

The Frontiers of Food Studies

Warren Belasco

American Studies Department, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Amy Bentley

Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, New York University

Charlotte Biltekoff

American Studies and Food Science & Technology, University of California, Davis

Psyche Williams-Forson

American Studies Department, University of Maryland College Park

Carolyn de la Peña

American Studies Program, University of California, Davis

From Latin meaning hearth or fireplace, and by extension the center of the home. Taken by Kepler (1604) in a mathematical sense for “point of convergence.” Introduced into English 1656 by Hobbes. Sense transfer to “center of activity or energy” is first recorded 1796.

From the First Lady’s organic garden to policy proposals that would tax soda consumption to Julia Robert’s meal-based healing on the big screen, food is a site of American political, social and popular fixation. This, then, is a cultural moment when food studies scholars have an opportunity to stretch beyond the archive, the text, or the performance and say something about food issues. A recent panel at the Association for the Study of Food and Society drew several food studies scholars together to consider

what we have learned from our own forays into what might be called “the frontiers of food studies”—that space where science-based, quantitative thinking tends to dominate but humanities scholars are occasionally called upon to provide a “cultural” perspective. Five of us, all trained in American studies, with scholarship primarily focused on the historical development of American food practices, shared our experiences working with scientists, in policy think tanks, with quantitative colleagues, and confronting research on food and health—especially obesity—that would be strengthened by a cultural point of view. We then recreated and extended this dialogue in an e-mail chain that allowed people to respond to a set of general concerns, and comment on others’ points of view. Here, we take as a given that food studies in our current moment should not merely work adjacent to social, scientific and political concerns. But we also realize that entering into public debates requires knowledge, approaches and language we did not learn in grad school. As interdisciplinary cultural historians seeking dialogue with policy makers, pundits and scientists on food issues *now*, what is the usefulness of the knowledge we have? What are—or what should be—the limits to what we can say? Do we need new methods to engage in contemporary concerns, or do we need just to stretch those we already have? And how, if we enter this new frontier of food studies, can we ensure that those who set policy, determine nutritional paradigms, and undertake scientific research will actually listen?

Warren Belasco

American studies professors are inherently interdisciplinary, so we tend to venture fearlessly where more prudent scholars might hesitate to tread. Furthermore, as a food scholar I feel the compulsion to be useful and practical. The potential to join theory with practice is what brought me to the field in the first place. As the notorious San Francisco Digger sage Emmett Grogan proposed in the late 1960s, food is a handy “medium” to develop “collective social consciousness and social action” (Belasco 2007: 17). Or, as an insurgent organic gardener at Berkeley’s People’s Park suggested in 1969, food can serve as an “edible dynamic,” or “digestible ideology” (Belasco 2007: 22).

On the other hand, my own experience editing a food journal has been somewhat cautionary: “food” covers so many different areas, from dietetics to agriculture to media studies, and I am constantly being brought up short by how little I understand, know, or want to know. As there is already so much to keep up with in my own specialty—modern US cultural history—can I really be knowledgeable and useful by encroaching on other people’s turf? Of late, however, I have been heeding the advice of Jeffery Sobal (1995)—if you want to go where the action is in food studies, study fatness. Specifically, I have been asked to join various expert panels, roundtables and non-humanities forums (loosely referred to as “think tanks” here) to provide some cultural and historical perspective on the obesity scare. The audience usually consists of epidemiologists, public health officials, food marketers, journalists and cardiologists.

If humanities scholars get the ear of the fatness industry, and pick up the skills required to communicate (reviewing foundational findings in food studies such as

Potter 1958, Bentley 1995 and Diner 2001 is essential; super-synthesis is good, detailed complex analysis is not), what can we tell them? It seems to me that the main thing we can do is to question assumptions.

To caricature those assumptions in a single paragraph: We are having an obesity epidemic because Americans eat too much, too quickly, and too mindlessly—unlike, say the French. We are having a crisis now because our cooking skills have declined, people no longer eat together as families, food has become too desocialized, too denaturalized, too taken-for-granted, too convenient. What we need is to change how people think, feel and act about food. Food needs to become more valued, indeed more expensive. Eating has to become more important in people's lives. On a private level, people have to become less convenience-oriented, less lazy, more active. Move more and eat less—and do so with reverence. And on a public level, business, government and consumer groups need to do a better job of working together to provide healthier food and more educated consumers ready to eat it.

