

# Food, Identity, and Environmental Education

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## **Abstract**

*While food is an exceedingly rich area for environmental education, I caution environmental educators and researchers from moving too quickly into messaging about what people should eat, given the many complexities around food and identity. Eating, as an inherently identity-laden practice, is fraught with complicated meanings, dilemmas, and predicaments. Far too often in environmental discourse, we focus on the eating choices of individuals, but fail to acknowledge the extent to which eating is influenced by larger social and cultural contexts. This paper will explore some tensions between eating as an identity practice and eating as a sustainable practice through an exploration of a phenomenological autobiographic account and through literature on food, identity, race, and class.*

## **Résumé**

*Alors que la nourriture est un domaine extrêmement riche pour l'éducation environnementale, je mets en garde les éducateurs et les chercheurs en environnement contre une méthode prescriptive trop hâtive quant à ce que les gens devraient manger, étant donné les nombreuses complexités liées à la nourriture et à l'identité. Manger, une pratique intrinsèquement identitaire, se mêle à des significations compliquées, des dilemmes et des affres. Dans le discours environnemental, on attire bien trop souvent l'attention sur les choix alimentaires des individus, mais on omet de reconnaître à quel point l'acte de manger est influencé par de plus vastes contextes sociaux et culturels. Le présent article se penchera sur certaines des tensions qui s'exercent entre la pratique identitaire et la pratique durable qu'est manger, en examinant un rapport phénoménologique autobiographique ainsi que la littérature sur la nourriture, l'identité, la race et la classe sociale.*

**Keywords:** food, identity, race, class, place, vegetarianism

For most inhabitants of (post)modern Western societies, food has long ceased to be merely about sustenance and nutrition. It is packed with social, cultural, and symbolic meanings. Every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about our selves, and about our place in the world... In a world where self-identity and place-identity are woven through webs of consumption, what we eat (and where, and why) signals, as the aphorism says, who we are. (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 3)

Food is a fruitful context for environmental education. It connects personal actions with environmental consequences and has major implications for climate change. And, unlike many environmental issues in which only some people are involved or concerned, eating is an activity in which every single person on the

planet engages. Food is playing an increasing role in environmental education initiatives, as demonstrated partly by the rise of interest in school, community, and urban gardens. While food is clearly a rich area for environmental education, I caution environmental educators and researchers from moving too quickly into messaging about what people *should* eat, given the many complexities around food and identity. Eating, as an inherently identity-laden practice, is fraught with complicated meanings, dilemmas, and predicaments. Far too often in environmental discourse, we focus on the eating choices of individuals, but in doing so we fail to acknowledge the extent to which eating is influenced by larger social and cultural connections.

In this paper I introduce some of the complexities governing an individual's food choices in terms of identity and identity-important designations such as race, class, and place. I begin with a consideration of literature on food and identity, as well as literature on food with regard to race and class. I then use a phenomenological autobiographic account to demonstrate more visceral aspects of food, identity, and culture. I close with a discussion on the implications for environmental education and environmental education research.

## Food and Identity

Food and identity are inextricably connected. Indeed, “you are what you eat” is an adage that speaks as much to identity as it does to the molecular makeup of our bodies. Though the connection between food and identity has not yet been explored in environmental education research, it is not a new subject of scholarship. Most of the literature about food and identity comes from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Starting in the 1960s, anthropologists Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas examined food as it classified and represented group collectives (Fischler, 1988; Scholliers, 2001). At this time, food anthropology studied relationships within and between groups with distinct food cultures (Scholliers, 2001), and scholars like Bourdieu (1984) looked at class-related tastes and social norms. In the 1980s food studies developed further, linking food with identity (Scholliers, 2001). A central theme in the contemporary literature on food and identity is that food is central in communicating who we are to ourselves and to others (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Greene & Cramer, 2011; Scholliers, 2001). Greene and Cramer (2011) note, “one of the most common ways that we utilize food is in the construction of our personal identities... we regularly define ‘who we are’ according to both the foods that we eat and those that we refrain from consuming” (p. xi). Furthermore, Caplan (1997) suggests that “food is like language—its meaning can shift according to contexts of time and place and people can switch food codes just as they do language codes, depending on with whom they are communicating” (p. 6).

