SPECIAL ISSUE

Journal of Critical Dietetics

ISSN 1923-1237
Vol 5, Issue 1

Toronto, ON

Introduction to against healthisms: Challenging the paradigm of "eating right"

By Alissa Overend, Meredith Bessey, Adele Hite, and Andrea Noriega

In much of Western, neoliberal culture, "eating right" has been rendered a healthist commodity disconnected from the social conditions that produce it. Government documents, food labels, expert and lay advice alike often conflate healthy eating with health outcomes—that with the right ratio and quantity of micro and macronutrients, we will be granted immunity against chronic diseases. Sounds seductive, and familiar, no? For those willing and able to take up the call of "healthy eating" and "good citizenship"—a pairing both synonymous and pervasive—health is positioned as an individual choice, while ill health is the result of bad personal or lifestyle decisions. In this reductive formula, life and longevity are accomplished one carefully measured, conscious bite at a time, with little—if any—contextual understanding of the social conditions that mitigate access to, affordability of, and universal framings of "healthy food." The many paradoxes, contradictions, and fallacies of such myopic equations that link "healthy eating" with health outcomes is the nexus of what this issue takes up.

As critical dietetics and food studies scholars, we question and are concerned with the seemingly ubiquitous, anodyne embrace of what Deborah Lupton (1995) aptly frames as the "imperative of health." Applying Foucauldian theories of governmentality to the development of the public health model—a model part and parcel of neoliberal governing structures—Lupton examines how power works to produce health-conscious citizens who enact "a kind of regulated freedom" (Rose and Miller, quoted in Lupton, 1995, p. 3). While examples of this regulated freedom permeate across public health and medical reaches, they are arguably most palpable—indeed, all-too-commonly swallowed—in the often-unquestioned rhetoric of "eating right." As John Coveney (2000) put it, "the combinations of science and moral conduct are never so apparent as they are in nutrition" (p. 28). Part science, part salvation, the dominant discourses of "healthy eating" and "eating right" make many false promises that if we discipline ourselves today, we will be rewarded with good health tomorrow. Despite the ubiquity of these tropes, they fail to account for the underlying conditions of illness—conditions that neoliberal governments seem quite content to continue to ignore.

Riffing on the title of Metzl and Kirkland's (2010) collection *Against Health,* the editors and contributors of this volume take a stand "against healthisms" and the many iterations thereof that continue to circulate in contemporary nutrition discourse. Healthism, as defined by Robert Crawford (1980), is "the preoccupation with personal health as a primary—often *the* primary—focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of [personal] lifestyles" (p. 366). This issue heeds the call to trouble and contest the concept of health articulated through the ideology of healthism, while at the same time recognizing that profound social inequities exist around the pursuit and delivery of health and wellbeing. The persistence of these inequities, we believe, incur a marked position against health, healthisms, and normative framings of "eating right." This collection questions how health is defined, who gives and receives health, for what purposes, through what means, and to what ends, with a specific focus on diet, nutrition, and the normative framings of "eating right." Within a heightened neoliberal and public health

fervour to promote "healthy eating" comes an uneasy reluctance to query the moral grounds on which health and eating resides.

Mary Kate Dennis and Tabitha Robin, in *Healthy on Our Own Terms,* trace the historical effects and contemporary iterations of settler colonialism that fracture Indigenous Peoples' connection to the land, to spirit, to ancestors, to traditional knowledge, and to traditional foods. Rejecting colonial biomedical framings of healthy eating, Dennis and Robin offer Indigenous conceptualizations of wholistic approaches to food, health, and Indigenous food sovereignty. Specifically, the Cree concept of *miyupimaatisiiun* (being alive well) and the Anishinaabe concept of *mnaamodzawin* (the good life) are evoked as decolonial concepts that better reflect the network of relationships that underpin and uphold healthy eating and healthy lifestyles for Indigenous communities and link to broader Indigenous food paradigms.

In *Against Healthist Fermentation,* Maya Hey offers an analysis of the ways in which emerging health discourses concerning fermentation extend the ideology of healthism to the non-human realm. Examining both commercially produced, "functional" ferments, such as probiotic yogurts, as well as DIY fermentation practices, such as homemade sourdough bread, she contends that in addition to the many pressures of healthy eating, under the ever-increasing gaze of healthism, we are now also responsible for our gut health and controlling our microbiota. Critiquing the reductive promises of health offered by healthist fermentation practices, Hey provides a relational understanding of health that asks us to consider the role of bacteria, molds, and yeast in ongoing, shifting health ecologies.

