Take Back The Kitchen

A New Agenda for Feminism's Fourth Wave

An Essay by Marguerite Rivage-Seul
Five years ago, when my daughter was a senior at an exclusive women’s college, she entered the school competition for a Watson Fellowship. The award gives graduates a generous stipend to pursue projects of personal interest at the international level. Maggie wanted to study vegetarian cooking with women in their own kitchens in Italy, Morocco and India. She argued that home cooked foods are disappearing in the United States because the fast food industry has replaced home cooking. Her project was to gather knowledge and culinary skills to pass on to her own children and those she would one day teach in the public school classroom.

The first round of interviewing involved several faculty members. One of the deans said to my daughter, “I have trouble with your proposal because McDonald’s makes me a better feminist.” Evidently, the dean meant that the fast food giant had liberated her from kitchen drudgery. Maggie was taken aback by the dean’s comment, but she mustered the strength to argue the credibility of her project by gently reminding her elders that the Alum magazine from their school was about to feature a former graduate who is reviving “slow foods.” The graduate was following the lead of Carlo Petrini, who had begun the Slow Food movement in Italy. Slow food is the antithesis of fast food, and celebrates eating traditional foods that promise health and vitality. Maggie’s arguments fell on deaf ears.

While the failure to win the Watson did not significantly alter my daughter’s life, that moment of truth about food and feminism, captured in the dean’s comment, changed the direction of my own feminist scholarship. From that time on, I have been thinking about the “Mcdonaldization” of feminism; that is, the relationship of the fast food economy to the women’s movement.

This essay will explore the way that the post-World War II women’s movement, in its valiant pursuit of gender justice in the workplace, helped to create the conditions for the corporate takeover of women’s traditional domain—the kitchen. Tragically, an unintended consequence of Second Wave feminism was the usurpation of the kitchen by unbridled growth of the fast food economy. As visionary resistance, the feminist response (that is the Fourth Wave of feminism) must include a movement to take back the kitchen. We need to liberate the kitchen, the domestic world, from the hands of the profit driven fast food industry, and a small number of large corporations controlling the health and well being of our entire planet.

Take Back the Kitchen:
A New Agenda for Feminism’s Fourth Wave*
To fully understand this undermining of genuine feminist movement which respected women’s work in the home, we must go back to World War II. It is vital to recall that women have always been charged with the moral authority in the care of the family. Our work has been to nurture through providing food, medicines, and whatever it takes to ensure the survival of the family. This idea extends to the local community and even the human family across the globe.

In times of war in the United States, women have been the leaders in preserving the food supply, tending to the wounded, and keeping the economy moving. During World War II, we witnessed the appearance of “Rosie the Riveter,” a nickname for the white middle class housewife who left her comfortable home to enter the factories of the war industry. Whether constructing planes or helping to build ships and tanks for men to use in the second inter-capitalist war against Germany and Japan, women had been moved out of the private space of home into the public space of the paid labor. For middle class women who went to work, this often meant a handsome independent income, meals prepared at the work site so that female workers wouldn’t have to worry about cooking when they got home, and community childcare. Consequently, women working in traditional male jobs felt better about themselves. They were often having a good time in the process. However, the fun didn’t last for long.

When the war ended, patriarchal leaders in the United States wanted to send men back to work on assembly lines that had been efficiently operated by female laborers, sometimes more efficiently than their male counterparts. To create a national consensus, the state used advertisement to promote an idea through the media. We need only to watch the documentary “Rosie the Riveter” for a graphic portrayal of this process. It was in the interest of national security for women workers to go home. The film allows us to witness the use of government propaganda to entice women to return to full time domestic activity.

Rosie left her job. She went home to produce babies and gourmet meals. Knowing that this might be boring, media taught women that life could be more interesting if we focused on interior design, and on cooking elaborate, gourmet meals. Dining rooms replaced kitchen tables because more elaborate feasts would require more formality. Additionally, it took more time to prepare fancy meals. As a result, the cooks had less time to reflect on the way their lives had been changed since vacating their jobs.

Yet the memory of Rosie the Riveter died hard. While some women found their moral authority in raising families, cooking, and house cleaning, it was not enough for others. Betty Freidan labeled women’s ennui as “the problem that has no name.” This undercurrent in the white middle class eventually gave rise to the second wave of feminism in the United States, resulting in structural changes in the workplace. New doors opened for women—from corporate offices to doctoral programs in universities.
As formally educated women went to work, they left the kitchen behind. It did not remain unoccupied for long. As the U.S. rebooted itself for postwar domestic activity, the food industry took a giant leap in production by creating convenience foods and kitchen appliances that made cooking easier. Freezers became affordable so that women could store prepared dinners, frozen vegetables, and meats—all making it easier to move away from cooking with fresh foods. It wasn’t long before McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken replaced local diners.