I can respond to these generalizations in two ways: as an expert, or as a generalist. My own research is not on obesity, nutrition or food choice. Opting for the latter, here are four sets of questions well within my paygrade as an American studies scholar that I have found productive to raise in these forums:

- *Mass culture indictment:* Is it true that Americans do not appreciate food? Or, as often phrased, America does not have a cuisine, unlike France, where people presumably know how, when, and how much to eat. I see parallels here to the old debates, at the very formative stages of American studies, about whether America really had a “culture,” or more recently, about whether American pop culture was a dangerous drug (e.g. Winn 1985; Levine 1990; Gans 1999). Over the past 50–75 years, we humanities scholars have done much to reveal the inherent elitism of such contentions, and I think we are doing a lot of the same when it comes to discussing American food. (e.g. Gabaccia 1998; Counihan 2002; Smith 2004; Parasecoli 2008)
- *Assumptions of decline and fall:* Is it true that people used to eat better, more slowly, more mindfully? Did people really cook more or better? Did families used to eat together more often? All of these are empirical questions for social historians, who are coming up with some startling findings about what really went on in American kitchens and dining rooms in the past (e.g. Turner 2006). And while we may have major “source problems” when it comes to figuring out what ordinary people used to do with food, even that uncertainty can be a refreshing finding. Sometimes the sermonizers need to hear that we just do not know much about the past.
- *Educating the public:* Does nutrition reform actually work, especially the kind that focuses on individual behaviors? There are many studies of previous waves of health reform (Whorton 1982; Green 1986; Levenstein 1998). I have been at meetings on obesity where Harvey Levenstein has summarized his well-known work on the failures of previous attempts to “educate” people to eat better. Unfortunately that message still does not seem to get through. People listen



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

politely to Harvey's spiel, which he has down cold by now, and then go on to propose more programs to educate people to eat less and move more.

- *What's the problem?* Here I am reminded of 2008 Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin on climate change: it does not matter who caused it, we just need to solve it. But can we "solve it" if we have not really defined it? Is it fatness? Being overweight? Diabetes? Is it a problem of agricultural economics (oversupply, overmarketing) or is it a problem of personal economics, food insecurity, poverty? Is it a medical problem or one of race, class and gender? Is it even an American problem? And why now? Why the sudden flood of funding? For this we need more discussion of how social problems are constructed and represented—something food scholars are very good at (Maurer and Sobal 1995; Gard and Wright 2005).

If, with our annoying questions, we humanists can provoke the experts to re-examine their stale paradigms, we will have performed a great public service.

Warren Belasco teaches American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is the author of *Appetite for Change* (1990), *Meals to Come* (2006) and *Food: The Key Concepts* (2008). He used to be editor of *Food, Culture & Society*, but now grows figs in Washington, DC. 6909 Fifth Street NW, Washington DC 20012, USA (belasco@umbc.edu).

Amy Bentley

Recently in the media have been discussions over the relevance and usefulness of the humanities, not only in the public sphere but in academia as well. In these times of crisis, some argue, the humanities are a luxury we cannot afford unless we can target and identify a tangible benefit to the economy. Others argue that it is precisely now that we need to take out our great books, think big thoughts, and relearn the ethics, values and obligations of being human in a complicated world. Even as many maintain the traditional rationale that the humanities foster critical thinking that leads to wiser, more informed decision-making and civilized action, others, such as the esteemed Professor Stanley Fish, disagree. Fish argues that the humanities are valuable precisely for the knowledge they generate and nothing more. To try to estimate or even identify a value, Fish believes, is fruitless and in fact denigrates the humanities (Cohen 2009; Fish 2009a, 2009b).

Here we can insert *food studies* into the fray. When I tell people I teach "food studies," it almost always prompts a smile. It makes me wonder then, how can it achieve the necessary gravitas to enable it to actually influence our scientific, political, and popular debates about food. Food studies scholarship tends to be qualitative-oriented, featuring questions that employ, for example, historical and cultural analysis, critique the political economy of food, or explore the meanings and uses of food.

