

Review of:

Eating in Theory

Annemarie Mol. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. 208, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index.

Review By: Ema Noëlla Kibirktis

Annemarie Mol's *Eating in Theory* distances itself from Western philosophical tradition by asking "What if our theoretical repertoires were to take inspiration not from thinking but from eating?" (3). As a Dutch ethnographer and Professor of the Anthropology of the Body at the University of Amsterdam, this book is an exciting addition into philosophical anthropology and food studies. The main body is separated into chapters named after the active themes of being, knowing, doing, and relating. Diverging from customary centrism, Mol demonstrates that focusing on "human metabolic interactions *with* the world" (3) allows for a different, and perhaps more accurate, understanding of human experiences of eating.

Eating in Theory will not make you feel hungry. Often when I read about food ethnography or even food philosophy, I become obsessed with travelling to the time, place and dish described; that I too will be thrown into a moment of intense reflection or nostalgia based on a single bite, or come to understand how someone is what they eat. Mol's writing affected me very differently; I began to think more critically about how I experience the world through eating.

I was introduced to the philosophical and humanistic perspectives on eating by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* and Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. In these works, eating is often viewed as a human necessity rather than deeply embedded with meaning. Eating and food are often ranked as insignificant, as Mol highlights in Caroline Korsmeyer's analysis on Plato and Aristotle, which ranked taste as a lower sense experienced within the body, whereas sight and sound are higher senses for being "more rational and cognitive" (52). This hierarchy of the senses, however, is constructed, and as a person who undoubtedly experiences the world around me through taste and food, neglects the immeasurable variety of the human experience of eating.

From these works, Mol uses her own fieldwork research and autoethnographic accounts to recenter and reconsider what we know about eating. These accounts are italicized within the text, and truly stand out and visually guide the reader through the transition from fieldnotes to analysis. For example, within the second chapter, "Being," there are a variety of example to consider. Mol transports us to a rehabilitation clinic where brain-damaged individuals are helped to regain their ability to swallow. In "Knowing," she recounts a time when she thought she was drinking decaf coffee but a rush of caffeine corrected her assumption. In "Doing," she tells of a hypnotherapist's clinic focused on helping people with long-term constipation. And in "Relating," she introduces an ethnographic experiment she conducted with friends on discerning the sensorial experience of eating a hot meal with

fingers instead of with utensils, ultimately realizing the similarity between the food and the eater. These accounts are relatable and striking, truly highlighting the gaps in food-related ethnographies (an ethnography of indigestion, anyone?).

Throughout the book, we find scattered “sidelines” in the margins. Mol explains that these are “stories about *eating* that I import from the works of others. This is to compensate for the limits of my own, narrowly situated, fieldwork” (10). Being based out of the Netherlands, Mol introduces glimpses of studies from across world relevant to the theme at hand. These sidelines are typed in a different font from the main body, run for many pages but skip a page to be superimposed when flipped through, and add additional perspectives and analysis to the topics at hand. Physically, it renders the reader hyperaware when reading the book. Pausing after a paragraph in the main text to read the sideline and flip ahead to finish the sideline, then turning back to the main text was a different type of reading experience. Sometimes I would slip up and accidentally keep reading the main body, then have to go back and reset myself. I found this experience akin to peeking through the doorway of the kitchen to catch a glance and whiff of what your mother is cooking for dinner. This technique allowed me to see what was ahead while rendering me conscious of my own body’s relation to the book. The reading itself was an embodied experience.

The only subject matter I wish Mol would have expanded on is the contentious subject of food and risk. Though briefly touched upon in regards to eating and health, and the author’s own experiences with celiac disease, I think Mary Hufford’s take on risk perception would be an interesting addition to this examination of eating. Within the chapter “Doing,” we are introduced to a “young man with a spinal cord injury” (84) who is undernourished—Fred. He argues that the times when he is expected to eat and the type of food he is served are unfit for him (84-85). This passage reminded me of my own friend who is lactose intolerant, yet as a teen when she would come over to my house would insist on having full-dairy ice cream. She would rush home 20-30 minutes later in agony, but would repeat this habit time and time again. Mol highlights this in her own example that Fred’s eating is deemed a task to allow him to become properly nourished, needing to adapt and change based on Fred’s specific tastes and needs. However, I am curious about the conflict between assessment of risk involved in discerning what is acceptable on behalf of the medical professionals attempting to assist him (“what about allowing him to order in pizza?”) and himself, who would rather be malnourished than eat the “horrible nutritious yogurt drinks” (84-85). Risk is an overlying concern when it comes to issues of eating, especially to those with diseases which render eating a more cumbersome task. In the case of Fred or my friend, they are well-aware of their conditions and nutritional protocols, but the decision making, risk assessment and eating are ultimately of their own volition—often, as humans do, completely subverting what it ‘logical’.

Eating in Theory proves to be not only brief and approachable, but exciting and thought-provoking for foodways scholars. Reminiscent of Sarah Pink’s work on sensory ethnography, Mol introduces the reader to exciting new approaches in studying food and eating. Through thoughtful fieldwork passages and engaging analysis, Mol teaches us to view the world through eating, relating it to larger issues of overconsumption and

ecological sustainability. The once deemed 'lower' sense of taste and the act of eating dismissed as unimportant, prove to be an easily relatable and engaging way to observe the world around us.