Another central theme in food identity literature is that food connects us to

others and serves as a way to build and perpetuate community, support group identities, and signal group affiliations including class, race, gender, age, and ethnicity (e.g., Caplan, 1997; Cosgriff-Hernandez, Martinez, Sharf, & Sharkey, 2011; Greene & Cramer, 2011; Karaosmanoglu, 2011). Greene and Cramer (2011) point out that we “identify with others based upon the types of food that we eat such that we may feel a common bond with people who have similar eating habits to ours” (p. xii). Fischler (1988) notes that, in the case of migrant populations, food traditions sometimes remain long after language has disappeared. Similarly, Ferguson (2004) offers that “cuisine constructs and upholds a community of discourse, a collectivity held together by words, by language, by interpretations of the world in which we live” (p. 8).

An additional theme present in food and identity literature is the role of personal agency in constructing one’s own food narrative, and how personal food decisions can further shape identity (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997). Bell and Valentine (1997) have seen through their examination of personal food histories that food choices have also shaped identities. They cite a woman whose decision to become a vegetarian impacted her political leanings, her social networks, and even her employment. Likewise, Scholliers (2001) explains how becoming a vegetarian as a teenager meant that “little by little my vegetarianism positioned me more clearly: it gave me particular status in the eyes of others and in my own eyes” (p. 3). Furthermore, Bell and Valentine (1997) have found that individuals’ food identities change throughout life as a person moves from being a child to various life stages, such as being a single and/or partnered person, or a parent, or retired. They emphasize that food is an important way for youth to express hybrid identities, especially when youth are from immigrant families who have a different food culture from that of the local place where they live.

As a final note on the food and identity literature, it is important not to assume too much about the importance of food or certain foods to identity. Scholliers (2001) asks, “Is the position of food flexible, or, on the contrary, continuously pivotal (or trivial) in identity formation?” (p. 5). To answer this, he suggests that though food is important in identity formation, we should avoid widespread claims about the role of food and identity since people and groups show differing flexibility and adaptability in their identifications with food. Indeed, not every food is identity-significant, and different individuals may have different relationships with the same food. Sometimes food is, in fact, just food.

### *Food and Identity in Environmental Education Literature*

Though the literature in environmental education about food has not explicitly connected food with identity, several scholars have discussed aspects of eating that reflect the aforementioned themes. Kahn’s (2011) writing on veganism demonstrates that his choice to abstain from eating animal products signifies an important part of his identity as an animal rights activist. Kahn (2011) also presents vegans and vegetarians as a marginalized group. In doing so, he recog-

nizes that food choices signal group affiliation.

Though they do not use identity language, perhaps the clearest representation of food and identity in the existent environmental education literature is a consideration of hunting for food by Pontius, Greenwood, Ryan, and Greenwood (2013). Pontius et al. (2013) argue that hunting for food is an important identity marker that often stems from family traditions, particularly among North American Indigenous groups. Additionally, the authors demonstrate agency regarding their own food identities as they explain that “the rationales behind our own food choices continue to change as we learn, depending on the places we live, health considerations, and the communities we are involved in” (p. 84).

### *Food, Race, Class, and Access*

As indicated in the food identity literature, the food we eat can carry important markers of race and class. When I was teaching environmental science at a California high school, food was a key part of the curriculum in numerous ways. For example, we examined the industrialization of agriculture, factory farming, and the environmental impacts of different kinds of meat. One year, a large percentage of my students chose to eat less or no meat as part of environmental impact projects in which they attempted to record and measure impacts of their personal actions. In these projects, I noticed some race- and class-based variation across my students in their ability and/or willingness to alter their diets. At one point in her report, a Latina student expressed her difficulties with a vegetarian diet because her cultural and familial foods were typically meat-based. I worried further about the class (and race) associations of organic food when a Latino student remarked to me, “Ms. Stapleton, I went to Whole Foods the other day because you’re always talking about how we should eat organic and everything, but I bought a jar of olives and it cost \$8.00, and the only other brown people in the store were workers.” This particular store was in my neighborhood, a racially and socioeconomically diverse section of town, but despite a sizable percentage of Latino residents, I had also observed a predominance of white customers. Was it the expense of the store that was most problematic? After all, the high prices of Whole Foods are notorious (Johnson & Szabo, 2011). Or, was it that eating organic foods was considered a white and/or upper middle class activity?