When we talk about the differences between the sciences and the humanities/soft social sciences, at the core are differences in methodology—quantitative and qualitative—and all of the assumptions and conventions that go along with each.

While some argue that the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research are less distinct than we commonly assume, each has its own conventions. Quantitative research is concerned with classifying, counting and constructing statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed. The research is regarded as objective—that is, seeking precise measurement and analysis. Qualitative research regards knowledge as inextricably intertwined with a researcher's perceptions and prejudices. Qualitative research attempts to identify, explore and attach meaning to phenomena. Quantitative research's strengths are that it can aggregate and measure a large quantity of data, and can test hypotheses, but it may miss nuance and detail, and may not measure meanings of phenomena. Qualitative research is able to ask different questions, to dig deeper, focus on the individual experience, note historical change, and explore and ask questions of such "intangibles" as culture. Qualitative and quantitative researchers often "think differently." We become "mono-lingual," or entirely immersed in our methodological worlds, and by virtue of professional specialization become less fluent and aware of other methodological systems out there with their own citizen researchers.

Food and health policies are shaped by quantitative data. Even though studies employing mixed methods are becoming acceptable, the reality is that most evaluating bodies regard quantitative research as the gold standard, and qualitative-based studies are a nice add-on if there is time and money. I doubt this is going to change radically anytime soon. Therefore, if (as qualitative-oriented food studies researchers) we are to influence food, nutrition and health policy, we need to make the first move to adapt to current conventions. We need to understand and be fluent in the entire spectrum of research methods, at least as much as we possibly can.

Since 1996 I have been a member of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies (in 2005 Public Health was added) and have happily called it my home ever since. Most of my department colleagues take quantitative approaches to questions of nutrition and health. Thus for over the past decade I have had sustained interaction with those who work with large data sets, and who employ the scientific method in their work and their teaching. We in the NYU food studies program have learned much by presenting our research to quantitative researchers skeptical of qualitative methods. Such pointed questions as: "Why those informants?" "Is it a random sample?" "How do you know you've gotten enough material to make those claims?" "Why didn't you do a cross-cultural comparison?" and "How can you make a definitive claim with only a handful of examples?" have sharpened our methodological stances. I have had to learn to describe my work, which is primarily about building historical narratives and describing cultural meanings, in terms that make sense to quantitative researchers, who intuitively understand the reality of, say, a cultural zeitgeist, but are not sure there is any way to "prove" that it exists.

In addition to developing fluency across the research spectrum, we should think about making our work more accessible to people outside of academia. Our agendas, the questions we ask, and the conventions of our scholarship are not well suited to speaking to a popular audience interested in what to eat or policy makers looking to regulate food products and practices. This is not necessarily a bad thing;



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

in fact, I think the conventions and specialization of academic scholarship have much to admire. But if we want our scholarship to be influential on the frontiers—beyond our own networks—we need to develop a “usable past,” in the case of historical research, or ideas about culture devoid of specialized jargon that can be applied to contemporary problems and help generate solutions.

An example from my own research as a cultural historian can illustrate. My book, *Eating for Victory*, tells the story of Second World War US government programs designed to promote food production (victory gardening, canning) and limit consumption (rationing) as well as tried to uncover citizens’, especially women’s and African Americans’, responses to those campaigns (Bentley 1998). There is much in the book that is of value to those in government regarding the equitable distribution of food in times of austerity, as well as agricultural production and the role of the citizenry as we re-evaluate farm policy and grapple with health and nutrition issues. But to make the material truly accessible, I would need to pull out and reframe the ideas and examples. A brief article on what victory gardens during the Second World War can teach us about participatory democracy, for example, would probably attract more interest than the ideas embedded in a 200-page academic book.

I am advocating that we food studies academics expand both our methodological reach as well as our mode of presentation. It is time to consider whether our work can function both as academic scholarship and ideas formulated to solve societal problems. But given that food is such an important topic in so many current discussions including climate change, economics, nutrition, public welfare and community building, we can, and should, develop research that is both relevant and specialized.

