

Ann Beutel (CY Publications Committee Member) interviewed **Kate Cairns** for the Fall 2015 CY newsletter's "Meet the Scholar Interview." Kate received a bachelor's degree in Sociology from McGill University in 2005 and master's and doctoral degrees in Sociology of Education from the University of Toronto in 2007 and 2011, respectively. After completing postdoctoral fellowships at the University of Toronto, she joined the Department of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University in 2014 as an Assistant Professor. Kate's substantive interests lie in the areas of childhood, gender, culture, education, and inequality. She is a co-author (with Josée Johnston) of *Food and Femininity* (2015, Bloomsbury). Kate's work also has been published in such journals as *Gender & Society*, *Theory and Society*, and *Gender and Education*. She teaches courses on childhood studies, children's geographies, girlhood studies, and gender and education. Kate can be reached at kate.cairns@rutgers.edu.

Ann Beutel (CY Publications Committee Member) asked Kate the following questions:

Ann: How did you first become interested in studying children, and in particular, studying connections among children, food, and consumption?

Kate: I actually didn't start out researching food. My interest in studying children and youth began with schools. My own childhood was in a rural community in Ontario and my parents taught in schools within the area, so conversations around the dinner table often centered on the topic of education in a small-town setting. When I moved to Montreal to study sociology at McGill, I found myself returning again and again to the relationship between schooling and subjectivities – that is, how young people come to understand who they are and who they can become through schooling. I was excited to read critical scholarship exploring gender, race and class in the realm of education, but was struck by the fact that my own rural schooling experiences were rarely reflected in the research.

These experiences led to my doctoral research in a rural elementary school, exploring how seventh and eighth grade students imagined their futures. This ethnographic study examined students' experiences of a career education program called "The Real Game," which attempts to prepare young people for their adult futures in the "real world". This program promoted a kind of entrepreneurial, flexible, mobile subject that many have linked to neoliberalism; my project looked at how young people made sense of this vision of future success from their own social and geographic locations – that is, how gender, class, race, and *place* come together in young people's sense of who they are and who they can become.

While working on my dissertation, I also became involved in research on a seemingly very different topic: food. This began through work as a research assistant, and eventually led to a postdoctoral fellowship exploring issues of food, gender and inequality. This research has just been published as a book, *Food and Femininity*, coauthored with University of Toronto sociologist Josée Johnston. In this project, the analysis of childhood relates to the everyday work of feeding children. We look at how cultural constructions of childhood shape the pressures

mothers experience in their foodwork. For example, one chapter explores a gendered and classed cultural ideal that we call the “organic child” – an ideal that encourages mothers to practice careful and conscientious consumption to protect children from the risks of industrial food. This ideal sets a classed standard for good mothering that is extremely labor-intensive and virtually impossible to achieve. Even privileged women with ample economic and cultural capital worry that they aren't doing enough to protect their children's health and socialize them to be ethical consumers. This is a theme that we have explored in collaboration with Rutgers sociologist Norah MacKendrick. Our analysis of the organic child reveals the gendered workings of neoliberal governance. As systemic food issues are individualized, they become the personal responsibility of consumers. It is often women – and particularly mothers – who bear the weight of this burden in their everyday foodwork.

These might seem like disparate projects – from rural schooling to feeding children. A common thread that runs through both studies has been an enduring interest in gender, inequality, and subjectivity formation in the context of neoliberalism. I come to childhood studies with particular interest in the way that children and youth are figured as the promise (or threat) of collective futures. Throughout each of these projects, I examine how ideas about children as the future do particular kinds of work – discursively, politically, and in the formation of subjectivities – whether that's in terms of young people's sense of self, or mothers' everyday care-work.

At the present moment, children's food practices are the site of immense public concern, and these concerns are often framed in terms of collective futures. So studying children, food and consumption offers a lens onto contemporary hopes and anxieties about health and well-being, environmental and social justice, and the relationship between individual and collective action. We can see these contested issues play out through debates about what children are (or should) be eating.

Ann: What can you tell us about your current research on children and youth? What projects related to children and youth are you looking forward to working on in the future?

Kate: My current research brings together my past work in education and food studies to explore the rise of initiatives seeking to connect children to their food. In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in connecting children to their food – whether that's through educational trips to local farms, planting seedlings in a school garden, or getting kids involved in planning and cooking their own meals. And here, once again, I'm interested in how collective hopes and anxieties about the food system are projected onto young people as the promise of a healthy, sustainable future. I'm also interested in how young people make sense of these discourses, and how food figures into their own identity projects, communities, and visions for the future.

