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Mobile Eating: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: Over 80 percent of North Americans regularly eat in the car, yet neither mobility literature nor expanding discussions of food cultures focus on the practice. Two studies shed light on eating in the car. First, North American's distinct, dynamic, and embedded mobile food infrastructure is outlined via discussion of noteworthy innovations – from the 19th century dining car to the 21st century drive thru – that food entrepreneurs constructed to facilitate eating on the go. Second, four exploratory focus groups investigate the meanings and practices drivers associate with eating in the car. Together findings suggest that eating in the car is compromised by the demands of accelerating modernity. Framing eating in the car as simply another facet of an obesity crisis, as culinary preference, or personal choice and responsibility limits full understanding of the cultural anxieties, environmental and health risks surrounding this widespread food practice.

Keywords: eating while driving, mobility, convenience, fast food, modernity, North American culture

Introduction

One factor little discussed either in the mobility literature or expanding discussions of food cultures is that the vehicle is a primary locus for dining in North America. Eating in the car is a common and habitual practice: 86 per cent of US citizens report they regularly eat and drink in the moving car (National Safety Administration 2012). Indeed, after home and work, the car is the third most common site of eating (Hamrick 2011). Drivers consume anywhere between 11 to 20 percent of meals while driving (Herbst 2007; Gardyn 2002). Yet, these measures do not address how people make sense of eating in the car or how they practice mobile eating in everyday life (Ferdinand et al. 2014). The following two-part exploration takes up these concerns.

People's sense, and practice, of eating in the car intertwine with a distinct mobile food infrastructure. Beginning with the 19th century dining car, food entrepreneurs devised means to feed a mobile population. A cuisine dedicated to portability, timeliness, and profit emerged. Predicated on a corporate model and massive economies of scale, the cuisine spread along transportation corridors. A mobile food infrastructure distinguishes North American architecture and culture. Four exploratory focus groups sought to illuminate some of the everyday interpretations associated with the mobile food infrastructure. We asked 20 drivers how they made sense of and perform eating in the car. The argument asserted is that perspectives that view eating in the car as individual preference and choice limit understanding of the practice.

The Mobile Food Infrastructure

Transportation and nationhood are married in North America. Rail, the first motorized mass transportation, supported Canadian and U.S. confederation and modernization. Rail company's, in the 19th century launched public relations campaigns inviting Europeans to settle in the US, populate the Midwest, and increase domestic rail travel (Piasecki, 2000). Rail held the promise of tying together a country that had been divided by civil war. Rail tied east to west coasts forging Canadian federation. Movement intertwined with potent national ideals, such as freedom and social advancement. Speaking of the US context, Jackson (2008) discusses how modernity became fused with mobility: 'To not be on the go is to be stuck in the past, to be unforward in a country forged on the myth of constantly moving Westward' (p. 33).

A mobile food infrastructure followed mass transportation lines. We use the term mobile food to highlight the role of mobility in shaping a distinctive North American foodway. While fast food is a more commonly used term, it stresses timeliness, and quickness. Yet,

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fast food belies the origins of eating on the go slow food service. George Pullman's dining car, launched in 1867, was the first plank of a modern mobile food infrastructure. Instead of hopping off the train, running to a rail side café with 300 other passengers, eating quickly to catch the departing train; dining cars provided access to food while in motion. Pullman named his first dining cars Southern, Tredmont, and Delmonico. Delmonico co-advertised the elite New York restaurant commissioned to cater dining car food. Pullman served a fresh food menu, encompassing several courses, and an extensive wine list, served on fine Limoges china. Advertisers represented meals as luxurious still lives. The ornate dining cars modeled after European salons encouraged formal, leisurely eating. Pullman Porters, black men, many of whom were freed slaves attended the tables. Pullman hired black men for service positions. Tips supplemented their low wages. Attentive porters bolstered the white middle class travelers' sense of self-importance and racial superiority. Required to 'smile for miles' the porter appeared happy in his work, glossing over racial and class inequalities.