Slow foods, whole foods, local foods, farmer’s markets, and community-supported agriculture have materialized as grassroots social movements and alternatives to industrialized agriculture. While these are generally promising and well-intentioned endeavours, a number of scholars (e.g., Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2007, 2011; Harper, 2011) have begun to question the lack of attention to issues of race and class within these movements. They argue that this inattention prevents huge percentages of the U.S. population from having access to healthier and more sustainable alternatives. These scholars, for example, have criticized Pollan’s work in general (e.g., Pollan, 2013) for proposing solutions that aim at the individual rather than institutional level and, as a

result, do not serve those for whom money and access are barriers (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2007, 2011). An increasing number of scholars are directly addressing the implications of the whiteness of food movements. Alkon and Agyeman (2011) argue that the food system is not “racially neutral” and that the colourblindness of the food movement needs to be addressed. They suggest that the food movement, as a predominantly white and middle class movement, may be “something of a monoculture” (p. 2), and recommend that it aim to become a “polyculture,” representing more inclusive and diverse perspectives. Guthman (2011) charges the alternative food movement with being colour blind, and discusses the need to expose the whiteness of the movement. She criticizes the patronizing notion held by many white food activists that low-income people—especially those of colour—simply do not understand their food situation. As a female black vegan, Harper (2011) speaks of the struggles that she and other vegans of colour have experienced because the U.S. vegan community is overwhelmingly white. She criticizes the inattention that the vegan/vegetarian community has given to issues of race and insists that the colour blindness rampant within the community is deeply problematic and in need of addressing.

Places to buy foods have also been problematized in terms of race and class by a number of scholars (e.g., Johnson & Szabo, 2011; Slocum, 2007; Zitcer, 2014). Slocum (2007) argues that the whiteness often seen in farmer’s markets can create “white imaginaries” in which these spaces are coded as white, exclusive, and silencing of others. Similarly, Alkon and McCullen (2011) describe the “white farm imaginary” in which farmer’s market shoppers conflate the people who grow their food with the predominantly white people who work as vendors at the markets. Since Latino farm workers do the majority of the labour for the California market they studied, Alkon and McCullen (2011) argue that the invisibility of these workers is especially troubling. Perhaps as a result of this invisibility, the authors note that although buyers often asked about farming practices, they did not inquire about labour practices. Zitcer (2014) points out the unintended exclusion of people of colour and/or those with low incomes by food cooperatives “whereby some practices and people are inadvertently left out in order to create conditions for a strong identification among others with particular ways of being and doing” (p. 2). Johnson and Szabo (2011) interviewed Whole Foods shoppers, and, not unlike the concern voiced by my student, two-thirds of those interviewed were concerned about the high prices and nearly half were aware of the exclusivity of the store because of its high prices. Furthermore, though their study took place in a diverse city (Toronto) and they actively searched for diversity in their respondents, most of the interviewees were white and middle class.

### *Food, Race, and Class in the Environmental Education Literature*

Haluzá-Delay (2013) has noted that “race, power, and culture remain largely unproblematized” (p. 397) in environmental education research. He adds that

“barriers include a weak understanding of the social and cultural positions of minority groups or lack of attention to racialization” (p. 397). Marouli (2002) has further noted that there are few environmental education programs that consider themselves to be “multicultural” in focus. While urban environmental education is growing rapidly as a field among environmental education practitioners, there is much work to be done to improve our awareness of and attention to these important issues within environmental education research. Moreover, as food becomes more prominent in environmental education, we must recognize the important connections of food to culture, race, and/or class.

A few examples in the environmental education literature begin to point in this direction. Crosley (2013) recommends that food justice as a practice could help environmental education to move toward race and class issues. Cutter-McKenzie (2009) examines how cultural practices for recently immigrated populations were supported through a multicultural gardening program. Bruenig (2013) discusses justice and food security issues in her literature review; however, she does not attend to them in her analysis: she interviews students from rural and urban programs, but does not explore students’ race, class, and positionality-based relationships to food or to their responses to education about food.

### A Phenomenological Exploration

To provide an empirical description of identity-based complexities of eating, what follows is a hermeneutic phenomenological account, following the style of van Manen (1990). Phenomenological research aims to capture the essence of human experience related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). This means that “the researchers attend...to what is present or given in awareness” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 41). The method is meant to reject mind and body dualism (Creswell, 2007) and thus is particularly useful for experiences that are visceral. As Polkinghorne (1989) notes: “Experience is a reality that results from the openness of human awareness to the world, and it cannot be reduced to either the sphere of the mental or the sphere of the physical” (p. 42). As part of this method, a researcher selects a phenomenon to examine, reflects on major themes, writes an account, and examines that account (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990). In this case, the phenomenon explored is the experience of eating an identity-laden food. As is often the case with exploratory stages of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007), this is an autobiographical account. I wrote the account while eating the food that I was describing, being attentive to whatever feelings and emotions came to me, without trying to analyze them in the moment. Because phenomenology privileges the senses, it is particularly useful for the experience of eating. I argue that this method can help access the unspoken but felt aspects of identity triggered when eating an identity-significant food.