Amy Bentley is an associate professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University. She is the author of *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*, as well as several articles on such diverse topics as the politics of southwestern cuisine, a historiography of food riots, and the cultural implications of the Atkins diet. She is editor of *A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age* (in press), and currently writing a cultural history of baby food. Bentley is also a co-founder of the Experimental Cuisine Collective, an interdisciplinary group of scientists, food studies folks and chefs who study the intersection of science and food. Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, New York University, New York, NY, USA (amy.bentley@nyu.edu).

Charlotte Biltkoff

I used to cook for a living, then I went to graduate school (in American studies) to study food, and now I work at UC Davis, where my appointment is in both American studies and food science and technology. I have learned that food means something very different in a restaurant kitchen, a humanities dissertation, and a food science department. When I made the transition from the kitchen to the study, the differences between working with food, the material, and thinking

about food, the concept, preoccupied me. Now, as I settle into my role as a faculty member in both the familiar realm of American studies and the new world of food science, I am revisiting similar concerns, but with a lot more urgency. Every time I walk by the labs on the way to my office, a lone outpost of cultural criticism in the food science department, and every time I try to describe (justify) my research methods to my colleagues there, I am seeking a more productive understanding of the differences between scientific and humanistic approaches to food. As Amy has explained, the intellectual and cultural gulf between researchers using qualitative and quantitative methods, between those of use who work in labs and those of us who haunt historical archives, is formidable. But many of us who are trained to think about food using qualitative methods are motivated to bridge it.

My research into the history of dietary health has convinced me that we cannot understand the conflict between the “facts” of dietary health and the practices of American eaters unless we pay attention to the role of beliefs and values on both sides. There is, in fact, no such thing as dietary health apart from values and ideology. I frequently conduct an exercise in which I ask students why they try to eat a healthy diet. Their answers typically include the following reasons: to be sexy, attractive or thin; to perform better in school, at work or in sports; to show that they are educated, moral, or disciplined. These responses show how deeply dietary health is intertwined with social ideals and cultural values, how deeply our understanding of “eating right” is intertwined with our beliefs about “being right.”

If we are to construct a bridge over the science/culture divide that leads to productive collaboration in the name of food and health, it may help to start by considering why we think of dietary health as purely biomedical, when it so clearly is not, and why we so often think of eating habits in terms of health (conceived in biomedical terms) when there are clearly so many other ways in which food matters. We need to better understand why, as Paul Rozin and his collaborators have shown, fried eggs mean “cholesterol” to Americans and “breakfast” to the French (Rozin *et al.* 1999).

A little bit of history can help illuminate this picture. For example, understanding changes in the larger culture of health and the role of diet within it since the 1970s helps, in part, to situate the dominance of scientific expertise in the larger cultural discussion about food. Starting in the 1970s the focus of health professionals shifted from communicable diseases and contagion (as well as deficiency diseases) to chronic diseases and lifestyle. As a result, a whole new range of personal habits and daily activities began to fall into the realm of health-related behaviors, to be assessed in terms of their impact on health, and to be guided by scientific and medical expertise. The pursuit of health became an increasingly important and time-consuming preoccupation for the American middle class. Eating habits were absolutely central to this “new health consciousness” because diet was considered one of the most important ways of preventing and managing chronic diseases (Lupton and Peterson 1996; Crawford, 1980, 2006). Eating right became a more important practice than ever before, guided by scientific and medical epistemologies whose authority over food in general was also growing.



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

The social and cultural significance of ideas about food that are grounded in science and justified in terms of their impact on “health” has grown considerably not just in the last few decades, but over the course of the last century. At the same time, we have continued to think about dietary ideals as “objective” and failed to recognize their ideological content. We have ceded the terrain of “eating right” to scientific and medical epistemologies despite the important lessons that history can teach us about its cultural content.

