

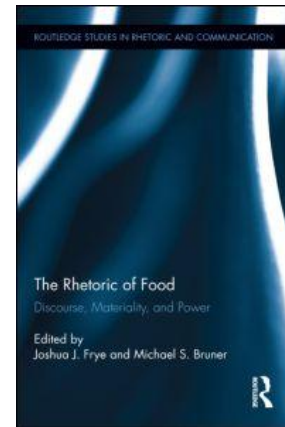
Joshua J. Frye and Michael S. Bruner (Eds.), **The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2012, 270 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Food consumption has been reshaped by communication scholars from simply being a means of subsistence to constructing eating as meaningful, political, and powerful. Whether we are speaking of one's choice of what to eat, when to eat, where to purchase, or where to grow, the rhetorical options (or lack thereof) surrounding food choices have never been more publically important. Boycotting Chick-Fil-A or engaging in kiss-ins outside of their stores became a visible rejection of the organization's statements against same-sex marriage. Laws against large sodas and trans fats moderate access to unhealthy choices and spark debates over individual agency and government responsibility. Media representations of obese and thin bodies create visual arguments for societal expectations of the perfect form. Consumption is not only an individual choice; it is also controlled by socioeconomic status, location, cultural restrictions, media, and laws.



In ***The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power***, editors Joshua J. Frye and Michael S. Bruner have collected chapters that take different perspectives on the importance of symbols, words, visuals, and power in food politics. The title, at least in part, simplifies the breadth of the arguments discussed, as the topics include hunger, health campaigns, agriculture, political ritual, and media representations, along with more traditional discussions of food. The objective of the book is to explore how “food rhetoric is expanding our lexicon, revising our attitudes toward food, and re-organizing relationships with our earth and our bodies” (p. 1). The aim is a laudable one, as this emerging intersection is worthy of scholarly attention. Pairing a discussion of food politics with a rhetorical perspective is a beneficial way to explore the symbols surrounding food and food itself as a symbol. The three overarching rhetorical perspectives are Aristotle's original conceptions of persuasion, Kenneth Burke's definition of humans as the “symbol using, making, and mis-using animal” (1966, pp. 3–4), and the postmodern perspective that rhetoric addresses issues of power, culture, access, and voice.

The Rhetoric of Food begins with a forward by Raymie E. McKerrow, who outlines the importance and timeliness of an inquiry into how language conflates food, culture, and power. Though not split as such in the book, the first five chapters embody themes of nature, food discourse, and social complicity. Sir Albert Howard argues for the variety yet stability of nature without intervention from humankind. Jean Retzinger discusses the combined use of numerical and visual rhetoric to represent the hungry body as deserving pity and the obese body as deserving discipline and scorn. Laura K. Hahn and Michael S. Bruner argue that the lack of a cohesive vegetarian social movement has troubled vegetarianism's discursive success. John R. Thompson argues that discourses surrounding food are changing in a globalized society, and that defining ourselves as “eaters” may be more important than establishing a nation-state identity.

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Alison Henderson and Vanessa Johnson explore the notion of "functional foods," or foods that serve a health and physical purpose above sustenance, through a case study of a New Zealand beverage company and its nutritional claims.

The middle five chapters discuss issues of national discourse, politics, and farming. Maxwell Schnurer analyzes the rhetorical strategies of the American Farmland Trust in its arguments to protect agricultural subsidies on their website. Carrie Packwood Freeman and Oana Leventi-Perez argue that the political ritual of pardoning a turkey on Thanksgiving both creates a divide between human and animal, and glorifies the consumption of meat through comic coverage of the event. Natasha Seegert explores the transformative possibilities of community gardens in urban spaces as partnerships between human and non-human identities and voices. Joshua J. Frye discusses the political and symbolic power of martyrdom as a rhetorical substitution for the goals of social movements, citing the example of Lee Kyung Hae protesting against the World Trade Organization. Abigail Seiler argues that the neoliberal space that constrains Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* campaign affects its overall message of culpability for obese bodies.

The final five chapters explore issues of space, media, and power. Justin Eckstein and Donovan Conley explore the emerging popularity of farmers' markets as a space to enact food community and micropolitics. Garrett M. Broad discusses the politics of school food and how its mediation, namely *Jaime Oliver's Food Revolution*, is constrained through participation in the neoliberal system led by corporate concerns. Alexander V. Kozin describes the act of cannibalism as a complex social construction that situates the self and the other in conversation about morality and psychosis. Kara Shultz contextualizes prominent literature about food through Heidegger's "call to conscience" in order to highlight food's powerful role in constructing identity. Mohan J. Dutta explores the hypocrisy of neoliberal policies that aim to empower the poor economically, but still ignore their subaltern status.

Individually, these chapters each highlight important artifacts for both rhetoric scholars and scholars interested in issues of food and consumption. From political ceremonies to reality television, these chapters are provocative looks into the pervasive, yet often unseen, power of consumption in society. The variety of approaches, guiding theories, and topics makes this book an interesting and entertaining read concerning the intersection of food and power. This variety, perhaps the book's best quality, was also, however, its greatest missed opportunity. What was missing in *The Rhetoric of Food* was a cohesive thread and concluding chapter to reinforce the major concepts and more clearly define the overall argument. Instead, we read 15 inherently separate articles with little overlap besides a commonality with the terms "rhetoric" and "food." This book could have been improved by attempting to connect these chapters, grouping them according to content, and by presenting a more coherent narrative of the relationship between rhetoric and food in a concluding chapter. As it stands, it is an appropriate book to use for case studies and specific inquiries into rhetoric and food, but it would not be best used as an introduction to these concepts.

The Rhetoric of Food likely appeals to scholars in the fields of rhetoric, cultural studies, environmental studies, and health communication. Its emergence in a little-explored communication area is an important step in linking the prominent topic of food politics with a rhetorical perspective. The best

contribution of this book is the various strengths of the individual articles that beg additional inquiry into and attention to the many artifacts and topics found in the nexus of elements surrounding consumption. Paired as a companion to more theoretically-grounded critiques of food and rhetoric, this book's offering of prominent and meaningful inquiries would aid both classes and research into relevant topics. *The Rhetoric of Food* reminds us that meaning can be found in even the most mundane and normalized aspects of everyday life, that decisions regarding consumption are complicated, and that what we eat tells us much more than simply who we are.

References

Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.