## *The Account*

*First, it's the smell that hits me like a welcome wave of comfort, whose caresses play with my stomach and pull on my heartstrings. I breathe deeply and can't seem to fill my lungs enough with it; I could smell this all day. The smell is a delightful mixture of sweet, smoky, acidic: almost contradictory smells to be wrapped up in one food. As I take an even deeper breath I cough a little as the vinegar tickles my lungs. I am so excited to eat this food, to taste it, to continue to breathe it in. I am instantly transported to so many reoccurring events I can't possibly single out just one. All the events centre around my favourite place in the world—my granddaddy's farm in Eastern North Carolina—to the farm's kitchen, with lots of family. Even though I am decades older and geographically far away, eating Parker's barbeque instantly takes me back to the core of my paternal family's identity. As I lift this food to my lips, I feel the need to just stop, smell (again, I just can't get enough), close my eyes, and savour. These days this food, only found in one small region of one U.S. state, is so rare for me.*

*One part of me nags the rest as it asks: "Hmm. Should you be eating this since it probably comes from factory raised hogs and is not great for the environment? It takes so much water and grain to raise pork."*

*I attempt to bury that thought for now because eating this food is somehow part of me. In fact, eating it, I at once feel that all the conflicting parts of my identity are, for a moment, blissfully suspended. It is a pleasure to have so much of me simultaneously brought into focus, and I am reminded viscerally of my roots. As I eat it I feel a deep smile coming from somewhere within that doesn't seem to be connected to my face—it's far deeper than that. Maybe my heart is smiling. It tells me that I have family. Lots of family. As an only child this is particularly important to me. It tells me that I have roots, that there is a place in the world where my family has been for generations.*

*The older I get and the more I move around, the more I seem to crave this sense of place. This sense of belonging. Going into a drugstore or a barbeque restaurant and running into someone who knows my family; going to a place where I am introduced as "Gary's" (my father, the oldest of five kids).*

*I know it is just a food, but somehow when I eat it, I am magically transported not just to a place, but to many simultaneous events in a place. So many dinners with the whole family—aunts, uncles, cousins, my grandmother, and granddaddy. Granddaddy. I haven't stopped missing him, even after nearly 10 years. But, when I eat this food, I feel like he is close and I am reminded of all the meals when we ate this together. I feel his strong, calloused hand around mine as he says the blessing before dinner. I see the twinkle in his eye as he teases someone. I hear him tell a story I've heard a few times before.*

*I smell this food, taste it on my tongue, and my senses are overwhelmed. Am I happy or am I full of melancholy and longing?*

*I wish that I could have all the "fixins," too. The cornsticks, the mustard-based, finely chopped slaw. The Brunswick stew, red potatoes, the [some would say*

“overcooked”] green beans with ham. As I eat the barbeque, I also have a sudden and overwhelming desire to drink [sweet] iced tea. But alas, I am in Michigan and the only thing I could fly home in my suitcase was frozen barbeque.

I don't want this to end, but I decide to save some for later. I sigh as I close the remainder away in its white plastic container, thinking that Parker's hadn't changed their containers since I could remember.

I recall years ago when I was an undergraduate and had just become a vegetarian. My parents were struggling with my decision. How could they feed me balanced meals when nearly all of our family's meals involved meat?

As [American] Southerners, even beans and vegetables are cooked with meat, so my parents seemingly wondered not only how could I eat, but who I had become. On my first visit to my grandparents' after becoming a vegetarian, I still remember my dad turning to me with a question that held tremendous significance: “Will you still eat barbeque?”

There was a moment's hesitation as I contemplated the implications of what that might mean.

“Of course.” I found myself saying, “How could I not eat barbeque?”

I witnessed his wave of relief as he heard these words.

No, I was not forsaking my family. Because that's exactly what it would have felt like to my parents and grandparents—forsaking the family. Shunning our food.

