

Helen Traill

Hello. Hi, Selina. Nice to meet you, and thank you for joining us to talk about your dissertation, *Four seasons of hegemony: An analysis of the embodied and discursive practices which facilitate gendered hegemonic encounters in elite restaurants*, which won the Food Geographies Research Group (FGRG) dissertation prize in 2020. My name is Helen Traill, and I'm a post-doc at the University of Glasgow in the Adam Smith Business School. But I'm here today in my capacity as one of the ECR representatives on the FGRG committee. And I'm really excited to talk about your dissertation: it's a really interesting piece of work you've done.

Jack Pickering

Yeah. I loved reading it as well. I'm Jack Pickering. I recently finished my PhD at Cardiff University, and I'm the conference officer, one of the conference officers for the RGS FGRG. Do you want to introduce yourself a little bit, and tell us what you're doing at the moment and where you're working?

Selina Treuherz

Yeah, my name is Selina Treuherz. I wrote the dissertation! I've just finished my undergraduate degree at the University of Sheffield in human geography. And now I'm meant to be working as a chef, but I'm currently on furlough because of the lockdown.

Helen Traill

So we wondered if we could start, if you could just tell us the story of your dissertation. So where you got the inspiration for it, and what spurred it on to want to study haute cuisine.

Selina Treuherz

Okay, so the title of the dissertation was *Four seasons of hegemony: An analysis of the embodied and discursive practices which facilitate gendered hegemonic encounters and elite restaurants*. That's a very long title. The inspiration for it was primarily - there was no way that my dissertation wouldn't be about food, because I love cooking. I had started working as a chef at the end of my first year of university, primarily because I desperately needed a job. And then when my dissertation tutor, Professor Peter Jackson, found out where I was working, he thought that it would be a really exciting place to study. So that was the basis behind it. And I think it's quite an interesting place to study because... there's not very much research from an academic perspective of what it's like working in a restaurant. It's often from an outsider's perspective. So it's not a very well known space, particularly in human geography. And the power dynamics are very poignant in these spaces and that was one of the things that really struck me, as well as the fact that I was working in a very male dominated environment, which was unlike any other working environment I'd ever been in, and where you're expected to work 70 hours a week. Given how much of an impact these kind of restaurants have on society, I just thought it'd be really interesting place to study.

Jack Pickering

Definitely, yeah. Yeah, super interesting and super relevant. Like you say, there's a kind of connection between that kind of food space and the rest of the society. Could you tell us a little bit about any academic work on food that inspired you?

Selina Treuherz

It's really hard for me to answer because there was so much that I want to say. I think the first thing that I thought was important to speak about was all the visceral geographers, so the ones that really inspired me when I was doing my degree, were like the Hayes-Conroy sisters, Robyn Longhurst, Elspeth Probyn, and all of the visceral geography literature that I read, both academically and personally felt really important and inspiring for me, because of the way they interlinked all of the stuff about food in a very feminist lens. And those were the papers that I continually went back to and inspired most of the essays during my degree, because they were making that link between what was happening in the body, and what we were eating, and how it linked to society in quite a political way, which was really interesting for me. And then, the other things, I suppose Peter and Megan, who would be Professor Peter Jackson and Dr. Megan Blake, were two lecturers that were really important for me at the University of Sheffield. Megan's work on food ladders, I've read quite a lot about and also Peter, the way that he was- I learned a lot about the cultural turn from him, which was his earlier work, and then how he interlinked that into stuff about food was really important and shaped quite a lot of my dissertation. And then less academic food work, I read loads of chef's work. I really like MK Fisher, who is a 1930s housewife. And all of her work is really beautiful. And like Nigella and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Nigel Slater. And then more recently, the Vittles newsletter, I don't know if either of you have heard about it. But the way that it is integrating kind of decolonizing the food system and thinking about current restaurants and stuff. It's so exciting. And the conversations that it's making outside of mainstream media are really, really fantastic.