Travellers chose the dining car over packing foods from home or eating at train station cafés. Luxury dining cars turned low profits and had to be subsidized by rail owners. The buffet car spread, nevertheless, because those rail companies that did not include one saw middle class travellers migrate towards competitors who did. As historian Amy Richter (2005) notes, female travellers constructed the dining car as a domestic space, normalizing eating while moving. Dining cars thus contributed to food tourism. Eating soothed the boredom and discomfort of modern travel. Rail, faster than canal boat and horse, restricted body movement in new ways. The dining car's quixotic mix of fine food, theatricality, and racialized personal service provided a pleasant distraction from the tedium of modern travel. According to cultural historian Sarah Gibson, in so doing it 'disavows the limitations of time and space' (2007, 207).

The dining car dug grooves in the trajectory of mobile food. Pullman left an estate in 1897 worth $135 million (over $3.5 billion today), in part because of the low wages he paid for mobile food workers. Later food entrepreneurs continued the practice. Second, dining cars chipped away at traditional eating patterns of three home-made meals consumed at a stationary table. Train schedules called people to the table. Dining car meals were made available upon departure and withdrawn at travelers' terminus statons. As more people entered and exited the train, food availability stretched across day and night. Short train trips encouraged quick service and quick eating. Mobility shaped the episodic, continual, relative rapid, solo dining patterns identified as distinctly North American (Fischler & Masson. 2008). Pullman's dining car built public trust, and expectation, that sustenance was always available away from home, freeing them from forward planning meals when traveling. Hunger would no longer halt North America's mobility.

Entrepreneurs reworked the mobile food infrastructure in the 20th century when automobiles became the dominant mode of transportation. According to John Urry (2006) the quintessential car commodity shaped the modern marketplace. Expanding automobile sales inspired other sectors to replicate Henry Ford's lead and harness mass production, standardization, technology and labour efficiencies. Economies of scale lowered prices and sustained volume sales. American marketing associated mass consumption with marketplace democracy. Marketers linked automobile ownership with boundless opportunity (Cohen, 2003).

Advertisers in the 1920s and 1930s, who framed automobiles as a mode of escape from the crowds and poor air of the city, also associated cars with picnic baskets. Picnic baskets commonly appeared snuggled in the back seat of the spacious autos. Another popular tableaux depicted mother unloading pie and roast chicken from a basket atop a gingham blanket, which served as a table. In the bucolic background father, children and a gleaming car arced around mother and her homemade food. Advertising historian Roland Marchand (1986) recognized this 'family circle' as a recurrent symbol of U.S. advertisers connoting modernity and the power and promise of the nuclear family. The car and the picnic romanticized nature while celebrating a fun, wholesome family mealtime. Still, people did not eat food in the car.

Between 1930 and 1950 American entrepreneurs applied mass production techniques to deliver food to a mobile workforce. The legacy of George Pullman's dining car haunted early food culture. According to Witzel, 'as much as the American diners desperately tried to shake off the railroad connections, designers kept incorporating train like features into their restaurant cars' (2006, 77). Yet, instead of white glove service and slow cooked meals, speed of food production and cheapness of ingredients became the mandate of the sector. Early American diners found the dining car design enabled servers to move quickly among customers stationed in rows of fixed booths. As a symptom of the accelerating pace of a mobile culture, scenes in the diner feature commonly in Hollywood films.

The diner settled around a unique menu, which managed to meet the economic requirement of volume sales and expectation for rapid food service. Diner owners

preferred frying and deep-frying foods, for these are among the quickest cooking techniques. A menu of hand-foods, quick to eat and portable became the prototype fast food, including hamburgers, fried chicken, chips, and soda. Carbonated water and syrup produced an instant soft drink with an effervescence that made it a lively alternative to water or lemonade. Extremely cheap to produce soda became the virtuous alternative to alcohol in the prohibition era. Plentiful and cheap potatoes rendered in fat became tasty french fries. Ground beef was at this time, over-produced thus cheap. It shaped easily into uniform sizes reducing cooking time while delivering predictability (Ritzer, 2008). Colonel Sanders applied mass production technique to the production of fried chicken. The standardized menu required few skills to produce, a point companies made to justify paying low wages. Ongoing efforts sought to replace labour with technology. The sector also proved stubbornly resistant to unionization. (Ritzer, 2008).

