

Helen Traill: Welcome. This is our second annual dissertation prize interview for the Food Geographies Research Group. I am Helen Traill, based at the University of Glasgow and I'm joined today by Jack Pickering, say hello Jack.

Jack Pickering: Hi, I'm a postdoctoral research at the University of Sheffield.

Helen: And we are also joined by Camy Sandford, the winner of this year's dissertation prize for her dissertation which was called "Meating the mainstream: a critical analysis of meat substitute advertising in the American fast food industry" and you did that in the University of Edinburgh didn't you Camy.

Camy Sandford: Yes.

Helen: And so the judges were really impressed with this. It's a really rich dissertation, a really interesting piece of work, that looks at advertising and brings together a range of theoretical tools to draw out how meat substitutes are drawn into the mainstream of the fast food industry within America, particularly drawing on a semiotic analysis of the advertising and hopefully, one of the things we'll be able to get into in this interview is the process of doing that and how that's affected how you think about advertising. Just to kick us off, I wonder if you could tell us the story of your dissertation so where you got the inspiration for your dissertation and what really pushed you to study American fast food advertising.

Camy: I was really conscious that because I was going to have to spend so much time doing it, that it would be something that I would be really interested in personally. And so I think really the motivation for it was, I did a year abroad in Canada as part of my degree because Edinburgh's four years and the third year you can choose to take abroad. So I went to North America and I had a North American background, and so I didn't expect to have a lot of cultural shock. But I have to say I did experience it on the whole scale, it was so culturally different from the UK. But where I found the most difference what I was most surprised about is that I'm personally, I'm a vegetarian, I don't eat meat. But I also, hands in the air, I love fast food.

I love you know big macs, used to love chicken nuggets all that stuff. So for me that was one of the biggest losses of becoming veggie was that kind of lack of ability to indulge in

the thing one of the things that I loved doing in the sort of guilty pleasure way. Then all of a sudden, when I went to North America, every fast food outlet, because of the timing that I was there, had just started bringing out their meat substitute burgers. Not McDonald's but specifically Burger King and A&W.

And they were so tasty, and so I kind of you know, initially, I was clouded by you know the taste and the straight enjoyment of it. And then I started to think how odd it was that the cultural differences that I'd experienced everywhere else allowed for this to emerge and in my head, because of the way I was I guess situated I couldn't really make sense of it. And I also couldn't really make sense of who they were pitching it to. So I started every time I would go, which I mean really it wasn't after I'm making it sound like it was every day it was it wasn't that bad. But I would kind of look at how they were presenting it and if you'd sort of, if you've had an experience of North American advertising you'll know it's, it's quite strong, it's really to the point, it's loud. There's a very particular often male voice they use across the board that you'd be quite familiar with, so I kind of just started to look at it and think to myself, how are they integrating this what I think it's quite a progressive idea in a really, really commercialized environment with this new technology that they're able to make it taste amazing and it kind of just went from there.

And once I realized that I wanted to do something to do with food in my dissertation it just made a lot of sense and I was really encouraged by my supervisor Rae Rosenberg to run with that idea and focus on that specific location, because of the points of interest that I've mentioned and really focus on advertising as I guess a window into not exactly society, as it is, but sort of society as advertisers think it is and how they are presenting it. Because really if you think about marketing – apologies, this is a really rambling answer – but if you think about marketing that they're trying to draw on your assumptions and idealized forms of what they believe, based on their market research, people in that culture in that location want. So really I thought by examining the way they were presented that I'd be able to figure out what people think of not just vegetarians but someone who might buy that product and then what that says, conversely, about the perceptions they're trying to challenge if that makes sense.

Jack: Yeah that's really fascinating yeah thanks. Can you tell us about any work on food that particularly really inspired you?