Helen Traill

That's such a range of sources of inspiration there. And it's really nice to hear, too, that the teaching at Sheffield and the things that you were exposed to through your degree were so important in shaping where you ended up. And I think it's so interesting to hear how, I guess, and I guess maybe it's the Gramsci coming through a bit, but the relationship between the cheffing that you do, and the way that you're also thinking about it in this quite theoretical and in depth way is really nice to hear. One thing that I really enjoyed in your dissertation was that you were thinking a lot about the body in the restaurant and the way the body was part of what was happening and maybe an understudied aspect of what goes on within a restaurant. Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like to research that: as somebody who obviously there as an academic researcher, but also a chef?

Selina Treuherz

Well, as I said before, a lot of my essays were about the body before my dissertation. And I think a lot of them, it was the theme that like the body is so integral to how we understand our lived experience. But a lot of the time that's not fully recognized. And I thought it was just quite significant in a restaurant, even though I was trying not to focus

it and give quite descriptive pieces in my research diary, where I wrote my scratch notes. It's kind of the way that all the bodies in the kitchen have to work to these patterns and these rhythms, which is why the *rhythmanalysis* stuff came in, when you're constantly doing the same thing over and over again, and the bodies are interweaving but also at a kind of very visceral level, you're constantly tasting, you're getting cuts and burns, you're carrying these really heavy things. And you're really, really exhausted the whole time. So the body feels really, really important in a way they may not do to the same extent in an office job. So that seemed to come through while I was doing it. But in terms of the actual research process, it was a bit all over the place. At times, I just had a notebook that I would write in during my breaks. But obviously, I had to eat during my breaks as well. And I'd have a 20 minute break on my nine hour shift. So sometimes I would like end up writing them in the evenings or like on the bus on the way to work. So it wasn't the most traditional way of like always doing it, yeah, at the end.

Helen Traill

I was reminded actually, when I was reading just snippets of your notes and particularly in the dissertation where you talk about having to cram those notes into these spaces and moments where they're, you know, you're really getting to put your feet up for like, a very short period of time, it really reminded me of doing very long bar shifts, actually, I thought that you captured well that sense of snatched time away from the rest of the time where you're on your feet, and you're on the go, and you have all these rhythms. I thought there was a you know, it just took me back to being in a bar actually in quite an interesting way.

Jack Pickering

Yeah you really communicated that in the way you wrote really well. It really, really came through to me really strongly.

Selina Treuherz

That's good. I think because I was reading *Rhythmanalysis*, before I started even though I was trying to do these descriptive notes. I think when I was doing my coding, I did it manually on these massive A3 sheets, which did actually kind of scare Peter because they were just so big and covered in scribbles. But like, it was just kind of like there will would always be the same thing over and over again, because I'm making the same dishes every single day for the whole of that season. And it is that whole like rhythmic thing. It was really yeah, it just had to happen really.

Jack Pickering

I think I produced a similar sort of like giant, an A3 Mind Map when I was planning my PhD actually. So yeah, I definitely scared people with that kind of thing before. Definitely part of the process. And so how did you how did your colleagues feel about the research in the workplace? How did you feel about that as well? And how did you think your relationship with the material shaped what you found?

Selina Treuherz

I don't actually think the majority of chefs in the kitchen were that fussed, I would kind of, say, as a passing comment, that I was doing this research, after they'd signed up their participant information sheet, and they didn't really care. They were too, because I was working during the summer and it's like, the toughest season, you've got 80 covers twice a day, they were just focused on doing their job. And this really didn't mean that much to them. But I think the head chef was particularly interested because there's only what, one other woman in the kitchen and he wanted to hear what it would be like working as a woman and I think he sees that as an issue within the kitchen, that there is only one other woman. In terms of how the material shaped what I was doing. I think it's a very personal space, for me. I love being a chef, even though it's really, really hard. I love working there and I knew that my head chef would be reading my dissertation at the end. So even though I wanted to be critical, I think I recognized that it had to be looking at the systemic issues within the hospitality industry, as opposed to just criticizing this restaurant for being somewhat sexist in a way, but not like explicitly. So I suppose that, but being a chef, and not an outsider was useful, because I don't think if I'd been coming into that space - it takes a long, long time, and I'd already worked there for one summer, for people to kind of like take you in and speak to you properly and I was able to ask them questions. Like, how, how it works when you're tasting stuff and the power dynamics, running that in a way that I wouldn't have been able to if I was brand new.