The fast food industry worked hard to promote a new food culture. Using advertisement—in newspapers, in women’s magazines, on the radio and television—they talked people into experimenting with highly starchy, salty, sugary, oily foods that had a “fun taste.” Vegetables, grains, fruits, and meats began to taste the same as desserts instead of strong, plain food. As a result, a craving for sugar and starch replaced the body’s desire for nutritious, healthy food—for whole grains, fruits and vegetables—thus undermining everyone’s health. In addition, poor people, like their privileged counterparts, were watching TV, reading magazines, and listening to the radio. Driving past drive-in restaurants, they were being educated into the fast food culture. Indeed, the fast food culture promoted the idea of a classless society since everyone, rich or poor, would eat the same diet. Once you’ve tasted a Big Mac and French fries, few want to go back to whole grains, legumes, greens and broccoli—the kinds of food that actually promote health instead of disease, or diabetes. This is what Francine Kaufman in Hungry Planet calls “diabesity.”

Within a fifty or sixty year period, the national habit of eating fast foods has almost totally replaced the basic diet of healthy food. This explains why there is a health crisis today. Importantly, recent Center for Disease Control data shows that one in three children born in 2000 will have diabetes.

In fact, the exodus of white middle class women from the kitchen was very bad news for poor working women. The disdain for kitchen labor, an underlying value of Second Wave feminism, was instrumental in the creation of our current fast food culture. Even though the majority of women earn lower incomes and have never really left the kitchen, it is the dominant class, what bell hooks calls “dominator culture,” that altered the way we eat in the United States. The food industry, the agribusinesses, and the media carry the message of the dominant class. Today over 75% of women are working outside the home. Yet it is only a small percentage of those women who have the discretionary income, or luxury, of removing themselves from their work in the kitchen, even when hamburgers are 99 cents at McDonald’s. So the bad news for feminism is that most women still have a double shift; and most of the food prepared or purchased on the second swing is not healthy.
Let us not forget that the fast food industry entered the portal of the kitchen because of the growing affluence of the U.S., which allowed for an unprecedented level of consumption. With the success of the postwar economy came a large middle class that could afford to eat out and pay more for processed foods. Prior to 1950, however, most people’s economic circumstances required that they dine on simple grains like corn, rice, wheat, and legumes, including lentils and beans of all varieties. Family gardens were common, especially in the rural areas. Traditionally, when people are poor, they go to the bottom of the food chain—to grains, beans, and leafy green vegetables to feed themselves. We know from works like Frances Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet* that when legumes are combined with corn, wheat, or brown rice, these simple foods make complete protein for the body. In other words, the human body does not have to take in animal protein if our meals are well balanced. More importantly, this vegetarian lifestyle is the traditional diet of the world’s majority of people. In Appalachia, where I have lived for several decades, the traditional diet is pinto beans, collard greens and cornbread, milled from corn. Throughout Africa, the traditional diet is sadza (corn meal), collards and peanuts. In India, people eat dal (lentils) and rice. Dried fish, chicken, and eggs complement this basic diet when people can afford to move up the food chain. In the United States, cookbooks from WWII contain special wartime supplements with recipes for these simpler, strong vegetarian foods. Ironically, in dire times, healthy food preparation has been the norm.

Today, the bad news is that the toxic eating habits of what was once a privileged few in the USA have found their way into the entire global system of food production and consumption. In other words, agribusiness and the fast food economy have almost completely infiltrated Planet Earth so that poor and working class people in the U.S. and in poor countries are finding themselves playing by a set of rules determined largely by food and chemical corporations.

To make sense of this claim, let’s take a retrospective look at the economic period after WWII. It provides an important historical example. Then, the national project of the government was to transform its very profitable war industry into other robust forms of money making ventures. The food industry provided lucrative potential. With its capacity to grow vast quantities of corn, wheat and rice, the United States saw itself as the “bread basket of the world.” In the early fifties, farmers began to produce more grains than people in the U.S. could consume. The result was a surplus of corn, wheat, and rice so huge that farmers were hard pressed to find a market to sell the leftovers. When President Eisenhower issued an executive order for the Agricultural Surplus Disposal Act of 1954, it allowed U.S. farmers to sell grains to third world countries at discounted prices. The U.S. government paid farmers subsidies for the crops they produced so the farmers could then afford to sell their grains below market value in other countries. Poor countries were allowed to buy the discounted grains in their local currencies, thus saving the high cost of currency exchange. Those local currencies were then re-invested into factories and other economic development projects throughout the third world. For a time, the
farming industry in the United States was the clear winner in this arrangement. For example, when corn was sold at artificially low prices in Mexico, consumers gravitated to the cheaper corn from the United States, leaving the Mexican farmers without a market to sell their own produce. Unable to sustain their losses, Mexican farmers were forced to abandon their farms and search for work in industrial mega-cities of Mexico and the United States. In this process, Mexico has become dependent on the U.S. to supply its most basic food—corn—because U.S. surplus disposal in Mexico ruined its domestic corn industry.

