

Book Review of Beth A. Dixon. (2018). *Food justice and narrative ethics: reading stories for ethical awareness and activism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1350155206 US\$39.95, 192 pp.

Reviewed by Gabrielle Hobbs. Email: [ghobbs "at" pdx.edu](mailto:ghobbs@pdx.edu)

Addressing issues within the food system of the United States can be a daunting task. Author Beth A. Dixon, a Professor of Philosophy at State University of New York, Plattsburgh, outlines a roadmap towards action for the reader in *Food justice and narrative ethics: reading stories for ethical awareness and activism*. With a practical approach and self-described "travelogue", she empowers individuals to transform the food system through the value of storytelling. Through philosophical analysis, a series of case studies, and personal narratives, Dixon calls for the creation of what she terms *food justice narratives*. Dixon insists that these narratives must be factually correct and be communicated through the lens of fairness, honesty and justice. The book provides a thorough assessment of the master narratives within the U.S. food system that often place unfair burdens on undeserved individuals or communities.

What a storyteller chooses to share has the power to change lives, and Dixon encourages the reader to uncover the "counterstory": a narrative that addresses structural injustices. The counterstory allows for a new and more accurate narrative that includes contextual details. She writes that "By learning what is unjust the individual can identify what policy, laws and structural conditions should change" (p. 3).

Dixon writes that the steps towards action are publicly identifying those who are contributing to structural injustices and demanding they make changes. This can be achieved by educating oneself about the existing injustices in the food system through memoirs, documentary films and ethnographies. Dixon argues that individuals who are already involved in food access and advocacy should ensure that the narratives being told are just. Entry points include getting involved with organizations who are already addressing poverty, policy and food sovereignty. The range of concepts Dixon weaves together throughout the book give her readers the terminology needed to create and perpetuate accurate perceptions of common narratives, the stories that are not often told within larger contextual circumstances. Other terms discussed are: the "ethical novice" who must develop moral discernment of the ethical concepts in a narrative, the "moral fault narrative" a common narrative that misplaces the larger systemic failures on one's moral standing, and the "moral architecture" of our culture which addresses the public policies and corporate actors that affect iniquities within our society.

In Chapter 1, "Ethical Perception", Dixon explores the foundations of food justice narratives, drawing on Aristotle's concept of "ethical perception." Building ethical perception is an important part of an individual's path towards moral agency and the development of effective narratives. When moral agency is nurtured then one can begin to see where there are injustices and move into action. The three key components to an effective food justice narrative are: *particularity*, revealing what things look like from the perspective of the person trying to nourish themselves; *accuracy*, that the narrator's internal biases do not infringe upon the facts of the situation; and emotional responsiveness, meaning the narrator can educate the audience using stories that help the audience respond emotionally to ethically important issues.

Chapter 2, "Developing Narrative Skill", presents the idea that an individual begins as a "moral novice" and through lived experience gains expertise, suggesting that teaching moral rules can be a more abstract process of learning through practical life experiences. This chapter also discusses the role of epistemic skills and its relation to reading food justice narratives. Is it possible for the viewer to be able to separate their held beliefs from the facts of story they are being told? This is not an easy task, and the role of the storyteller is to facilitate that discernment. Uncovering epistemic skill is supported by a fable at the end of the chapter called "The Hippopotamus at Dinner" (Lobel, 1980), which can encourage conversation about moral discernment and ethical particulars at any age.

In Chapter 3, "Food Insecurity: Hungry Women", the reader is primed to pay close attention to the narrative told by non-governmental organizations. The storyteller has a lot of power in this situation. What is the goal or mission of the organization? What distinguishes between charity and food justice? These questions are complicated in the NGO sector. This is due to the relationship between large corporations and the charities they support. "Since nonprofit funding organizations are often supported by surplus capital that is the result of

wealth acquired at the expense of low-wage workers, one might wonder whether or not this contradiction is a permanent and intractable problem about nonprofit funding organizations" (Kohl-Arenas, 2016, p. 91). This reality makes addressing root causes all the more challenging, although Dixon remains optimistic, saying that we can rewrite the call to charity.

Chapter 4, "Rewriting the Call to Charity", develops this point. It is an examination of food justice and hunger relief advocates, suggesting that their partnership is what's needed to create lasting impacts for hunger relief. This chapter also examines how collective policy disadvantage affects individuals' ability to support themselves. This is where an effective narrative from hunger relief organizations is most important; they can capture larger systemic issues and inspire volunteers and ordinary citizens to build alliances with religious groups, unions, cooperatives and local food policy councils to address systemic inequities (p. 89). The chapter also centers a case study of "The Hunger Project", a global organization that showcases woman's success stories from skill training on their website. The message is "*sustainable* progress in overcoming hunger and poverty" (p. 86).

Chapter 5, "Farmworkers: It's Ugly Here" is an in-depth look at farm labor and the lived experience of migrant farmworkers. There are two master narratives that are common in the story told about migrant farmworkers. First is the belief that migration is voluntary, and secondly, that oppression is natural. By addressing these narratives as false and producing a counterstory, the narrative agent has the opportunity to change the oppressive master narrative. Dixon also shares two case studies which give power to "good" food justice narratives. These immersive stories take the blame away from the individual and bring societal ills into view quite vividly.

Chapter 6, "Obesity, Responsibility, and Situated Agency", addresses the damaging moral fault narrative with regard to weight gain. This is the idea that individuals are solely to blame for their relationship to food and the condition of their bodies. This view and master narrative completely disregards the reality that we live in a society where obesity is owed primarily to external conditions such as a "toxic" food environment, poverty, social institutions, public policy and the corporate food industry (p. 113). To validate this sentiment Dixon uses a case study of the documentary film, *Fed Up* (Soechtig, 2014) to illustrate how a film's counter story can be successful at dismantling a common false narrative.

Food Justice and Narrative Ethics: reading stories for ethical awareness and activism is highly recommended for anyone who wants to critically approach food injustices and the oppressive systems supporting them. The reader will learn how to decipher whether a narrative promotes band-aid solutions or root causes. This book reframes common master narratives and allows the reader to think in whole systems, as Dixon writes, "We will not formulate political, institutional, and sustainable policy solutions to hunger by focusing only on an individual person's accidental tragedies of living" (p. 137). This book is an important tool for educating students, philosophers, policymakers, volunteers and community members. Those studying political ecology may find it useful as it addresses the food system and the intersection between politics, people and the earth through food justice. Where many books on large scale issues focus on problems and offer far-off solutions, Dixon invites her readers to feel that positive change is within reach.

References

- Kohl-Arenas, E. 2016. *The self-help myth: how philanthropy fails to alleviate poverty*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Lobel, A. (1980). *Fables*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Soechtig, S. (2014). *Fed Up*. Documentary. Radius-TWC.
- The Hunger Project. (n.d.) Stories of Success. www.thp.org/our-work/stories-of-success/

Gabrielle Hobbs is a graduate student studying sustainable food systems at Portland State University, USA.