



Reflections on the Food Politics and Cultures Festival: 10-12 November 2017



The Food Politics and Cultures Festival grew out of a belief that sectoral and narrowly academic work does not begin to uncover the rich debates, controversies and dialogues about what food means in our lives, how its production and preparation have been dominated by corporate capitalism, how our senses and tastes have been defined by hegemonic globalization, what individuals, collectives and radical scholars have done to contest this, or what group and individual experiences of pleasure, yearning or desire are experienced through certain food cultures and practices.

With this in mind, members of the Project spent several months planning a trans-

sectoral and eclectic arts, humanities and cultures event that encompassed performance, the visual arts, fiction, academic discussion and activist discourse to open up new conversations. We were (and are) fully aware that our commitment to the idea of a “festival” of the arts, humanities and social sciences (rather than a conference or symposium) situated the event at the margins of what the mainstream academy defines as serious and rigorous and knowledge production. We were also acutely aware that a “festival” would lend itself to the idea of a-political and unreflective “fun”. But critical thought and reflection - what Gabeba Baderoon evocatively captured as “groundwork” in her opening presentation - requires risk-taking and opening oneself to contradictory, messy and open-ended knowledge-making. We do not regret this risk-taking and the contradictions it yielded, and offer the following reflections in the hope that these may spark further exchanges and reflections – both about the event and in the necessary ongoing conversations we urgently need about food.

Food Memory and Nostalgia

A central theme at the start of the festival dealt with memory and culinary traditions rooted in the social and eating practices of marginalized groups. As the curator of the District Six Museum’s food and memory project for over 10 years, Tina Smith spoke passionately about memorialising the recipes and cooking practices of women living in District Six under apartheid. This opened up a debate that ran throughout the festival. Responding critically to Tina’s emphasis on reclaiming pasts, Moenieba Isaacs commented on the trauma and social divisions that wracked the District Six community, suggesting that these were inevitably reflected in what food was produced, who produced it and how it was produced.



Moenieba’s main point was that it is counter-productive to perceive the past food practices of communities with histories of dispossession and oppression in terms of the politics of nostalgia and practices of salvage. Angelo Fick picked up on this reflection in a talk focusing on the dangers of ossifying “authenticity” in food cultures. Showing that regionalized “authentic foods” have now become the new focus in global gastroporn, he alluded to the ways in which our tastes and food desires are coerced by commodity capitalism at large, and by seemingly ordinary prejudices or food trends: the requirement on airplane flights that we should all choose “beef-or-cow” (the subject of a satirical comedy on [youtube](#)) is not a benign prejudice, but one that speaks volumes about how our eating is defined by what food corporations make money out of – in many cases, meat, meat and more meat.

Some Key Questions:

Does nostalgia about food practices and certain cuisines always mean succumbing to

capitalist or conservative practices or ideas about food, identity and eating?

Can/does nostalgia about food practices carry a political critique of how past dispossessions continues to impact the present and serve to inform political activity? Or does it keep us stuck in a romanticised past?

What does the nostalgia seek to point to or claim? How does looking to the past or revisiting the nostalgia of sharing, making something out of nothing etc., reflect different way of life?

Food and Groundwork



In the Festival's opening session, Gabeba' Baderoon's reflections on groundwork offered a tantalizing metaphor for thinking about what knowledges we produce about food, and the importance of searching doggedly for its sources in nature: the constituents and origins of what we feed our bodies, our connections to (or lack thereof) these sources, and the need for radical "groundwork" around what we are taught to understand about food, hunger and solving problems of food and hunger. Anticipating Desiree Lewis' reminder that the current specialist regime of registers, theories and practices about global food crises is not "fact", but "construct", Gabeba urged us to deconstruct our complex relations to what we eat, value about eating, and understand about the worlds in which we acquire knowledge about food.

Some Questions:

What kind of "space-clearing" do we need to undertake in understanding food?

How does thinking about *what* and *how* we eat connect us to who we would like to become – spiritually, politically and ethically - and how we inhabit our natural environment?