Camy: Oh that's a very good question and I, one of the deep dives I did into food quite separately was as part of a sociology module actually. And as we briefly touched about before we started this interview is that that's the great thing about geography: it intersects so many disciplines! In that sense, I was really fascinated by French food culture, which is obviously completely different than what I ended up studying. But I did a sort of deep dive into I can't remember any specific academics but about how that affinity with foods, both internally and internationally, really shaped French food identity and so that was one of the aspects I found particularly fascinating. I also in terms of American work specifically and I can't remember who wrote it, but the McDonaldization of Society, I think was one of the terms that I looked at quite a lot and I thought what's the name of that Netflix documentary that... Super Size Me there you go. And so, in that sense, I found that particularly interesting and how something that you might think is so not necessarily mundane but I guess, an essential aspect of surviving as a person, could take on so much more meaning and, personally, as someone who loves food I just found the way that intersected academically to be particularly fascinating.

Helen: So much, it's such a broad field. It's interesting the way you've got these, yeah the French food and then there's George Ritzer's McDonaldisation of Society, you know. I think I think you're right it that kind of interdisciplinary within food geographies is one of the things I find so interesting too. So you wrote this really interesting discussion about American fast food advertising, but one of the things that I think, for me, was quite interesting was how thoroughly you talked us through that process of semiotic analysis and a lot of the detail that went into that and I wondered a little bit, not to get too bogged down in the actual methodology, but what the process of learning to do that was like for you.

Camy: Oh it's really complicated. I mean, I think a methodology is one of, one of the most challenging and rigorous aspects of writing a dissertation because. Really, as anyone or most people do who reached that level of study is, I loved, I like to read and I enjoy absorbing other people's ideas but I was really conscious and in my discussions with my supervisor he made me really conscious and kind of look at academic work in a different way, which this is going to sound really basic but I was very conscious of the fact that someone was going to read this and they needed to understand it, and they would not have spent a hundred hours reading about American fast food, and so I thought it was really, really important to get a very structured methodology, from the outset. But at the

same time, what I wanted to do was very ambitious and it wasn't that I couldn't find anything that has been done, that was similar before, which is great, in a way, but what I wanted was so complicated that finding one lens to look at it through proved quite impossible, so I integrated a few methodologies, as I said, kind of semiotic was the main frame because of my subject matter, which was advertising, which is very symbolic and they draw on a lot of not necessarily subconscious levels but it's overt and yet very subtle in its symbolism. So that's why I picked that as the most applicable, but I was very conscious because of the subject matter I was dealing with was to do with gender and sex, was to do with racial aspects as well, so I integrated those feminist and eco feminist feminist lenses in doing that. So trying to find a way that balanced all of those aspects was quite hard and it involved a lot of reading and I think, importantly, a lot of, I was going to use the word networking but consultation and the seeking of guidance from people within the university who done semiotics before and, which I think is a really important aspect that probably students be more encouraged to do is to, that also sounds very obvious but to reach out to people who may have used certain methodology before, and they can really talk you through how you might be able to apply it and, importantly, the limitations of doing so, which is something also I feel like it's important to keep in mind the reach of what you're gonna say.

Jack: yeah.

Helen: That makes oh sorry Jack but I was just gonna say I think academics are also just usually really happy to talk about their research too so.

Camy: yeah, exactly.

Jack: I was gonna say I loved how clear your analysis was as well, like every step of it, you like walked through, and they having in there, the interpretant matrix at the end in the appendices that was so nice to sort of see that all laid out because when you described it, it was quite kind of a difficult sort of concept to like sort of imagine, but then you had it so well laid out, I think sometimes analysis can be like a black box press process in like some academic writing and you did such a good job of like just taking it to bits and showing it, showing us all how it works so.

Camy: Ah thank you, I think going back to the sort of previous question about methodology that's why it's also important, I think, to speak to people about it, because often and I'm guilty of this as well when I'm reading a paper and maybe I'm short on time that I don't really read the analysis, methodology in great detail, I read the sort of bare bones of it. In terms of seeing people's appendices, or going into great detail, I think people often don't do that when they're reading for information rather than methods. And so it was yeah it was really important to me that I try and make it as clear as possible, so if anyone else was doing it, that it would be clear, or was reading it, where I got my assumptions from rather than just kind of off the cuff, assuming that I'd done the work.

