

## CFP: RHM Special Issue on Food as Medicine and The Rhetoric of Healthy Food

Sociologist Deborah Lupton wrote that “food has become profoundly medicalised in its association with health, illness and disease” (2000, p. 205). Historically, diet has, indeed, always been part of a medical practice regimen—throughout the long reign of humoral theory, and the modern updates of dietetics and modern nutrition science; furthermore, specific diets have always been prescribed for specific ailments. Food has also played a vital part in public health interventions, in which its production, regulation, distribution, and safety have been recognized as paramount for the health of the populace. Insofar as it enters the purview of the state, food has also been strongly linked with national character, prowess in war, and other such ideological constructs that problematize the notion of “the health of the nation” (see Veit, 2013).

Governmental dietary guidelines (in the U.S. or elsewhere) have been highly contested and yet they have profoundly transformed the way many people eat. Food-related health concerns have been exacerbated in the Anthropocene, when unsustainable food production poses risks to both humans and the planet; for example, the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets opens its most recent report with a stark statement: “Food systems have the potential to nurture human health and support environmental sustainability; however, they are currently threatening both” (*Lancet*, 2019).

More recently, dietary habits have received increased attention from evidence-based medicine. While studies regarding correlation between food intake and health markers are notoriously difficult to conduct reliably (Ioannidis, 2013), an accumulated amount of evidence aligns with sensible advice regarding the importance of certain foods or food components (e.g., vegetables, fruit, fiber) for a healthy life. Certain foods, some claim, should be prescribed for certain conditions, and a recent study predicted that if such “healthier foods” could be covered by our health insurance systems, we could prevent disease and reduce healthcare costs (Lee et al., 2019). At the same time, such “prescriptions” can come with steep and unrealistic costs; in fact, another recent study in *Lancet* suggests that it is not possible to reach the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables in most countries, even under the most optimistic economic predictions (Mason-D’Croz et al., 2019). Food access and quality, and the accompanying health correlates, have always been embedded in economic and demographic dynamics.

In affluent countries where food is abundant, we have also created the conditions for what some have dubbed an “orthorexic society” (Nicolosi, 2006/7), in which we are obsessed with “eating right.” The diet industry has long capitalized on a variety of fears (e.g., health, social capital inherent in thinness), and health and wellness gurus are replicating at an accelerated pace. Eating disorders abound and even proliferate (with orthorexia, a morbid obsession with eating right, being one of the latest additions to the more well-known triad of anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder). Alternative medicine and health movements put food at the center of their concerns, although their language has been, in turn, coopted by the mainstream food industry (Kiedeckel, 2018). A preoccupation with our health and a belief that it is achievable through diet and self-control stems also from healthism—the idea that we are or ought to be personally responsible for our own health (Crawford, 1980). The idea that we can achieve perfect health via consumption of the right type of food (“clean,” organic, GMO-free, etc.) and via the correct balance of macronutrients (tailored or not to biological markers such as our genome or

microbiome) has led to an explosion of food fads, biotechnologies, food delivery services, apps, and more, aimed at keeping us thin and healthy—so far with dubious results.

All of these topics lend themselves to rhetorical treatment. Rhetoricians have already addressed some of the implications of food rhetoric and its intersections with health and medicine, such as, among others: rhetoric of the slow food movement (Schneider, 2008) and of organic food systems (Nowacek & Nowacek, 2008); rhetoric of health citizenship and the moralization of healthy eating (Spoel, Harris, & Henwood, 2012, 2014; Derkatch & Spoel, 2015); rhetoric of racialized food politics (Schell, 2015); feminist rhetoric of food (Goldthwaite, 2017; Dubisar, 2018); rhetoric of food justice, activism, and agricultural systems (Dubisar & Roesch-McNally, 2018); rhetoric of public nutrition guidelines (Mudry, 2009; Hite & Carter, 2019). We invite papers that further this work by expanding these lines of inquiry in relation to the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM), or explore some of the themes outlined below:

### **Rhetorical histories of dietetics, or, food as medicine**

- How has food been medicalized: from the ancient arts of dietetics to contemporary nutrition science?
- There is a budding literature on the rhetoric of food, but how can we conceptualize the rhetoric of food-as-medicine?
- How does the rhetoric of dieting fit into discourses of health?
- What can rhetoric tell us about past or current complexities and controversies of nutrition science?

### **Food, Wellness, and Alternative Medicine**

- How did food become a form of alternative medicine—e.g., see naturopathic claims about the power of certain foods to heal all manners of disease, Gerson therapy, etc.?
- What is the role of gurus/media celebrities/social media celebrities in spreading messages about healthy eating/dieting? (e.g., Oprah, Dr. Oz, GOOP, Food Babe, etc.)
- How can we cogently critique a variety of alternative food practices and beliefs (juicing, detoxing, cleansing, paleo, vegan, non-GMO, organic, raw, unprocessed, etc.) using an RHM perspective?
- How can we better understand the rhetoric of “clean eating”?
- How is food pathologized or lionized in matters of health?

### **Food Interventions as Public Health Initiatives**

- How can we better understand the rhetoric of public discourse about food as medicine/pharmakon (as prevention, treatment, or “poison”), from food that heals (chicken soup, DASH diet, sugar free, fat free, organic, vegan, etc.) to food that kills (from e-coli or BSE infestations to processed food or sugar/fat/salt promoting metabolic diseases)?
- How do we interpret the rhetoric of food lobbies (sugar, soft drinks, dairy, beef, etc.)?
- What is the rhetoric of public health communication on food safety/food scares?
- How has food become an agent of good or ill health through excess, deficiency, quality, or other?

- What are the rhetorical-ethical dimensions critiques of food production systems and the food industry in relation to their effects on individual and public health, as well as on environmental and planetary health?
- How can we understand governmental dietary guidelines and regulations through the prism of RHM?
- To what point is food pathogenic or healing in the phenomenology of eating disorders? We invite pieces that may address food-related ailments, e.g. malnutrition, obesity, bulimia, binge-eating, anorexia, or orthorexia, in which food may be regulated, prescribed, and theorized as treatment or pathology.

### **The Future of Food as Medicine**

- What role do practices such as the appification of health and healthy eating, “biohacking,” and other Silicon Valley solutions to our dietary concerns play in how we view health and health citizenship?
- How does measuring and quantification (of calories, nutrients, etc.) as a “social technology” (Mudry, 2009) change our relationship with food, our bodies, and our health?
- What are some of the issues regarding growing food in the Anthropocene that reflect on our health and medical practices?

These themes are meant to be generative rather than exhaustive. The guest editor and RHM editors look forward to reading proposals for research articles, but are also eager to hear your ideas for the journal’s other genres—persuasion briefs, dialogues, commentaries, and review essays. This special issue will be co-edited by Cristina Hanganu-Bresch in consultation with the *RHM* co-editors. Special issue proposals will be reviewed and ranked by this team and members of the journal’s editorial board, and manuscripts will undergo the same rigorous peer review process as regular submissions. Cristina is very willing to answer email queries at [c.hanganu-bresch@uscience.edu](mailto:c.hanganu-bresch@uscience.edu). Please email 500-1000 word proposals (excluding citations) to [rhm.journal.editors@gmail.com](mailto:rhm.journal.editors@gmail.com) by October 15, 2019. Completed manuscripts for accepted proposals will be due March 25, 2020; this special issue is slated for Spring 2021.

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