I often wonder what it would mean for conversations about food and health to be based on a fundamental belief that our most commonsense ideas about health, good diets and good eaters are shaped by culture, values and ideologies. Of course, to some extent, science-oriented studies on food and health already “include” the idea of culture. But acknowledgments that health is a biomedical matter that takes place within culture or that “culture” can sometimes get in the way of healthy eating ultimately leave the scientific hegemony over the concept of dietary health untouched. If we are going to bother with this at all, we may as well start to imagine a new way of thinking that starts from the premise that dietary health cannot be considered from a purely scientific or medical perspective. Dietary health cannot, of course, be considered from a purely cultural perspective either. So talking about food is going to require some very radical, productively unsettling conversation, collaboration, and cross-fertilization across social, disciplinary and professional divides.

Charlotte Biltkoff is Assistant Professor of American Studies and Food Science and Technology at the University of California, Davis where her research focuses on the cultural politics of dietary health. Her book, *Eating Right in America: Food, Health and Citizenship from Domestic Science to Obesity* is forthcoming with Duke University Press. She teaches courses on American food culture and new food product concept development. She also co-coordinates, with Carolyn De La Peña, the University of California Studies of Food and the Body Multi Campus Research Program and serves on the board of directors of the Association for the Study of Food and Society. Department of Food Science and Technology, UC Davis, Davis, CA 95616, USA (cbiltkoff@ucdavis.edu).

Psyche Williams-Forson

In May 2008, *The Washington Post* ran a five-part exposé titled, “Young Lives at Risk: Our Overweight Children.” As one interested in the intersections of food and society, many of the articles in the series caught my eye. Of particular interest, however, was the story of a young, very dark-skinned, African American girl named Latrisha Avery, aged twelve, standing at 5-feet-7 and weighing 220 pounds. Much of the online portion of Latrisha’s story deals with the ways in which she is teased in school regarding not only her weight but also her height and skin tone (*Washington Post* 2008). At times, not surprisingly, she feels isolated and alone in school. At home, Latrisha says that she turns to food—fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, collard greens—to deal with her depression, her grandmother having

recently died at the time in which she was interviewed. As I read the print and digital versions, my training as an American studies scholar working at the intersection of race and food helped me see that Latrisha is not eating in vacuum. While the article frames the issue as a problem of appetite alone, I see something different: Latrisha eats to the point where she is at risk of death because, in many ways, death surrounds her.

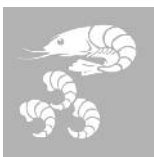
In discussions of food policy and nutrition education, cultural perspectives are often an afterthought. But why is this, when stories like Latrisha's so readily reveal the close connection between what people eat and the kind of lives they live? How can we in food and culture encourage those who seek to help people like Latrisha on the side of science and policy better understand the impact of environment and culture on food behaviors?

Some organizations—though not academic ones—are already bridging this divide between scientific and cultural approaches to food and health. The Food and Society Fellows Program sponsored by The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy provides fellowships to an interdisciplinary group of individuals ranging from chefs, farmers and nutritionists, to activists, public health professionals and policy experts who use media channels to create sustainable and just food systems and healthy communities. Project Health's FitNut, which actually works with Latrisha, purports, through weekly after-school sessions for girls, ages eight to twelve, to create "a supportive environment" in which "girls ... [can] grow up with health knowledge and self-confidence" (Aetna Insurance 2007). To be sure, FitNut, like the IATP Food Fellows, has been beneficial for girls like Latrisha, but they alone are not enough. How can we fill the gaps created between community-based interventions into the food supply and individually tailored "healthy choice" eating programs? Could a greater awareness of culture and cultural beliefs help—especially in preventing the ill health associated with obesity (e.g. coronary heart disease, Type II diabetes, hypertension, etc)?

In the photo gallery and slideshow that accompanies Latrisha Avery's story, we find one clip that shows Latrisha with a large salad of lettuce (seemingly iceberg), tomato, cucumber, a slice of red pepper, raw broccoli, and a scoop of tuna salad. Compare this raw vegetable salad with a meal we see Latrisha preparing to eat: fried chicken wing, sliced beef, collard greens, corn pudding, potato salad, macaroni salad, sweet potato, and ice tea, while sitting just beyond her elbow is some kind of walnut cake waiting to be cut. Which would you choose?