Jack: yeah no that's Great yeah really good on you for that and yeah. So one of the things I really liked about your thesis as well was that you, you brought up how central meat is to American culture and like vice versa, and there's a relationship between the two sort of meat and nationality aspects, and so I've always found that really fascinating and I was just wondering, did you think about and did you like talk about sort of other cultures that in their relationship with maintenance of inside the American sphere, I think, Helen can probably feed into this as bit more as well.

Helen: I guess just the conversation that Jack and I briefly had before you arrived actually Camy was just that, there are these different food cultures, there's a lot of immigration as well, so I guess some of this is also to do with the way the power figures through mainstream food culture. I think the thing that really struck me was the way that that Latino identity was pulled through the taco adverts as well and I guess there's quite a lot of rich diversity, I suppose, within the American food scene and I just wanted to hear you talk more about it.

Camy: that's a very good question. And I feel like that's probably something had I had more space, I would have liked to delve into a bit deeper. I'm sure you guys know from doing it yourselves that trying to cut everything down to the right amount of words is a really challenging process and I find it really hard, because I had a lot more to say, of which I can't specifically remember at the moment. I think in the American situation particularly I found what I would call a slightly uneasy marriage of other cultures with the fast food culture and that might have just been because of the lens through which I was looking at it. But particularly in the Latino case, I thought that it felt slightly appropriated. And in the fast food sense, and that was purely because of the kind of commercial lens

that I was looking at it through. And, bearing in mind that I am not part of that culture, so I can't speak to the intricacies of it, and I think that's kind of the point, is that advertising by nature, simplifies things. And so, by not only taking another culture, and I would put quotation marks melding this into the very American this, that is fast food really because of its origins, I felt like I was at risk of simplifying not only other culture itself, but of the relationship between the two, and the power dynamics between the two of them. Because if you think about the, not even just in monetary but as kind of evidence from my research, the cultural impacts that the very American conglomerate nature of fast food has, throughout not just America but I guess the world by proxy I think that is something that is in danger of being missed in that circumstance, and so I think that was really the to boil it down to a nutshell, the overall impression I got from the very specific sector that I was looking at, but it is something that I wish I'd gone into a little bit more depth.

Jack: yeah there's so much of it there, how would you fit in how do you yeah, what do you choose to cut. It would be difficult to navigate as well, so yes lots of challenges there yeah.

Camy: Yeah and also it's an important topic to navigate sensitively as well, like I'm very conscious and there was, including in my methodology kind of acknowledging where I'm looking from my own background, my own personal perceptions of meat as a vegetarian of these offerings, of you know my parents being North American. So my cultural link in that sense. And so yeah I think it's something that's difficult to speak about in such a large scale, without doing a proper deep dive probably through ethnography or kind of collaboration with others who may be inside the cultures that you're talking about

Jack: yeah

Camy: if that makes sense?

Helen: yeah yeah and I think I think there is, you really get that sense of that sensitivity, in the way you approach the materials you're really clear about your positionally within the field and which, particularly for a kind of a semiotic analysis is perhaps a bit rarer than you would in, than you would in a in a methodology that's perhaps more, about actually interacting with people. I wanted to ask whether and how your research has changed how you engage with adverts because sometimes when you do this kind of research, the subject you start to respond to it slightly differently.