Helen Trill

Do you think it made it harder to write in a way? It was interesting, because you were saying there that you didn't want to feel that you were criticizing this restaurant specifically too much. And you wanted to consider it in a structural way. Did that make the writing process harder? Or do you think that it maybe pushed you try to do a fairer job, or a more thorough job? Talk to me a little bit about that?

Selina Treuherz

Well, the gender aspect of the piece was actually the last bit that I kind of put in at the very, very end, which seemed to link it all together. But actually, for the majority of the time, I was focusing more on the Gramscian notions of hegemony and the power dynamics in the space rather than looking specifically at gender because I didn't want to make it about gender. I didn't want this just to be I'm the only woman in the kitchen and this isn't right. So I think it may have made it harder, because I kept on being reluctant to add that part in. But at the same time, I think it it meant I was more thorough when looking at power dynamics. And when I was doing my coding, to try and step back and look at it in a kind of non-critical way and just see it for what it was rather than kind of getting really emotionally invested. If that makes sense.

Helen Trill

I mean, I think everybody probably has that thing of like when you work closely with an organization wanting to represent them in a way that is fair, I guess that's why I use the word fair. It's something that comes up for me when I write too, which is, you know, how do you be; how are you critical without, without feeling like you're making criticisms that

are you know, that maybe an organization don't have control over all of the aspects within. I don't know if that makes any sense.

Selina Treuherz

It definitely does. And I think the other thing that I had to take account of is that I'm a commis chef, and in the staff diagram, I am literally at the very, very bottom of the pile because I'm still in my training. So there are a lot of people with a lot more authority than me. And given that I knew I wanted to continue working there after I finished my degree, I couldn't be really overtly critical of this space because I didn't want to be, I didn't need to be, but I couldn't be because I wanted to be a chef and I knew that this was the place where I wanted to work afterwards.

Jack Pickering

You're sort of in, within the hierarchy already, that you're sort of discussing, the realities of being in that hierarchy. Yeah, I guess I should say as well, I, I think I learned so much reading through the dissertation. It was so, there were so many terms and things I've just never come across before. Sort of the background things you don't even hear about on chef programs on TV. It's a really fascinating

Selina Treuherz

About the kitchen specifically, like the mise en place and stuff like that? Yeah, there is a whole language. It's really weird.

Helen Trill

So as part of a conference a few years back with the **FGRG**, we visited **Foodhall** in Sheffield. And I believe you volunteered there in the past? And one thing we were interested to ask you actually was what link you saw between your work there and your work on more elite food spaces? How you think they connect and how you how you see that relationship within I guess the broader food scene?

Selina Treuherz

Well, I actually cooked for that event at ! I got paid to do it, it was one of my summer jobs. And so I was at that, I also volunteered for the event through Sheffield geography. So I went to quite a few talks at it, which were really interesting.

Just for a bit of an explanation is a community kitchen in Sheffield. And it works on a contribute what you can basis, so anybody in the community can come and get a hot meal. And they contribute through the means that they can, be that in a monetary way, or by doing the washing up or something like that. And I just want, I know that I shouldn't, but I want to plug their **National Food Service**, which is another organization that I work for which was the founding branch of. And there are eight spaces like across the country and we're all united by the aims to tackle food insecurity, social isolation, social inequality and food waste. So we're basically using surplus food to feed the community and increase community resilience.

And the two spaces, the elite restaurant and are in very many ways, opposite ends of the food system. One is kind of based on sort of anarchist values of mutual aid, and the other is making millions of pounds in profit every single year. So they are very, very different. But I think the thing that unites them, and the reason that I feel comfortable working in both spaces is because they are centered around the idea of commensality, which is the act of eating together. And I think both of them, be it for a millionaire or somebody who's just coming to the elite restaurant for their wedding day, and they're saved up for years or all of us eating around the big table at food hall, It's all about creating memories and bringing people together through food, which is a really, really important thing for me. And in a similar way, both spaces, in a different way with different aims are trying to create a better food system.