The hot, cheap, hand foods became widely available and convenient, thus a powerful alternative to making, transporting and eating cold sandwiches from home. After a short wait in line, people acquired a palatable, calorie dense meal for little money. The food was quick to eat, increasing the amount of time spent on other activities like work. The food was designed for transport. Served in disposable boxes, wrappers and bags and eaten by hand away from the table, mobile food transformed traditional rituals, and manners of the table associated with a modern civilizing process [Elias, 1939/2000]. The use of packaging enabled food producers to forgo the costs of cleaning dishware or utensils. The Styrofoam cup is quintessentially North American. The onus of paper packaging disposal fell on the consumer and the environment. The drive for portable food contributed to a distinctive material culture.

By the 1950s quick service restaurateurs reached out to an increasingly mobile population with the drive-in, a series of covered parking spots arranged as a runway jutting out from a restaurant. Customers parked, selected food from a posted menu, and communicated orders to 'car hops'. Trained to hook a tray of food to the car window in a prompt, friendly and functional manner, drive-in staff nailed another important plank in the mobile food infrastructure by relieving customers from the need to get out of their cars. The large pool of postwar teenagers became a preferred labour source for the drive-in restaurant. Owners benefited from teen labours' acceptance of low wages, compliance, as well as the youthful glow and energy they brought to the restaurant's brand. Young people also comprised the majority of customers, as the drive in became a popular hang out and dating venue. The car provided escape from parental control. Mobile food was an affordable alternative to the social demands of the home cooked family meal. The drive-in therefore helped to normalize eating in the car for the large and influential baby boomer generation.

In 1980s, the drive-thru eclipsed the drive-in. Studies suggested consumers began to put a price on their consumption time (Allon 2011, 490). Research participants 'assign an implicit value to waiting in the drive-thru queue that amounts to many times the pretax U.S. wage'. Based upon the research insight that consumers rewarded fast service, restaurants competed to reduce food delivery time. Speed of delivery became the rally cry for an industry subscribed to the maxim: 'for every seven-second reduction in total service time, sales will increase by 1% over time' (Allon 2011, 490). Drive thrus, which passed food to consumers as they rolled by in cars, expanded. By 2012 the average drive-thru transaction time was 2.8 minutes (Oches 2012, par. 5). By 2013 70 percent of all US fast food purchases went out the drive -thru window. The drive thru was crucial to linking the mobile food infrastructure and eating in the car. Dilivering food directly into a moving car coincides with the rise of eating while driving.

Automotive designers in the 1980s found cup holders increased sales, thus they became a permanent feature in North American cars. Over-time cupholders became numerous, more secure and large enough to accommodate supersized fast food drinks. According to Peters and Peters (2002) the cupholder aided the socialization of eating in the car: 'It can be argued that consumers wanted cup holders in automobiles and this led to one-arm driving while drinking the beverage, which in turn led to eating while driving'. The cup holder is not a universal want. In Japan and Italy car designers exclude cup holders. Distinct food cultures in these countries render cup-holders nonsensical. Yet, in North America automobile makers have designed some of the most elaborate accommodations to eating on the go than anywhere in the world. Designers flattened consoles to create make shift tables. Mini vans with coolers sold more rapidly than those without.