Camy: yeah that's a really good question actually um and I think it was always something that I was quite interested in just because, have you ever played the advert game sort of between TV breaks, where you kind of you try and guess the company that's the adverts for? So I always used to play that but I play it probably even more now and but I really noticed the fine print of what people are saying to me and I, I think I take it much more with a pinch of salt and particularly I think it's a really interesting subject given kind of GDPR and the sale of data and the rise of personalised adverts. I think I view that really differently now because I'm very conscious of the fact that they are targeting what some metric has told them is my personality, my living habits, my shopping habits so I think that's particularly interesting because what I was talking about was national kind of blanket advertising, but now because they're so particular, I think, especially when you're dealing with something like semiotics where it's all about how you interpret a sign and the fact that they're now tailoring that so what they think I'm going to respond to you as a personality, I think that's really interesting and I'm definitely more conscious of that, and not that I've explored that necessarily academically, But yeah I think I'm more conscious of what they're trying to do, but I wouldn't say I apply a semiotic analysis in in a sort of everyday fashion, I think, I don't really have time.

Helen: I think that's fair, I mean how much time would you have left if you just were constantly doing a semiotic analysis. But you're right, they're everywhere, they're personalized, you're being targeted forever.

Jack: um has it changed how you think about food at all, I suppose yeah vegetarian food as well.

Camy: yeah I think I am particularly because of the sort of sociological research that I did this kind of aside to the dissertation, but I think a lot more about food and relationships and how I particularly use food to you know have friends over and it structures basically my whole day. When I'm hungry, when I see people, is often at lunchtime so I'm very conscious of my relationship with food and in terms of my relationship with fast foods, now that McDonald's has the McPlant it's still very strong in the UK and I think I probably think more carefully about it, but as someone who always love food, I think it hasn't changed super significantly, to be honest. It's just more I'm conscious of more of a macro sense of why I may be doing what I'm doing and in relation to it if that makes sense.

Helen: I suppose this probably ties into the kind of the broader ethics really of the work. There is this quite important I guess ethical thread that runs through the dissertation, about you know what happens when you take this kind of alternative food, this alternative diet that is usually framed around an ethical position, whether that's animal welfare or environment, so when you take that vegan or vegetarian diet and when you put it into the mainstream into this incredibly commercialised environment. I just wondered if there was any challenge for you in that, to think differently about food ethics, whether with vegetarianism or veganism have more generally.

Camy: yeah I think I feel a lot more about why I was doing it and I've been vegetarian, for a number of years and, often, when I say that to people their first responses to ask me why. And, to which I never really have a concrete response because essentially it's bit of everything. First and foremost, I never actually particularly liked meat so it's not a challenge for me, and I think because of that I don't frame myself as a particularly alternative and ethical because of my vegetarianism person if that makes sense. Not that I think of myself as unethical, but I don't think, from my perspective, it doesn't add particular ethical value to my character. But I was really conscious that particularly from a vegan perspective that it really did and so I think exploring that and being conscious of how my consumption would affect other people is something that I'm quite interested in and particularly as more of my friends and acquaintances are becoming vegan I've been really interested to see how they respond to people in their space eating meat and eating animal products. And I think a few of my friends did dissertations about ethical veganism and militant veganism and aspects like that, and how that translates to social media which as an aside was very interesting. But I don't think it's particularly changed my consumption patterns. If I'm being honest, but I think I am more conscious of, more conscious about how other people perceive me actually. I think that's what I really took from it, is that I hadn't really realized how much dietary identity can change the way other people think about you and what they assume, your lifestyle is, because of that or what you might think of them. I don't know if that makes sense.

Jack: that's pretty interesting yeah. So what was the most sort of them kind of interesting finding from your research is there anything that you could have like want to like investigate more?