Eating foods from the latter menu, also known as "soul food" in many African American communities, is part of a cultural tradition that is directly tied to our families and our communities. Given this truism, I am led to agree with Kimberly Nettles who in her article "'Saving' Soul Food" argues:

If ... the food itself is the culprit, then the answer is simply to stop consuming it. Yet the threat of disease and death fails to quell the urge to prepare and consume foods that are part of a cultural tradition, that are valued as positive part of our communal life ... The plethora of "light" soul food cookbooks attempt to "save" soul food by encouraging the retelling of narratives that honor family,



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

love, and community while simultaneously advocating personal responsibility and restraint. Even so, they do not go far enough ... These books pay very little attention to the problems endemic to our contemporary food system that contribute to disease and environmental degradation. (Nettles 2007)

Creating healthy bodies requires a redefinition of the food stories that define our cultures. If we accept that this is true, then humanities scholars can intervene in questions of nutrition and food policy by discouraging our colleagues from demonizing and degrading the foods that help to create and sustain our communities. Rather than urging people like Latrisha to change what they eat, a more effective approach may be to help communities incorporate more healthful preparation techniques and ingredients into foods already rich in cultural meaning. Latrisha does not have to completely abandon her corn pudding in favor of the “naturally fresh” salad. Instead, she can be taught to eat a bit of both. Rejecting this either/or dichotomy seems to be at the heart of MyPyramid. Based on the recommendations set forth by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans in January 2005, cultures resonating from Native America to Malaysia and Canada now have their own food pyramid to which they can refer.

Other organizations are also taking a cultural turn by teaching and advocating food policies that recognize an additional need to work with extended families—such as grandmothers and other women who may head families (and thus have a different historical experience of cooking certain foods)—instead of focusing solely on individual family members. Organizations like The Food Trust and programs that are raising awareness about the lack of good supermarkets in many city communities—are also crafting life strategies (dietary and physical activity) in neighborhoods that lack access to affordable sources of food and fresh fruits and vegetables in such a way that gives the power to those in the community. As an example, San Francisco’s Farmer Brown restaurant boasts a menu of such items as “cayenne carrot cole slaw” and “crispy cornmeal catfish with candied yams” to support “local and African-American farmers.” Believing African American southern food is “a gift that is often mis-represented” they are doing what they can to restore its merits using a perspective of corrective action (Farmer Brown 2006).

But this corrective is far from simple. Not only does it involve humanities voices informing food policies, but also individuals and communities. There is no one formula for all people and there cannot be. We would be more than elitist to suggest as much. We would be foolish. Yet, in working together to really help foster change as activists, policymakers and academics, we can enable children like Latrisha Avery (who by 2008 had lost 15 pounds) not only to reduce her genetic predisposition toward obesity but also to enjoy the pleasures of eating the foods that help to create and sustain her cultural wellbeing. We can give her more than the limited choice of tuna on a bed of lettuce *or* fried chicken, candied yams and potato salad.

Humanities food scholars are talking. But will scientists and others who inform food policy, listen?

Psyche Williams-Forson is Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland College Park and an affiliate faculty member of the Women's Studies and African American Studies departments and the Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity. She is Associate Editor of *Food and Foodways* journal and author of the award-winning *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (2006). Her new research explores class, consumption and citizenship among African Americans by examining domestic interiors from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. 1104 Holzapfel Hall—Department of American Studies, University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742, USA (pwforson@umd.edu).

Carolyn de la Peña

Only five years into my life as a “food scholar,” I am still trying to balance my research on the history of food production and consumption with what I have come to think of as my “public work” as a collaborator with scientists and nutritionists and members of the food industry on current issues of consumer choice. I remain uncomfortable with the distance between these camps, and think resolving this discomfort will require the ability to speak more knowledgably, from the archives, to current concerns. To draw out and expand upon two points suggested already, we can do this by becoming more bilingual with our scholarship and learning methods beyond the humanities.

Academics who study food do so in a unique public space, and there is much to be gained by embracing it. But we need to be aware that so doing requires a process of translation that is not always rewarded by our academic institutions.