Before coming to Rutgers, I was conducting ethnographic and focus group research with youth involved in a school garden program in Toronto, and I am keen to continue that research in

Camden and Philadelphia. Another aspect of this project looks at children's cookbooks, and the way that these texts address the child reader. I'm also looking at media discourses surrounding the dreaded figure of the "picky eater," and examining how this pathologized child subject is contrasted with the figure of the "foodie child" – the child with an adventurous palate who happily eats everything. These kinds of narratives are often implicitly raced and classed, and teasing out these dynamics is a key focus of the larger project.

In terms of future research, I am keen to continue exploring articulations of food and gender, shifting to the context of girlhood. In *Food and Femininity*, we found that food is still profoundly connected to femininity, and that food practices are an important way women performed their identities – for instance, as caring mothers, health-conscious consumers, or engaged citizens. While finding striking continuities with past feminist scholarship, our research also identified important changes in the way that food and femininity are woven together in a contemporary context – particularly since overt gender beliefs about foodwork as "women's work" are widely regarded as outdated. Coming out of this research, I am curious to explore how these connections play out for girls in the performance of young food femininities. For instance, in our research with women, we found that explicit talk of "dieting" has become stigmatized and replaced with an emphasis on "healthy eating," even though some of these practices also involve food restriction and a concern with thinness. Are girls negotiating a similar shift? More broadly, how do girls understand the significance of food in their lives – their bodies, relationships, responsibilities and desires? What kinds of food struggles and pleasures do girls encounter in relation to family, schooling, and peer social interactions? How does gender intersect with race, class and sexuality in the performance of girls' food femininities? Clearly, I am in the "brainstorming" stage of this project, with no shortage of questions! It's likely that these queries will spawn more than a single study in the coming years.

Ann: You were educated in Canada and did some college teaching there. What do you see as important similarities and differences between postsecondary schooling in Canada and the United States?

Kate: This is a tricky question to answer, and I'm not sure I can really speak to these differences yet. It's all still quite new! Also, I would imagine that teaching in different settings in either of these countries would be quite different, so I'm hesitant to make any broad declarations about postsecondary education in "Canada" and the "US" beyond the three cities where I've taught: Montreal, Toronto, and Camden. I can say that students occasionally catch me using "Canadianisms" in class (e.g. referring to "grading" as "marking", throwing a "u" into words like "favourite", or calling the last letter of the alphabet "zed"), and they are always quick to remind me where we are located.

At a structural level, one obvious difference is the greater affordability – and thus accessibility – of postsecondary education in Canada. This of course has an impact on who ends up in the university classroom. At Rutgers-Camden we have many students who are working while in

school - and sometimes also raising children - which I know makes for a different student body than one would find in many American schools. Again, it is hard to make generalizations, but in general my Canadian experiences suggest the importance of making a university education affordable for everyone (something that Canada has to work on too).

Ann: You work within a multidisciplinary department at Rutgers, The Department of Childhood Studies. What has that experience been like, and what advice do you have for sociology graduate students who are contemplating employment in a multidisciplinary department?

Kate: I am really thrilled to have landed in this unique program. I've always been drawn to interdisciplinary research, even though my training was rooted in sociology. One of the things I like most about working across disciplines is having access to a range of tools that can best help you to explore the question at hand. The feminist scholar Jacqui Alexander has written about how interdisciplinary research allows us to "follow the question," rather than reproduce disciplinary boundaries. This has been really important for me. For instance, during my doctoral research with rural youth, I found that I needed scholarly resources to make sense of the significance of place within young people's lives. It was by turning to the literature in children's geographies that I was able to theorize the *geographies* of neoliberal governance. And now here I am teaching children's geographies courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. I feel so lucky to work in a space where this kind of multidisciplinary scholarship is celebrated. The rich and varied backgrounds of my colleagues also make my department an exciting place to be. (I have the greatest colleagues!)

Of course, multidisciplinary research does bring its own set of challenges. In our program, we are always thinking about how to ensure that students have the opportunity to forge connections within scholarly communities that often remain organized around traditional disciplines. But I think the opportunities opened up by multidisciplinary research far outweigh these sorts of challenges. There are students who have entered our program with a particular research project in mind, and have found that their multidisciplinary training opened up new ways of exploring this same question – for instance, by combining qualitative research with more humanistic approaches. These kinds of innovative approaches often allow us to see things differently, sparking questions and insights that go beyond traditional disciplinary debates. As a faculty member, I get to work with colleagues who come to childhood studies from anthropology, psychology, history, film, English, and education. This means that I am constantly being exposed to new ways of thinking about childhood that go beyond my own comfort zone, and can help to challenge my own scholarly assumptions. I'm only a little over a year into my position and I've already been inspired to ask new questions and consider new avenues within the study of childhood.