I remember a year or two later, when I had come back to the United States from where I was living in West Africa to visit my granddaddy because he had cancer. I was sitting at the kitchen table with my multitude of little cousins, eating barbeque from Parker's, of course.

“Sarah, do they have barbeque in Africa?” one of my little cousins speculatively asked.

“No...well, not like this anyway,” I reply.

I see their eyes widen, as they try to imagine a land with no [Eastern Carolina] barbeque.

I—their perpetually diasporic cousin—wonder what it's like to never be without it.

## Analysis

Because this account is autobiographical, it is important for me to situate relevant aspects of my identity in relation to food. My whiteness gives me a privilege of dexterity in dietary preferences, since no one particular food genre is associated with my ethnic group. Being middle class, I can afford to have choices about the food I eat. As someone white and middle class, making the choice to be a vegetarian is not in itself surprising. However, the norms around vegetarianism vary geographically. As is evident in my account, my familial/cultural roots are in the American South, and being a vegetarian there goes against very strong cultural norms. Indeed, I became a vegetarian in my first year away from the South, while living in the United Kingdom, where vegetarianism was more



acceptable and at a time when many were concerned with mad-cow disease.

Upon emergent thematic coding, several themes from the literature surface within this phenomenological account:

*Food can express and communicate who we are to ourselves and to others* (e.g., Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Greene & Cramer, 2011; Scholliers, 2001). My reaction to eating this food clearly says something about who I am and what is important to me. My family and regional food heritage are important aspects of my identity, a fact that is apparent by my deeply emotional and comforting reaction to eating this food. My choice to become a vegetarian communicated to my family that I was rejecting their way of eating. However, choosing to continue to eat a highly identity-salient food despite the contradiction that it held for me ethically indicates that being a part of my family is at least as important to me as my environmental concerns.

*Food connects us to others and supports group identities* (e.g., Caplan, 1997; Greene & Cramer, 2011; Cosgriff-Hernandez et al., 2011; Karaosmanoglu, 2011). The barbeque in this account reminds me of times with family. Furthermore, this food's association with a particular place fosters connection to that place and people in that place. This connection to place is particularly important given that I am living geographically separated from this place. This particular style of barbeque is also a distinctly regional food, nearly impossible to find elsewhere, so its limited geographical availability fosters a collective regional food identity.

*There is some degree of agency in constructing one's own food narrative* (Caplan, 1997; Bell & Valentine, 1997). Scholliers (2001) points out that "diet and identity are not 'given' or just 'out there' ready to grab...both are interpreted, adapted or rejected according to one's needs, means, and intentions" (p. 4). While an undergraduate, I chose to become a vegetarian as a result of learning and studying ethics. This decision reflected personal agency in my food choices. Different phases of life allow for different levels of agency in food choices (Bell & Valentine, 1997), and being a university student meant that I had more dietary control and choice than when I was living at home. I also expressed agency when I decided that my need to connect with my family in eating this particular food overrode my environmental reasons for not eating meat. In other words, I used agency not only to decide to become a vegetarian, but to define what it meant for *me* to be a vegetarian.

In addition to themes from literature, my account adds the importance of place to food identity. Some attention to place is implicit in the food identity literature; for example, Caplan (1997) has noted that "food is like language—its meaning can shift according to contexts of time and place" (p. 6), and others have noted the salience of ethnic foods to immigrant and other diasporic groups (Fischler, 1988). I suggest that place identity is particularly important for foods, such as Eastern Carolina barbeque, that are not typically available beyond a particular region. If I had access to this style of barbeque in any of the disparate locations where I have lived, perhaps this food would not be nearly so identity-salient for me. But, because it is only available in Eastern Carolina, the food is

strongly representative of my emplaced family and memories.

From my account, it is evident that food is an experience in which sensory cues can be intertwined with emotional responses. Certainly, Eastern Carolina barbeque is a delicious food—as Pollan attests to in his 2013 book, *Cooked*—but when I eat it I am not only reacting to its taste, but to the memories its taste elicits. For me (unlike for Pollan), eating Eastern Carolina barbeque simultaneously is and is not about taste. In this way, the experience of eating an identity-laden food is qualitatively different than the experience of eating a delicious food with no identity affiliation. That said, with this particular food, even Pollan (2013) notes that it is something special. In his statement about eating at a barbeque place a couple of miles from my grandparents' farm, he reflects that, “If a sandwich can be said to have *terroir*, that quality of place that the French believe finds its ways into the best wines and cheeses, this sandwich had it, a sense of place and history you could taste” (p. 46). While I am glad that Pollan recognizes the distinctiveness of this particular food, the sense of place history contained by this food is deeply part of who I am, while he is merely a passing visitor.