The most explicit way that they're similar is that they're both trying to reduce food waste. So at , you know, we're using surplus food to feed people. And at the elite restaurant, you can't waste anything because you're throwing hundreds of pounds of profit down the drain. And then at the restaurant, we're working with the seasons, and we're using as good a quality produce as possible and it's trying to get put good food in people's bellies, but up it's far less **explicitly than** that. And it's like people haven't eaten at all and we're giving them their one meal. But I suppose at the **National Food Service**, it is trying to hold the government to account and make sure that they realize how severe of an issue food insecurity is at the moment for local authorities, and making sure that everybody has access to a hot meal.

Another way that I thought that there was a similarity, which isn't as positive is my experiences as a woman. So the reason that I was in Sheffield, in the summer of 2019 was because I was doing some research with Dr. Megan Blake about the geographies of care in the public sphere at . So I was working there quite a lot and speaking to a lot of community members and there were times when being a woman, I felt quite stigmatized, and they would say hurtful comments and it was a similar male dominated environment when I went to do my research two weeks later at the restaurant, where I was the only woman in the space and I think that there's a real irony to this, that, you know, this whole idea that women are meant to be in the kitchen, but in these two spaces where I was feeding hundreds of people, I didn't feel like I belonged there. And that's something that has felt really important for me and really shaped me and has led to where I am.

Helen Traill
That's so interesting.

Jack Pickering
Yeah. So how do you understand the kind of connections between the high end kind of luxury food space that you worked in, and kind of everyday food culture, because this kind of came through your dissertation a little bit, but I just wondered if you could talk about it a little bit more.

Selina Treuherz

Well, as you said, you learnt quite a few terms from the dissertation. So I feel like there's an assumption that it's a really abstract place that not many people know about and especially when you know that a meal there costs 200 pounds, which is like half of my monthly rent, it feels really, really far away from what we eat every day. But I think, for me, it feels more relevant than we give it credit for in so many ways, just because like, there are chefs like Jamie Oliver, and Heston Blumenthal who have shaped so much of what we eat now and what we come to know and that obviously has impacts on what we buy in the supermarket and has set loads and loads of food trends, and as someone that keeps up to date with that, you notice how much chefs are having a say on it. And especially during lockdown, when restaurants were shut, we were aware of how much we missed them, people became far more excited about cooking and food and it's become a really, really important part of people's days. So I think that's the biggest similarity that I can think of.

Jack Pickering

Yes, it's kind of a thing that's mediated through kind of celebrities and figures in a way. Yeah.

Helen Traill

I do wonder whether there's something in the contrast that you were making between this idea of kitchens as the supposedly feminized space. And the, you know, and then these very male dominated spaces that you were working in, though. I don't know where I'm going with that except that I do think it's interesting that in that translation, it's almost like, particularly if we're talking about Heston Blumenthal, or Jamie Oliver, we are talking about often famous men who are translating this kind of high culture into our maybe feminized home kitchens, but that's probably a bit of an oversimplified gender dynamic. It is just interesting to hear you talking about yourself within the spaces.

What did you find the most interesting thing, the most interesting finding from your research and was there anything that you really wanted to take further that you maybe didn't have space for within the dissertation?

Selina Treuherz

Well, I feel like it, it goes back to what you were speaking about before. I don't know if it's the most interesting thing that I found. But the thing that really, like has impacted me is recognizing the relationship between the social and historical foundations of gastronomy, where it was men in the army who became chefs. And that distancing from motherly notions of care and nourishment where women were in the home. And recognizing that distinction and how, as a result of that, there is a kind of lack of care for ourselves as chefs while we're cooking, and we're burning ourselves, and we're meant to be really macho and that's the kind of thing that I think that was the most interesting finding. And I think it is starting to be recognized in the restaurant industry, that we need to take better care of ourselves. And that these hours are unsustainable and not healthy. You know, we've got reductions in the amount of days that restaurants are open and people are actually following the rules, the legal requirements now, which is really good. But I suppose I feel like until we, the thing I was trying to do with my

dissertation is recognize the hegemonic nature of it. And how all of this is really, really entrenched in it. its not just these men being sexist, explicitly sexist to me, but actually, like, the practices that we're doing in these restaurants are masculinist. And that's what's having the impact.