As Warren points out, food studies scholars who speak to non-humanities audiences often end up spending more time delivering spiced up book reports on core texts from the 1970s and 1980s rather engaging in the more meaty parts of their own research. And as Amy and Charlotte reveal, working with mixed crowds also means that if you do hope to communicate the findings from your own historical, literary or theoretical scholarship, you need to find new methods for framing and delivering that work. Amy reminds us that we academics are not taught to present our own research in pithy, malleable formats. Working with members of the public, be they citizens who eat, policy makers, industry representatives or scientists, requires that we internalize a different audience. They may need to have culture explained as a concept. They may want generalizations rather than historical data or meaty case studies. They may crave definitive claims from us and grow bored with evocations of how things are “complicated.” I often tell myself that it is better to deliver a sound-bite on culture that people can use and remember rather than a more accurate analysis that they will forget when I leave (if they are listening at that point at all). Perhaps it is best to think of this work as scholarship rather than research, as the former is broad enough to encompass the creation of original work and its translation to multiple audiences.

At the same time, we need to recognize that we do not work within a structure that places much value on this sort of bilingualism if it stops short of original research. An essay explaining the value of a published study to a new audience, such as Amy's



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

inspired idea of a pamphlet on wartime food, may or may not count as new research in one's field, depending on how a given academic personnel committee decides to view it. Certainly, summarizing other scholarship for industry would not be seen as an "original" contribution to the humanities. Perhaps it should be, and if so, this is a matter we need to take up on our campuses. In the meantime, Charlotte's assertion that culture needs be integrated into the very heart of inquiries into health suggests that works of translation alone may not shape food policy. It is good that non-humanists know the value of historical definitions of "good diets," for instance. But if they do not see how culture shapes, right now, the very ideas of "good" and "diet," we settle for appreciation rather than integration. Achieving this, however, could require us to adopt methods we were not trained to use in grad school.

Finally, all of us in this forum were trained in American studies. This makes sense. As an interdisciplinary field, American studies offers fewer cautions than other disciplines about dabbling in multiple methods (a little ethnography here, a little media studies there, a little history here, throw in some literary analysis). This is probably why we find ourselves on these frontiers that stretch—uncomfortably at times—our expertise. As Warren suggests, it is in our nature to say "yes" when asked if we could say something about something. Yet with food studies this ecumenical approach will only get us so far. As Charlotte points out, if we are to work with scientists, nutritionists and policy makers, we have to understand how they think and have the tools to read their data through a cultural lens.

We have to acquire new forms of data on living people and current events. On several occasions, I have used my historical knowledge to create an "aha" moment at a table of scientists only to have them stump me by asking "what does your research show about that today" or "what do consumers say now?" As a (mostly) historian, I am not trained to ask or answer those questions. But as a food scholar who wants to influence how food and nutritional knowledge are produced, I *want to* be able to. It is important that those of us who are aware of this gap between what we know and what is actually *usable information* for scientists, nutritionists and policy makers, really admit that it matters; and then, as Amy recommends, "make the first move" to sharpen what she calls our "methodological literacy." It is not that humanities methods are ineffective in revealing the cultural dynamics of food production and consumption. Rather, it is that humanities methods alone make it difficult to get from theoretical or historical data and patterns to the present moment with conviction.

Doris Witt has recently done this by taking a leave from the English department at Iowa and getting a law degree after finding that legal decisions on interstate transport laws shaped US segregation and de-segregation efforts. All of us asking ourselves these questions about policy are doing so within the midst of university systems. This is fortunate as opportunities abound to learn new skills and engage colleagues with different methodological training. One could sit in on a graduate course in anthropology and learn to do participant observation, or read and talk to sociologists and geographers to better understand political economy, or even attend a sensory science meeting to find out how scientists define "taste." None of this, of course, is easy.

As Charlotte smartly notes, “we cannot expect to solve a problem that we do not understand.” We can critique food science and food production and nutrition and obesity paradigms quite cogently from the sidelines. But if we want to be part of solving a problem, we have to forge a model of interdisciplinarity that enables us to know scientists, policy makers and eaters on their own terms.