As the centrality of the automobile in everday life intensified driving ceased to be a viable choice. Car ownership positively correlates with gaining and maintaining employment. Many work from their cars (e.g. taxi and truck drivers, sales personnel, police, drivers, sales personnel, police). A distinct material landscape is structured around mobility -- suburbs, highways, garages, roadside service stations, driveways, and parking lots – all of which are discussed at length in the mobility

literature (Squires 2002, OECD 2007). The dominance of the automobile contributes to the withering of alternative modes of transportation in North America. Less than 12% of the population uses public transportation, walks or rides bikes to get around (Exisa et al. 2012, 346). Alternative modes of transpiration receive a fraction of the governmental and financial support for highways. Today 8 in 10 people own cars and 78% drive alone. '[T]he average numbers of miles Americans drive annually increased 80 percent in the past twenty years' (Jackson 2008, 34). In urban centers people spend on average 80 minutes a day in the car (Exisa et al. 2012, 347). Car time is devoted less to leisure than commuting to work, undertaking numerous short trips between different activities, waiting in traffic or looking for a parking space.

Purveyors of food reach out to commuters who spend large parts of their day in their cars away from home. In a pioneering essay, Freund and Martin (2008) argue fast cars and fast food became fused in the U.S.:

> For both, the Fordist, assembly line was foundational. Both thrive in motorized urban sprawl. Both share an energy and land use intensity, which in recent decades has accelerated. The growing intensity and scale of the fast car/fast foods mode of consumption is driven by capitalism's dynamic of accumulation, exemplified by its tendency to overproduction. (Freund & Martin, 2008: 319)

As the number of cars on the road doubled since the 1950s, the availability of food along transportation corridors became extensive. The 'convenient' food sector assumed 30% of the domestic restaurant trade. Convenience stores with cold and hot road snacks expanded. Gas stations increased food offerings. Fast food brands, convenience stores and gas stations amalgamated instead of competing, resulting in hybrid outlets. The major fast food brands, orchestrating numerous franchise, entered economically deprived neighborhoods. Immense economies of scale brought success where smaller food providers failed. A small number of brands control the estimated 200,000 US fast food outlets that shape a distribution system with a layered response to the demands of mobile eaters. And unlike the dining car, mass produced mobile food was profitable, assuring its stature.

By the 21st century, the ubiquity of fast food provoked popular criticism of the mobile food culture. Eric Schlosser, highly influential bestseller *Fast Food Nation*, carped that 'clusters of fast food joints seem to repeat themselves, Burger Kings, Wendy's, and McDonald's, Subways, Pizza Huts, and Taco Bells' reoccur endlessly across North America making it difficult to distinguish one part of the landscape from another (2001, p. 313). Schlosser's lament tipped off of a revolt against fast food which spread through books, magazines, documentaries, films, video games, advertisements, blogs and social media. Labour critics wondered why fast food workers wages remained so low in a sector making $160 million in profits in 2010. As fast food rose to account for and estimated 12% of the total caloric intake of US citizens, the sector also became embroiled in the 'globesity' pandemic. (Guthrie et al. in Jabs 2006). According to Kline the risks to health and environment of constantly eating processed foods emerged as a moral panic which reached its most fervent pitch in media coverage repeatedly criticizing fast food marketers for promoting unhealthy diets to hapless children (Kline 2011).

The promotional push to sell cars in American remains unabated, despite automobile production moving off shore. In the first quarter of 2014, cars accounted for 17% of the total US advertising spend, a figure that dwarfs all other promotional budgets around the world (Kantar Media Reports, 2014). Marketers continue to construct cars as modes of freedom and escape from the drudgery of late modernity. Depictions of the lone driver replaced the family circle. Contemporary car ads appear to promote the car as a means for the individual to escape others. The car is represented speeding over scenic roads, traversing mountains, deserts, forests, and even city streets, eerily devoid of other vehicles. Yet, although 86% of people eat in their car, car ads avoid associating food and autos, perhaps due to the negative sentiments surrounding mobile eating.