The Agricultural Surplus Disposal Act created a system in which rich countries dominated weaker economies in controlling the most basic survival need—food to eat. For sixty years, the Two-thirds World has been victimized by a post-World War II strategy that privileged the U.S. market in the sale of grains. This same strategy, first deployed in other countries, also broke the backs of the American farmer, especially the small farmer. This had dire consequences for women who were major food producers. Just as men were encouraged to abandon the farm and sustainability, women of all classes were told to get out of the kitchen. No more canning, no more healthy bread making. The culture of cheap, unwholesome, processed food had colonized the American diet. Truly there can be no meaningful, lasting feminist transformation of our culture without a deep understanding of the politics of food and of women’s work as nurturing home makers.

It is essential that feminist thinkers examine the politics of the global food economy. On the one hand, we have a deplorable global condition of poverty with direct links to food production in the United States. The fast food industry has the controlling interest in the food lives of most Americans. How else could they have “McDonaldized” feminism? At the same time, the country producing the most food has the highest rate of food-related diseases. Overall, this should be a red flag to the women’s movement. Many Third Wave feminists are busy reclaiming their body rights to self expression, yet paying no attention to the reality that “we are what we eat.” Feminists who understand that the “McDonaldization” of feminism has endangered the health and survival of humankind, must be leaders in the fourth feminist wave. We need to theorize resistance and we need to reclaim the kitchen—both the process of food production and home cooking—so that food is once again life nurturing and not life destroying.

Our theory can begin with the cultivation of awareness and basic suggestions for critical interventions. Resisting corporate food culture in the United States can take place in many different ways, from small acts to very big ones. First off, we must remember that food is regarded in the United States in a very individualistic way. We drive through fast food restaurants, often eating in the car so we won’t be late for our next appointment. Dining with other people is the exception rather than the rule. One strategy for resisting individualism in capitalist food culture would be to begin dining with people on a more frequent basis. If I eat in community once a week, then perhaps I might do it twice a
week. If it is difficult to imagine taking time to eat with others, then why not try eating with someone else once every two weeks? Invite a friend out to eat. Or invite that person home. Encourage the friend to bring a dish. Proven strategy for undoing capitalist food culture is the organized potluck which easily turns into a fun, community feast. Slowing down our lives long enough to share food and fellowship communally will quickly erode any collective co-dependence on fast food. There are myriad ways we can begin to collectively resist food culture in the United States.

My own efforts to resist fast food culture begin with the recovered memory of eating together as a family of eleven children. I began with the ritual of cooking with another family every Wednesday night. My best friend and I organized our families to come to the dining room table in our homes, once a week to share an excellent meal. We took turns cooking. Our kids were the same age. They went to school and church together. Wednesday night was always a party. We ate together. We prayed together. We took turns making really nice foods. We all knew that on Wednesday nights we could count on one really good home cooked meal, shared with family and friends. This took place for five years when the kids were in grade school and high school. Looking back, our Wednesday night parties are among the best memories of growing up my children treasure. During these five years of community cooking, I was engaged in a profound feminist practice. I did not know just how profound it was until I began to examine the loss of healthy cooking, of healthy eating, of the way in which fellowship with food creates caring community.

As I look forward to a healthy planet, I see that “reclaiming the kitchen,” that is, wresting control of intimate acts of eating from corporate fast food giants, asks more from us than making community meals. If we want to ride a fourth wave of feminism, we need to take the positive steps to change the structures that distort our food consumption. How do we take back the kitchen? As a culture, we need to create new forms of eating that can be marketed to everyone. This is obvious in the organic food industry in the United States where supermarkets like Bread and Circus, Whole Foods, and Wild Oats sell foods that depend on organic farmers. These newer food chains work to promote local foods. Additionally, there is a growth of communities that pledge themselves to eat only their local foods. A good example is the “Locavores,” a group of people with a commitment to eat only foods that are grown in a one hundred mile radius of their homes.

The “Locavores” embody the big action that is required to fuel a new revolution to reclaim healthy eating. At the same time, people like the “Locavores” are reclaiming community because they often share vegetable gardens with neighbors. They are reoccupying the kitchen because, in order to eat food from the garden, people have to live in their kitchens where the local food is prepared for consumption. Reclaiming the kitchen as the Fourth Wave feminist agenda will happen when we come together to problem-solve as groups and not as individuals. What am I going to eat tonight transforms itself into what are we going to eat tonight.
There are models all over the United States of people intentionally eating together again. For example, Pilgrims’ Place in Claremont, California, brings together hundreds of retired missionaries who break bread together every day. It is a great place. And a great process. Pilgrims’ Place invites peace activists to talk to each other across the table every day. Fellowship creates fun.