My account also demonstrates that food does not need to be home-cooked to be identity-important. The restaurant producing this barbeque is locally owned with only two locations. Nonetheless, it is possible for a chain restaurant—even a fast food chain—to produce identity-salient food. For example, while getting a haircut, a stylist told me about how much she and her toddler enjoyed going to McDonald's because it was their special time together. As a result, her son may associate McDonald's food with his mom and quality time with her.

Reflecting on how race and class may play into my account, it seems important to note how identity-foods may or may not be associated with a particular race and/or class. In this case, Pollan (2013) has noted that barbeque reaches adeptly across the infamous colour line of the American South as a food prepared and enjoyed by generations of East Carolinians, black and white alike. It is also a food that has been quite democratically available to most, regardless of their economic class. Indeed, the most beloved barbeque “restaurants” are typically little more than “hole in the wall” places; what is prized is the meat, not the service or ambiance. Of course, the low price tag of barbeque is unfortunately the result of contemporary factory hog farming prevalent in the region, and the major reason for my conflicted feelings in eating it.

Within my account, there are several identity-based tensions relevant to environmental education. Among them is the struggle between a familial food and a growing awareness about the environmental problems and animal ethics currently associated with that food. A difficult decision is unavoidable: to eat an identity-laden food—complete with environmental and ethical consequences—or abstain and face familial and personal consequences. As an undergraduate, my announcement that I had become a vegetarian caused great consternation in my family. This issue was not limited to barbeque. For example, my granddaddy was a farmer and his gift to his children each year was a portion of a cow he had raised. Meat therefore played a central role in the expression of love

within my family. For these reasons, it was as if, through the seemingly simple act of not eating meat, I was questioning my family's culture.

While this account is limited to my own experience, my story is not unique. Scholliers, in his edited book, *Food, Drink and Identity* (2001), recalls that his decision to stop eating red meat as a teenager forced him to “justify myself again and again, not only to my close relatives but also to a large number of people in various situations” (p. 3). He notes that “[t]his struggle was hard because red meat was highly valued in my immediate and wider milieu (my grandfather had been a butcher), and it had formed part of my family's daily behaviour ever since I could remember” (p. 3). We simply cannot underestimate the power of family orientations around meat when we promote little to no meat consumption. People are not necessarily resistant toward eating less/no meat simply because they like to eat meat; rather, it may be a deeply embedded part of their familial and/or ethnic culture.

### Food for Thought: Implications for Environmental Educators

So what does this mean for environmental educators and researchers? Recognizing the complicated landscape governing food choices and the ways in which this landscape varies for every person is of paramount importance for any environmental education work concerning food. As several scholars have noted, eating sustainably is often framed as merely an individual choice (Guthman, 2007; Weismann, 2015). Weismann (2015) has suggested that this focus on the individual can be problematic for failing to address systemic economic issues that govern and shape available food choices. I agree and add that limiting our focus to individual food choices can also be problematic for failing to address the broader *cultural* contexts surrounding sustainable food choices. We must recognize that “food is a fraught signifier” (Zitcer, 2014, p. 8), and that certain food choices may represent far more than meets the eye. While many individuals do have a degree of agency at various times of their lives about their food choices, these choices are *always* mediated by cultural, familial, and geographic factors.

Another important food aspect to which environmental educators and researchers must attend is that organic food, local food, and vegetarianism/veganism may be embedded with race- and class-based associations. These associations have tremendous implications for teaching and researching about sustainable food options and choices among diverse groups. In environmental education, critically examining race and class associations within alternative food movements might be helpful, since bringing attention to the issue may help individuals of all backgrounds to work toward more inclusive alternative food movements.

Identity is extraordinarily complex and even contradictory, and food choices related to identity, as my account demonstrates, are likely to reflect that complexity. Nonetheless, dietary changes are important and necessary if we are to

become a more sustainable world. To help reconcile this potentially precarious venture, I suggest commencing this work by helping people explore the concept of identity foods, asking them to distinguish between identity foods and non-identity foods, recognizing that not all food adjustments have the same consequences for their identity. Finally, when suggesting dietary changes, we must respect (and not dismiss) the very real identity-related barriers that may stand between individuals and sustainable food choices.

### Notes on Contributor

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