Carolyn de la Peña is Professor of American Studies, Director of the UC Davis Humanities Institute and Co-editor of *Boom: A Journal of California*. She also chairs the system-wide network of Humanities Center Directors and co-coordinates the Multi-Campus Research Initiative “Studies of Food and the Body” for the University of California. She has co-edited *Re-Wiring the Nation: The Place of Technology in American Studies* (2007), and written *Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda* (2010), *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built The Modern American* (2003), and numerous articles on the history of Americans’ efforts to achieve health through technologies. American Studies, UC Davis, 1321 Notre Dame Drive, Davis, CA 95616, USA (ctdelapena@ucdavis.edu).

References

- Aetna Insurance. 2007. Profile: Lindsey Olier. Available from: http://www.aetna.com/diversity/aahcalendar/2007/profiles_dec.html (accessed November 1, 2008).
- Belasco, W. 2007. *Appetite for Change How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (2nd edn). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bentley, A. 1995. American Abundance Examined: David M. Potter’s *Paradox of Plenty* and the Study of Food. *Digest: An Interdisciplinary Study of Food and Foodways* 15: 20–4.
- Bentley, A. 1998. *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Cohen, P. 2009. In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth. *New York Times*, February 25. Page C1. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/books/25human.html?scp=1&sq=patricia%20cohen%20in%20tough%20times%202009&st=cse> (accessed April 4, 2011).
- Counihan, C. M. 2002. *Food in the USA: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Crawford, R. 1980. Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life. *International Journal of Health Services* 10(3): 365–88.
- Crawford, Robert. 2006. Health as Meaningful Social Practice. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Medicine, and Illness* 10(4): 401–20.
- Diner, H. R. 2001. *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Farmer Brown. 2006. About Us. Available from: <http://www.farmerbrownsf.com/about.html> (accessed May 5, 2008).
- Fish, S. 2008a. Will the Humanities Save Us? Think Again. January 6. Available from: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/?scp=1&sq=stanley%20fish%20will%20the%20humanities%20save%20us&st=cse> (accessed April 4, 2011).



FOOD,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 3

SEPTEMBER 2011

- Fish, S. 2008b. The Uses of the Humanities, Part Two. Think Again. January 13. Available from: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/the-uses-of-the-humanities-part-two/?scp=1&sq=stanley%20fish%20the%20uses%20of%20the%20humanities&st=cse> (accessed April 4, 2011).
- Gabaccia, D. R. 1998. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gans, H. 1999. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis And Evaluation Of Taste* (2nd edn). New York: Basic Books.
- Gard, M. and Wright, J. 2005. *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.
- Green, H. 1986. *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Levenstein, H. A. 1988. *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levine, L. 1990. *Highbrow and Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lupton, D. and Petersen, A. 1996. *The New Public Health: Health and Self in the Age of Risk*. London: Sage Publications.
- Maurer, D. and Sobal, J. (eds). 1995. *Eating Agendas: Food and Nutrition as Social Problems*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Nettles, K. 2007. "Saving" Soul Food. *Gastronomica* 7.3: 106–13.
- Parasecoli, F. 2008. *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Potter, D. M. 1958. *People of Plenty: Abundance and the American Character*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rozin, P., Fischler, C., Imada, S., Sarubin, A. and Wrzesniewski, A. 1999. Attitudes to Food and the Role of Food in Life in the USA, Japan, Flemish Belgium and France: Possible Implications for the Diet–Health Debate. *Appetite* 33(2): 163–80.
- Smith, A. F. (ed.) 2004. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sobal, J. 1995. The Medicalization and Demedicalization of Obesity. In D. Maurer and J. Sobal (eds), *Eating Agendas: Food and Nutrition as Social Problems*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, pp. 67–90.
- Turner, K. T. 2006. Buying, Not Cooking: Ready-to-eat Food in American Urban Working-class Neighborhoods. *Food, Culture, and Society* 9(1): 13–39.
- Washington Post*. 2008. Latrisha Avery. Young Lives at Risk: Our Overweight Children. *The Washington Post*, May 18. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/health/childhoodobesity/index.html> (accessed November 1, 2010).
- Whorton, J. C. 1982. *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Winn, M. 1985. *The Plug-In Drug*. New York: Penguin.