

The Goose


Volume 13 | No. 2

Article 24

2-15-2015

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Isabel, Mariève. "The Politics of the Pantry: Stories, Food, and Social Change by Michael Mikulak." *The Goose*, vol. 13 , no. 2 , article 24, 2015,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/24>.

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Changing Values: The Utopian Vision of Storied Food

The Politics of the Pantry. Stories, Food, and Social Change by MICHAEL MIKULAK

McGill-Queen's UP, 2013 \$29.95

Reviewed by MARIÈVE ISABEL

“What’s for dinner?” is the opening question of *The Politics of the Pantry*, a book which explores our relationship to nature through food. The goal of what Michael Mikulak calls the politics of the pantry is “to shift our basic approach to nature in terms of material relations, and also in the stories we tell,” through an act most of us do many times a day: eating. The concern is not only the production and the consumption of food, but also the stories we tell about it and the values attached to it. While Chapter 1 explores discourses on nature and capitalism, Chapter 2 classifies stories about food into different genres. Chapter 3 tells another story: Mikulak’s, as he tries to shift his way of eating. In an autobiographical style, Mikulak, small-scale farmer, postdoctoral fellow at Virginia Tech, and adjunct faculty at McMaster and Wilfrid Laurier Universities, writes his foodshed memoir, recalling his experiment of the 100-mile diet as an attempt to redefine his relationship to nature and society.

The Politics of the Pantry rests on Jane Bennet’s argument that “the cultural narratives that we use help us shape the world in which we will have to live” (Bennett qtd. in Mikulak). Mikulak identifies the current dominant cultural narrative about the environment as *green capitalism*, which he sees as a hegemonic discourse incorporating and eventually subsuming all others. The different ways in which society has tried to think nature within capitalism

leads back to the same stories of commodification, perpetuating an unsustainable way of living. Mikulak is looking for the “root of all evil” in our problematic relationship to nature and for alternative value practices. Chapter 1 presents the reader with three main discourses—ecological modernization, techno-utopianism, and apocalyptic narratives—that have contributed to perpetuating green capitalism, even though they were initially intended to distinguish themselves from it. Ecological modernization seeks to integrate ecological questions into capitalism. One strategy that Mikulak highlights here consists in adopting economic language to talk about nature in order to shift value about it, a method authors such as Herman Daly, Kenneth Boulding, Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen and Paul Hawken already put in practice. According to Mikulak, this approach has proven to be highly inefficient. Industrial organic farming, with its problems of labour and long distance transportation, is an example of this failure. As long as “markets [will] prioritize growth and consumerism above all else,” the changes will largely remain cosmetic, concludes Mikulak. Techno-utopianism is another familiar discourse about the environment. The belief that technology will save the day—this “utopian faith”—is a dearly held belief in modern society. Mikulak presents an interesting reading of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and its short list of small tasks offered as a solution at the end of the documentary. “This materiality . . . does not address discourses such as risk, toxicity and other environmental issues; switching to hybrid cars and CFL light bulbs just won’t cut it.” The third discourse identified, apocalyptic narratives, “relies on alternative value practices such as spirituality,

community, and slowness as means of averting ecological collapse.” Feeding on guilt and fear, “this approach has obviously not worked very well.” These mainstream discourses are not enough to redefine a sustainable way of living; they represent “a failure of imagination.” Mikulak concludes that more compelling stories are needed to inspire change.

In Chapter 2, Mikulak categorizes stories about food into a series of sub-genres: the commodity biography, the pastoral narratives (nostalgic and utopian), and the foodshed memoir. While most of us know that on industrial farms cows don’t graze on open green land, the image of the pasture on the milk jug still tells us otherwise. For Mikulak, these images act as veils, hiding what’s really going on behind the scenes in the food industry. “The commodity biography tells the story of production by piecing together the fragmented lifeworlds and labours involved in food’s transformation: it literally reassembles the food system piece by piece,” assuming that the reader is unaware of it. *Food Inc.* and other documentaries such as *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners* aim at unravelling the “true” story. Unfortunately, too often, the solutions suggested are limited to paying more attention to labels and buying organic and fair trade certified products, which are all at risk of being absorbed by the capitalist system and becoming industrial, rather than thinking about the whole system. The commodity biography, while it can help raise awareness, is not enough to shift practices.

The question of pastoralism, and in particular of “utopian pastoralism” is central to the rest of the book. While many scholars, such as Leo Marx and Raymond Williams, criticize utopian pastoralism for “usually serv[ing] a conservative politics”

and others, like William Cronon and Timothy Morton, accuse it of sentimentalism and romantic idealization, Mikulak refuses to automatically dismiss the genre: “What interests me here is the appeal to authenticity and the real beneath the concept of the natural and the pastoral within these romantic notions of Nature.” Not only is the pastoral omnipresent in stories about food, but the “work that such ideas do is significant,” regardless of if that work is positive or negative. Indeed, not all pastoralisms are equal. Nostalgic pastoralism can easily become regressive.

Utopian pastoralism, on the other hand, is more urban and less romantic. The genre, according to Mikulak, has the power to re-enchant our relationships with nature and with our food: “It is possible to rehabilitate the pastoralism as a worldview that can open up actual and imagined places, and has the potential to encourage the cultivation of a slow and mindful inhabitation of the world.” The pastoral can serve as a “bridge between the urban and the rural” through acts such as urban homesteading, backyard chicken coops, and community gardens. Pleasure becomes central to this strategy, since “change emerges from desire rather than prescription.” Here, storied food does more than just tell a story: “In moving from text to world, storied food provides a form of narrative enchantment that encourages action and participation.” If it remains authentic—which is achieved by talking about meat, death, pests, the hardship of gardening, etc.—then storied food has the potential of serving as an “antidote to modern alienation.”

The third and last chapter recounts Mikulak’s experiences while testing the 100-mile diet proposed by Michael Pollan, the prime example of the foodshed

memoir. This last sub-genre “invites readers to consider their own everyday lives and practices as embedded in various structures of knowledge, power, and everyday practices.” Through his stories about growing heirloom seeds, making sauerkraut, taking care of his beloved sourdough, and the ups and downs of consuming meat as ethically as possible, Mikulak takes his readers on a journey that obviously changed his perception of the foodshed. Recognizing that reconnecting to the foodshed is a luxury not everyone can afford, he still underlines some of the advantages of this philosophy: “In a future characterized by increasingly uncertain labour arrangements and climate change, learning to grow your own food may be the smartest thing you can do.”

Throughout the book, the arguments are solid and clearly laid out. The autobiographical elements add to the arguments and Mikulak shares many personal anecdotes. Sometimes, the leap from “here” to “there,” that is, from “the small act of baking bread, brewing homemade wine or beer, or making a crock of sauerkraut with friends” to “alternative

value practices and . . . communities that can resist the commodification and alienation of techno-utopianism and ecological modernization,” is hard to make. But in the end, one needs to understand the politics of the pantry as a contribution, not as a “silver bullet”; Mikulak is quite clear on that. He is optimistic that a (re)enchantment is possible; it is a powerful device that can succeed where apocalyptic tales have failed. Outside capitalism exists “a field of relations that is defined not only by commodities and money but also by conviviality, commons, and gifts.” Guilt isn’t the answer; people “have to crave change and feel the need viscerally,” and this can start in the stories we tell about becoming part of the foodshed in a more active way.

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