The way that I'd like to take it further is because of my work with the National Food Service, I've obviously been looking at two very different ends of the food system. And I think, in 2020, I think one in 20 families used a food bank, that may be wrong, but the Trussell, that was with the **Trussell Trust**, and only half of food banks are with the Trussell Trust, so a lot of people are really food insecure at the moment and at the ***National Food Service***, we've been working with some academics at the University of Salford who are kind of recognizing how the infrastructure that the government's putting in place through food banks is now becoming a permanent part of our foodscape and that's really terrifying, because it's going to remove them of responsibility in the future. But at the same time, 70% of restaurants think they're going to shut. So we've got these two really precarious spaces in the foodscape, which are really significant. And I don't think people are recognizing how much food banks are actually part of the hospitality industry. We need to recognize these social eating spaces as part of that. And I kind of think that this is an opportunity. I don't know if this is actual research, but I think we can see there's an opportunity we're getting all of these closed down restaurants, and really insecure people. So whether it's through the National Food Service or not, the thing I've been thinking about loads is how we can make use of these spaces to make sure that everyone's got a hot meal.

Helen Traill

I suppose its building those connections between, you know, this supposedly abstracted haute cuisine space. And, and I guess more ordinary food spaces. There is actually when you were talking there, I was wondering if you'd heard, maybe haven't because it's quite a specific Glasgow thing, that the **Glasgow Community Food Network** organize a chef's challenge every year, where they get, they connect up local chefs, and locally grown produce from community gardens, and they do a kind of a competition. And it's, and it's just quite an interesting and quite a nice way, I guess, of connecting up these often quite separate food spaces.

Selina Treuherz

I think that's a link that really needs to be made. I saw that Peter Jackson was talking to chefs at the thing about a talk for the UN about how to be more sustainable. But I think we need to start making that link where chefs because we love cooking, and we love feeding people and so it's just so ironic that there are so many people going hungry. And that's what our skill is, especially when we're all on furlough.

Helen Traill

It's an opportunity, perhaps as well as a crisis.

Jack Pickering

So pretty fertile ground to be working in and sort of experimenting with at the moment.

Selina Treuherz

I hope so. I hope that it happens.

Jack Pickering

So what do you think the restaurant industry specifically could learn from your work?

Selina Treuherz

That feels like a really big question. I think recognizing the importance of care, and how we need to look after ourselves and think about mental health more. And also just kind of hold, put our hands up and be like, there is actually an issue that the restaurant industry doesn't have enough women in it given that women have primarily been in the kitchen or that there aren't enough like people of color in these haute cuisine spaces. And kind of making a more inclusive environment by recognizing the practices that we're doing and how they contribute to stuff. Yeah, I hope, my head chef has been quite keen to learn from that. And it's really exciting that we, we might be able to implement these kind of practices at the restaurant. And hopefully, that can have repercussions in other spaces in the food industry.

Helen Traill

I like the idea of them taking on the idea of care. And I do hope that they can learn from it. And it's nice to hear that they're really open to your research as well that's really nice to hear of that kind of level of reflexivity, in reaction to your work. And maybe there's scope for quite a broad idea of care within that, maybe we can care for each other within the space of restaurant, but we can also care for the broader communities in which they sit. And maybe we can connect these things up in an interesting way. It's been so interesting to talk to you, Selina. I feel like you have so many things to say about food. What are your plans for the future? Tell us where we find you next.

Selina Treuherz

Probably in a kitchen! I think I'm going to continue training to be a chef for a bit and go round all other sections of the kitchen. But I, this award has maybe shown to me that I might, should go back to academia in some capacity at some point, because I do really enjoy speaking about food in an academic sense. But I'm not sure, I'm going to carry on doing lots of work for the National Food Service as well.

Jack Pickering

That sounds great and really important.

Helen Traill 28:44

Well, thank you. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for talking to us.

Selina Treuherz 28:49

Thank you for having me.

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