Die Vroue van Buffelsjagbaai

from [Riaan Hendricks](#)

02:46



Moenieba Isaacs reading a poem for Sarah Niemand's and other women

Indigenous Knowledges and Who Speaks in the Name of Revolutionary Food Practices

Riaan Isaac's documentary about women resisting threats to their livelihood in catching crayfish, abalone and selling sea shells raised much more than many academic volumes on "participatory action research" "self-reflexive research" or policy studies. In collaboration with Moenieba Isaacs from PLAAS, who has for years done policy research in the fishing industry, Riaan encouraged the audience to understand the agencies of some of South Africa's most socially marginalized women food producers, and their deep connections to their environment, the ocean and an expansive sense of being "human". It was this holistic breadth of human social, political and spiritual experience that Jolyn Philips, who hails from the area and is both an author of fiction and singer, raised in her short story readings, her singing and her astute commentary. The panel featuring Moenieba, Riaan and Jolyn clearly identified the vibrancy and depth of voices that are usually silenced or obliterated in the numerous studies of, for example, food security, food sovereignty or land and agrarian struggles.



Food @FoodPolitics_SA · Nov 11



Replying to @FoodPolitics_SA

The community, the land and the ocean are one in the area. Illegalisation separates these connected elements, stripping people of income and their spiritual dignity.



This vibrancy and depth also emerged in the brief but incisive words of "Comrade Carrot" who, in his own words, "is marketing himself as a revolutionary vegetable aiming to conscientize all the other vegetables". Comrade Carrot is a small-scale farmer who has for several years been growing organic vegetables in ways that elude

mainstream production and marketing circuits. Inhabiting a world that is very different from the Western Cape's elitist slow and organic food ventures (often critiqued during the festival), Comrade Carrot encouraged his audience to understand that indigenous knowledge is not some fixed body of "rural" ideas, but the product of often urbanized, alert, critical and constantly changing understandings of and struggles around, inter alia, land ownership, marketing practices, human nutritional and gustatory needs and the environment.



This understanding was also conveyed in the interventions of Zayaan Khan, who showed that alternatives to the current food system is in part located with "youth as the drivers towards building food communities". In her artwork and exhibition on food she explored and revealed that concepts of time, biodiversity, ancestry and self are deeply connected to land, seed and water.

Some questions:

Why has the notion of "food security" dominated the way we think about hunger and food, and what does it really mean?

What might be left out in much of the academic and policy research on land struggles and food struggles?

Who seems best placed to make progressive interventions into policy and planning around food growth and its distribution?

Pleasure, the senses and food



Food always appeals to many senses. It can do so in disturbing ways – as is the case with the flood of gastroporn that encourages us to fixate on edible commodities in our aspirations for dominant lifestyles or social identities. Or it can do so in liberating ways. Whether through critique or through demonstrations of alternatives, the artwork featured in the exhibition curated by Dee Marco *Yearning for Taste*, brought together a range of works by artists like Bernie Searle, Lady Skollie, Sharlene Khan, Churchill Madikida, Lawrence Lemaana, food activists Parusha Naidoo, Leila and Zayaan Khan, upcoming rural artists Donovan Julius and Sherriff Ramoabi, UWC students and others. This exhibition incorporated various

elements of food that often goes invisible like intimacy, memory and history.

Cutting Carrots the Wrong Way: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose about Food by University of the Western Cape postgraduate writing students Jolyn Phillips, Kerry Hammerton, Musa Khanyile, Sindiwe Magona and others edited by Kobus Moolman (published by uHlanga Press).



Mike van Graan's play, directed by Pamela Nomvete, also demonstrated how central food is to the existential struggles for dignity and meaning of some of South Africa's most socially marginalized, yet resilient and enterprising groups. The sense of well-being that comes from our connection to "the ground" (at a time when the extent of most people's disconnection is so extreme that they employ mourners to grieve at the funerals of their "loved ones") established a fascinating connection to Gabeba Baderoon's opening discussion of groundwork. At times hilarious, often biting socially

critical, and frequently inspirational, *Another One's Bread* is in all senses “grounding”.

Some questions:

Are feelings about food secondary or irrelevant to the so-called “serious issues such as “food security”, addressing hunger?

How can we integrate and understand feelings and the senses in our intellectual and creative work that deals with food?

In what ways does work that tangentially references food actually convey a great deal about food politics and cultures



Mailing address: Critical Food Studies: Transdisciplinary Humanities Approaches,
University of the Western Cape , Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, Cape Town ,
Western Cape , 7535, ZA