Myriam Durocher, in her essay *Biomedicalized Food Culture,* analyzes how the linked discourses and practices of medicalization, molecularization, and commercialization produce biomedicalized versions of "healthy" eating and "healthy" bodies. Durocher is particularly critical of how a biomedicalized food culture, including the growing reliance on nutrition technologies and applications, reproduces reductive forms of empirical knowledge. Such practices normalize "biospecific knowledge," such as the metabolic composition of foods and their perceived biospecific effects on the physical body, which in turn expand the biopolitical gaze in healthist pursuits of healthy eating and exclude, discriminate, and stigmatize other ways of knowing and understanding food, health, and the complex processes between the two.

In *Governance of the Gut,* Stephanie Maroney analyzes emerging discourses of the microbiome and microbial body. While seemingly liberatory at first glance, challenging and complicating the idea of an autonomous, self-regulating healthy subject, dominant discourses of individualized responsibility for health tend to usurp much of that potential. Analyzing physician- and scientist-authored diet books in what she frames as "the microbial etiology of obesity," Maroney articulates the ways in which healthist frameworks for health extend into nutrition's newest frontier—the microbiome—reinscribing the long-standing Western rhetoric of self-control and personal responsibility.

Finally, Barbara Parker offers a feminist intersectional analysis of the limits of choice in her essay *Consuming Health, Negotiating Risk, Eating Right.* Using a Foucauldian governmentality approach alongside critical public health and feminist intersectionality, Parker explores how food risk discourses in contemporary capitalism extend the moralizing of healthism into the care of the self, the care of the environment, and the care of ecosystems, all exercised through food "choice." She further argues that the feminine-citizen-subject is particularly targeted, despite structural constraints of health and eating. Gendered subjectivities and regulatory norms extend the healthist gaze of market neoliberalism enforcing individualist ideas about ethical eating and healthy citizenship.

This collection recognizes the stigmatizing, colonizing, normalizing, medicalizing, and consumerist rhetoric that permeates health and eating discourses and the creation and promotion of dominant dietetic knowledge. Separately and collectively, each of the contributions challenge, resist, and move beyond such articulations. In doing so, this collection offers a space (tangibly and ideologically) where conversations outside the narrow confines of dominant approaches to healthy eating can *thrive.* These conversations and openings enable us new ways to step outside individual-based solutions about what we eat and buy in the name of "health" to those that better situate food and eating within the complex, structural matrices of social inequality and oppression, as well as within the ongoing politics of knowledge therein.

References

Coveney, J. 2000. *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating.* New York: Routledge.

Crawford, R. 1980. Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life. *International Journal of Health Services* 10(3). 365–88.

Lupton, D. (1995). *The imperative of health: Public health and the regulated body.* Sage Publications.

Metzl, J., & Kirkland, A. R. (2010). *Against health: How health became the new morality.* New York: New York University Press.

Author bios

Alissa Overend is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at MacEwan University. Alissa's interests and expertise are in critical approaches to health, food, and social inequality. Alissa has a forthcoming book *Shifting Food Facts: Dietary Discourse in a Post-Truth Culture* (Routledge), which articulates a move away from the reliance on singular food truths.

Meredith Bessey is a MScAHN candidate at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax NS. Her research interests revolve around weight bias in dietetics, fat pedagogy, and weight inclusive approaches to care. Meredith is currently completing her dietetic internship, and will be beginning her PhD in September 2020. Meredith has also been teaching yoga for the past six years, and is interested in how embodiment, mindfulness, and vulnerability can be more effectively incorporated into health professional education.

Adele Hite, PhD MPH RDN is a registered dietitian with a background rhetoric and communication, nutritional epidemiology and public health. Her work combines biomedical and cultural studies approaches to food politics, nutrition science, and public health nutrition guidance, with a specific focus on the historical, scientific, and sociocultural contexts surrounding the creation and evolution of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Andrea Noriega is a PhD candidate of Anthropology at Carleton University. Her doctoral research has focused on considering public discourses of "healthy eating" as they are subjectively and ontologically represented by health professionals and para-professionals working in nutrition advice-giving roles. Andrea has served as the co-chair of the organizing committee for the Canadian Association for Food Studies for two years consecutively, both years also serving as the curator of the Exploration Gallery, where she organized interactive sessions to discuss the role of 'healthy' discourses across socio-political and cultural intersections with food and eating.