational theorization within the field of food studies. Here, Warde’s attempt to integrate practice theories and food-related research provides one example of a meticulous theoretical and translational endeavor. While theoretical synthesis is one solution, I also believe that attempts to transgress disciplinary boundaries more decisively should be taken. This work makes it difficult to avoid clashes between epistemologies, and, as a result, scientific literacy as well as translation between disciplines become crucial. Ideally, the long-standing divide between natural sciences and humanities might be confronted without falling into the polarized traps of either constructionist critique or naïve enthusiasm. Ultimately, I advocate for new configurations of interdisciplinarity across the divides of humanities and sciences that might help to establish foundational, boundary-crossing theoretical debates about food as an object of study. Perhaps, at this point, scholars could also search for an analytical metaphor other than the “lens,” which, used in the conventional way, does not do justice to the affective, transgressive, sometimes aggressive, and sometimes integrative methods of analysis in food scholarship?

In this essay, my emphasis on the materiality of eating serves as one provisional example of the pursuit of the particularities of food in food-centered research across disciplines. I hope that other ideas and approaches will complement my attempt, as the question remains: What is specific about food, and which conceptual tools support the path to an answer?

## Acknowledgements

My warmest thank you goes to the editors—Catie Peters for encouragement and unlimited intellectual support and Maya Hey for inspiration and insistence on feminism. I am grateful beyond words to Giulia Nicolini, who, with generosity and thoughtfulness, helped to improve my writing. Also, I express my appreciation to the two anonymous reviewers for challenging my piece. Finally, I wish to thank all friends and academics who shaped this article with wit and patience: Stef Rieser, Kit Davis, Jakob Klein, Eliot Gee, Katharina Graf, Galia Mansueto, Sung-Joon Park, Richard Rottenburg, and Konstantin Biehl.

## Biography

Maria Kuczera is an MA student in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the MLU, Halle (Saale), and a former student of the MA Anthropology of Food Programme at SOAS, London. Her current MA project
examines the redefinitions of eater and eaten as well as body and mind through working between disciplines, such as gastroenterology, neuroscience, and psychosomatic medicine.

Citations

8. While this essay is focused on consumption and the embodied practice of eating, I note that, for many years, political economists researching production have also investigated the specificity of food. See Ben Fine, “Towards a Political Economy of Food,” Review of International Political Economy 1, no. 3 (1994): 519–45; Harriet Friedman, “Premature Rigour: Or, Can Ben Fine Have His Contingency and Eat It, Too?” Review of International Political Economy 1, no. 3 (1994): 553–61; Peter Rosset, Food is Different: Why We Must Get the WTO Out of Agriculture (London: ZED, 2006). ↩
9. Scholars who have foregrounded materiality within the field of food scholarship include Emma-Jayne Abbots and Anna Lavis, Why We Eat, How We Eat: Contemporary Encounters Between Foods and Bodies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Emma-Jayne Abbots, “Introducing a Special Issue on Food Stuffs: Materialities, Meanings, and Embodied Encounters,” Gastronomica 16, no. 3 (2016): 1–4. One of the primary controversies in this body of scholarship involves how the agential qualities of foods and other non-living objects should be theorized. For example, Jane Bennett seeks to rehabilitate the agency of material, while other scholars distinguish a separate “material” sphere and highlight the co-constitution of the material and the semiotic. See Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Sebastian Abrahamsson, Filippo Bertoni, Rebeca

10. Geographically, food studies as a field is especially thriving in the U.K., the U.S. and other Anglophone settler colonies.


15. For a critique of visual metaphors, see Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 371. Rorty even suggests that we “get the visual, especially the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether.”


18. With regard to food-related experiments, see Sebastian Abrahamsson et al., “Living with Omega-3.”

19. Graduate Association for Food Studies, “Future of Food Studies 2017 CFP.”


26. Susanne Freidberg, Fresh: A Perishable History (Cambridge: Belknap, 2009). At the 2017 GAFS conference, two presentations on food insecurity, “Current Approaches to Reduce Food Insecurity: A Case Study of a Food Hub to Increase Fresh Produce,” by Whitney Fung, and “If You’re Not Gonna Eat It, Don’t Expect Someone Who’s Poor to Eat It’: Perspectives from Food Pantry Clients on the Barriers and Facilitators to Consuming Fresh Produce,” by Laura Kihlstrom, provided concise examples of the specific material-semiotic tension between freshness and perishability, which means life and death in the modern U.S. food system. Fung and Kihlstrom described constant tension between the goal to improve the delivery of fresh produce in food pantries and the challenge of managing its perishability (i.e. insufficient cooling facilities within food pantries or constraining work and household routines on the side of the recipients showed that freshness is relative to the possibilities of preservation). In some cases, frozen or canned foods proved fresher than unprocessed produce.


29. Wilson, Gut Feminism, 36–44; 75–8.

31. Foundational practice theoretical works include Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967). They share the idea that neither social structures (manifest in institutions, organizations, or systems of knowledge) nor individual agents are pre-existing entities, but rather, outcomes of the dynamic nature of embodied, routinized, and inconspicuous everyday practices. Therefore, empirically observable practices serve as the main unit of analysis to investigate the workings of social life.

32. These new approaches not only revived practice theories but also reshaped them by bringing previously neglected issues, such as historicity and power, to the fore. See Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike von Savigny, The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory (London: Routledge, 2001); Sherry Ortner, “Updating Practice Theory,” in Anthropology and Social Theory. Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–19.

33. Warde, The Practice of Eating, 32.

34. Warde, The Practice of Eating, 96. For more thorough analysis of the motoring example, see Alan Warde, “Consumption and Theories of Practice,” Journal of Consumer Culture 5, no. 2 (2005): 131–53.


37. Warde, The Practice of Eating, 10.


42. Warde, The Practice of Eating, 76.

43. Warde, The Practice of Eating, 110.
44. By “leaving the familiar,” I do not mean traveling to far-away places, but rather going to any new place which promises to give a new perspective or insight, such as an interview situation, fieldwork in a hospital, a walk through the park, or even reading a challenging text. Good research should start with a question which you have not answered yet: it should always be an encounter with the new. 


46. The absence of ingestion and digestion in Warde’s text is surprising, given his argument that this aspect of eating has to be explored much more because what we eat is, at least potentially, supposed to end in our mouths, to be swallowed, and to wander through the inside-outsides of our digestive tract. See Warde, The Practice of Eating, 69.


49. For a quick overview of academic traditions that disdain the realm of food as mundane/biological/female and hence unsuitable for philosophical inquiry, see Warren Belasco, Food: The Key Concepts (Oxford: Berg), 1–7. For foundational texts that highlight the social and semiotic function of food, consider the follow essays included in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik’s Food and Culture: A Reader (2012): Roland Barthes’s “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” Claude Lévi-Strauss’s, “The Culinary Triangle,” and Mary Douglas’s “The Abominations of Leviticus.”

50. For a critique of scientific approaches to food, see Nick Cullather, “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie,” The American Historical Review 112, No. 2 (2007): 337–367; Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica
Hayes-Conroy, Doing Nutrition Differently: Critical Approaches to Diet and Dietary Intervention (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).


59. According to Haraway in “Situated Knowledges”: “[W]e must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts” (585).
60. Whereas Wilson refers to general tendencies within feminist theory, it has to be highlighted, that, within the field of STS, feminist thinkers contributed significantly to theorizing the middle ground between solely constructionist and naïvely enthusiastic approaches to biology and other natural sciences. For an overview, see Mary Wyer, Mary Barbercheck, Donna Cookmeyer, Hatice Ozturk, and Marta Wayne, *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

