

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Bell, Gill Valentine. *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 257 pp. \$25.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-13768-3.

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Perhaps the best image to describe David Bell and Gill Valentine's engaging book *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* is that of the potluck. At the potluck, food is undeniably the star, but it is the mixing together of differing types of food that makes the meal interesting. With an appropriate sense of humor, then, the two authors attempt to "ground theoretical debates about identity politics and issues of consumption through an exploration of one of the most universal and mundane features of everyday life" (frontispiece) namely, food. They begin by noting that food has not been a topic that geographers (of which Valentine is one) have formerly said much about, even though it is intimately wrapped up in place: the kitchen, the neighborhood pub, the nation, etc... In order to think about these various issues, the book itself moves spatially, beginning with the discourse closest to each of us - the body. From there, we migrate out into the home, the community, the city, the region, the nation and the entire world. As an organizing device the author's method is at times helpful. For example, placing the chapter on the body next to the one on the home raises interesting questions of how individualized food practices are negotiated in the space of living arrangements between multiple adults and/or children. However, the organizational arrangement breaks down as similar issues, like using food to as a marker of worldliness crop up in more than one chapter.

One of the strongest points of the book is the breadth of the author's research and commentary. Bell and Valentine ably mix their interdisciplinary stew, bringing together a wide variety of theories, scholars and topics As

the authors write, food "can elaborate different theoretical perspectives - and, most fruitfully of all, the *spaces between* different perspectives can open up still newer ways of thinking." (italics in original, 11). For this reason, the wide-ranging bibliography is a boon to anyone studying food, consumption or identity. At times, though, the book reads like a long review essay mainly interested in cataloguing what others have already said without adding in much new analysis. While entertaining and thorough, this book would be most useful in undergraduate classes on popular culture. In fact, the book does have the feel of a textbook, as there are boxed off sections throughout that highlight the thoughts of people interviewed by Bell and Valentine regarding food practices. Strangely, though, we are never told how or why the authors chose these particular people to speak to. The book could also work well for people looking for an overview of food studies, consumption, geography or identity. Much like the average potluck host, *Consuming Geographies* encourages us to pile up our plates with lots of options, leaving it up to us to figure out how it all works together. For this reason it seems appropriate that there is no real "conclusion." Instead, the book ends at the global level with a brief look at the interconnections between the spaces discussed throughout and the "instruction: (actually the name of a popular and populist British cookery show): *Ready, Steady, Cook!*" (207).

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