That is what we have to do. We have to find fun in eating together once again. It is not fun anymore to go to McDonald’s. That has been over for a long time. We must create places that are enjoyable. We must decorate our kitchens by putting colorful eating utensils—like inexpensive Fiesta Ware—on our tables, inviting people to make one thing to create the meal, to create the feast that we share together.

The difficulty we face in sustaining this process arises if we do not also liberate our imaginations. Reclaiming the kitchen entails reclaiming our imaginations as well. We cannot imagine alternatives if all we see around us are the products of a fast food culture or a little bit of expensive, organic eating. We need to go outside our culture to find alternatives to the way we live, and to the way of life that we are currently imposing on the rest of the world. Those utopian pockets exist. They are thriving in areas of what the U.S. calls the Third World.

Argentina is a first example. When its economy collapsed in 2001, citizens of that country realized that they were on their own, and that they had to meet their basic needs, especially the need for food. In this crisis mode, people found that creating community kitchens helped to feed a lot of hungry people. One hundred women at a time worked in kitchens for one or two shifts, while others reclaimed old factories, watched children, or took care of the elderly. Everybody contributed. In this economically fragile context, people knew that they could show up at community kitchens and enjoy a full meal as part of this cooperative, life-sustaining adventure.

Something similar has been happening in Brazil with the Landless Movement. Throughout the country, citizens have gathered to denounce homelessness. They have created their own encampments and their own parallel governments. They operate outside the formal economy. They have no confidence in the government, even though their president Lula da Silva comes from the working class. Landless people have written off their formal leader, seeing him as a sell-out to the traditional power holders. As a result, they have found communal ways of taking care of each other, including community kitchens. Moreover, women living at the bottom rung of the economic ladder have found ways to keep their dignity through cooking. When they are preparing food for others, not just their children, but for their neighbors and others who are struggling in the non-formal economy, they are contributing to the well-being and survival of the planet. They are claiming their moral authority in the care of the human family and strengthening their personal self-esteem.

All of this—in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere—represents a huge undertaking. Yet these examples provide us a way to hope. We are called to act responsibly in this age of environmental destruction. (We only
need to watch the Al Gore film “Inconvenient Truth” to know that this is a very scary time to be on Planet Earth.) Anything and everything we can do to live closer to the land, to return to our most basic foods, will not only restore health, but will engender us to have more compassionate and just relations to the world community. And when we do, we know that we will be in the company of many people— maybe the world’s majority— who still, because of their own difficult economic circumstances, are eating at the very bottom of the food chain. With the exercise of our “ecological imaginations” we will envision our world-wide feminist movement whose leadership emanates from the community kitchens of poor women.

There’s more. As we become re-sensitized to the food we eat, the agenda for the Fourth Wave of feminism will unfold. This work will not be gender specific this time around. Everyone must eat. As men and women together, we become more concerned about where our food comes from, whether it is genetically modified, and what kind of pesticides are on our fruits and vegetables, antibiotics in milk and cheese, etc. Instead of becoming hopeless, we can all use our most powerful weapon, which is mostly still in the hands of women: our power to shop. Consumers drive the food industry. When we organize to insist that foods be labeled “genetically modified” when they are, and that “organic” food be really organic, we will witness a seismic shift in the way we eat. Grains will become healthy again. Fruits and vegetables will come from local growers who will understand that organic farming is more efficient (and profitable) than chemical agriculture. Chemical companies like Monsanto will be threatened, its suicide seeds rendered powerless. Our children will be stronger. They might even learn to cook as we all find ourselves back in the kitchen, having fun. This time around, the entire family will join in making the feast. All of this is the work of the Fourth Wave of feminism. When we liberate ourselves from the imperialist, patriarchal control of the corporate food industry, we will already recognize that the task may be self determining: to be free is to take control over what we eat and drink.

This Fourth Wave of feminism promises a real end to poverty. It will also herald in a new way of working. Then, Juliet Shor’s “overworked American” will be a distant memory. There will be no millennial goals to end poverty because women (and men) will have already led the charge to take back the kitchen. Karl Marx’s vision of a society where people fish in the morning, read literature in the afternoon and create feasts (and maybe some philosophizing) in the evening, will have finally triumphed over the savage corporate capitalism that characterizes our current eating culture and its patriarchal control of the world.

*The footnotes for this essay are not included in this copy.