Camy: Well, I think the relationships between the men and meta I found particularly interesting, I think that from doing more and more reading about it's something that seems in retrospect very obvious and personally from my own relationships with like my guy friends, basically now examining them through my academic lens, I'm very conscious of the fact that they eat a lot of meat. And then, not that they particularly would sit there and have a steak and exclaim that they are very masculine, but how that is an aspect that is so ingrained and I feel in our society, so I think that's something that I would love to delve more deeply into more broadly, not just in the kind of fast food space and how that's impacting people. I found that a particularly fascinating element about how they've been framed was the fact that they were just trying to appeal to the male audience and by kind of shrouding the meat substitute in this, like meat identity and in that sense, as you said Helen, and kind of losing that alternative nature and losing what had previously been a feminine identity from a vegetarian perspective, so I think yeah that's definitely something that I would love to delve more deeply into and in the same sense kind of the relationships between the meat and masculinity and the family unit that might sound quite particular but one of the real images that came to my mind during my research was, particularly in the American context, the picture of the, you can't see me but I'm doing quotation marks, "nuclear family" of, you know, mom and a dad and kids and then being that family unit with a meat dish on the table that the dad would have purchased, the dad would have carved at the table and, that being that real structure, on which the previous again quotes "foundation of American society" was built on that assumption of that unit working like that. So I think if I had unlimited time, I would love to delve more deeply ethnographically into that relationship between the meat, the man and the family, and how that's changed.

Jack: that's really interesting, I suppose you could almost like, you could almost approach it from a lens of like looking at different types of families and I mean it's not so much the case anymore, but what used to be called like you know non-traditional family types and yeah and then, if they engage with meat differently as well, if they do eat meat that would be that would be really interesting yeah.

Camy: yeah I also think, to the earlier points about different cultures and how food fits into cultural identity and a much more diverse society, essentially, so I think that would also be really interesting lens through which to analyze how relationships are being built and how people are perceiving each other, because of the way their families work around food and

around meat and around masculinity I think that'd be really interesting but bearing in mind that's a huge undertaking and that's a very broad topic.

Jack: yeah it sounds like a PhD thesis yeah!

Camy: yeah.

Helen: I think you've just cue'd yourself up for a PhD. And I think the flip side is interesting, so you've got the main meal, the masculine meat consumption. And then you also have like I guess the idea of kind of feminized care and food care is this concept of being developed relatively recently about the way that you can be mothering and the way attentive mothering can be, can be brought about through certain kind of food practices, so I guess, we should think about those kind of, the way that culture is so tightly bound that we tend to reproduce a lot of the heteronormative power dynamics within our food behaviors as well. It sounds super interesting, so I look forward to you doing your PhD. No, more seriously, I did want to ask whether you had any kind of further plans for the future academically, you mentioned just before we started recording the you, you were doing a post grad in real estate, and I wondered if you saw any kind of lines of continuity through, through your dissertation, through your undergrad and into the masters.

Camy: yeah I think the lines of continuity would be much more about the sort of broader geographical similarities, rather than so much about food, just because I work in commercial real estate in London, so in that sense professionally a lot of what I do revolves around place as I specifically work in a location team so it's really helped the way I approach projects, I think how I approach stakeholders, how I consider people's relationship in the area. I think that's a massive transferable learning that, from my undergrad studies to my later life in terms of, my I mean my master's is pretty similar it's quite it's very practical, it's very different in its approach, to how geography was. As a lot of undergrads are, I guess, quite theoretical and a lot of reading, where my masters is more practical and much more report based. But I think yeah I think the way you approach space, but bearing in mind that property in real estate is by nature it's tangible, it's you know it's there. It's in a space in a place people live there, people work there and people move around and that's where all of this, you know we've spoken about family, we spoke about food and the home and where people make relationships and kind of establish who they are, and I guess from that perspective, this all happens inside a place inside a

building. So I think the way that I think about even a commercial benefit or a social benefit or how this might fit politically and all that in my post Grad studies, I definitely brought forward from geography and in terms of my plans to pursue postgGrad and geography, I don't know. I think that might be unlikely at this stage of my life, but never say never.

Helen: Well, Jack and I are also very interested in your ideas about the masculine, and meat in the family, so you can keep us posted if you do.

Camy: I will.

Helen: Thank you so much for joining us today, it has been so interesting to hear a bit more about the process of your dissertation and yeah best of luck with your future studies!

Camy: Thank you very much, thank you for having me.