Mobile eating experiences

Market research accounts for the number of burgers passed through the drive thru window, risk statistics catalogue the health toll of bad diets, labour campaigners pay careful attention to fast food workers' wages and environmentalist measure the size of landfills, but few explore people's experience of eating in the car. To make a modest contribution to filling this research gap a small study of drivers who eat in their car was undertaken. Four exploratory focus groups conducted in Southern Ontario, Canada, a metropolitan area known as the 'Golden Horseshoe' which is one of the most intensive automobile systems in North America. Participants were selected for three car dependent groups: working mothers with children, police officers who work in cars and university students with part time job(s). Five people comprised each focus group, for a total sample of 20. A series of broad, open-ended, questions about when, why, where, what

and how people ate in the car guided the focus groups. Efforts were made to listen to how participants understood and practiced eating in the car, without direct researcher evaluation. As with all qualitative studies, halo effect is a limitation, but as the candid responses of participants suggest, the interviewer managed to build a solid rapport with the groups.

A striking finding across all focus groups was how eating in the car was discussed in relation to eating at home – with friends and family. Participants uniformly idealized 'home cooked' meals, which in their minds always included numerous fresh ingredients -- meat, vegetables and grains prepared on a stove. Home cooking was valued because it 'took time' to prepare and was often shared with others around a table. Home meals therefore signified 'balanced', 'full', and 'proper' meals. The meals were considered healthy, but also 'delicious', 'relaxed', 'sociable', 'hot', and 'enjoyable'. Male participants spoke of home more often and more glowingly than female participants. Young men waxed adoringly of their mothers' home cooking and the moral sanctity of the family aura. Working mothers and female university students also honoured the home meal, but more so for how it enabled socializing and healthy eating. Women were less sentimental about the act of home cooking, suggesting broader gender issues at play.

The car was constructed as a liminal space, which participants sometimes viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere; yet, also held in stark contrast to the experience of home. When juxtaposed with idealized home foods participants found eating in the car problematic in a number of ways. The limited range of ingredients and food types made car food 'narrow' and 'unbalanced'. Confirming the work of others, participants rarely talked about car food as a meal, but rather as a snack, a bite, or a filler (Bisogni et al. 2007 Jackson 2008; Marshall and Bell 2003;). In keeping with other studies, the food they ate in the car was almost exclusively obtained from the fast food outlets and convenience stores that comprised the mobile food infrastructure (Glass et al. 2004, Jackson 2008). The recurring list of foods included: hamburgers, french fries, sandwiches, bagels, muffins, and wraps. Drinking was common: coffee consumption ubiquitous. The police officers preferred 'mom and pop' restaurants due to late opening hours and a consistent staff they knew and trusted. They mentioned eating ethnic and street foods like shwarmas and rotis. Cooked in fat, calorie dense, portable hand foods, foods also fit the definition of mobile food.

The act jarred with distinguished eating in the car from dining at home. Without the familiar utensils participants felt uncomfortably close to their food. Eating with one's hands jarred with what was understood as clean, proper, and mannered. It also disrupted the ability to achieve a dignified, mature eating style. They spoke of faces, hands and bodies smudged, dripped on and smeared with food. This childlike state of eating disturbed participants. It proved difficult to keep clothing from soiling, causing embarrassment and frustration, particularly for police who felt a heightened sense of responsibility to keep their uniforms presentable. Participants spoke of occasionally engaging passengers to pass, hold and open foods to help them eat and drive. One police officer found these favours infantilizing: 'It's silly having someone feed you. But I remember rushing out to a call and having a partner shove a hamburger in front of me to bite at'. So too was the speed of fast food consumption considered aberrant. Many spoke about 'wolfing down' the food, which caused indigestion and insulted their human dignity. The 'cold', 'stale', 'cardboard' food too easily slipped into the category of scavenging.

Broader concerns circulating through the media about fast and processed foods filtered through to drivers experiences. The acute guilt and shame young female university students expressed towards eating fast food suggest awareness of rising obesity levels. The calorie density of fast food challenged the disciplining eating regimes young female participants felt most acutely. Young women expressed being 'mad at themselves' for regularly eating fast food in their car. Several confessed they felt 'stupid' and 'dumb' for undertaking such 'gross' eating patterns. One said: "I hate myself for doing it [eating in the car]". They also expressed anxiety about their ability to control the habit. These expressions of guilt spoke to an internalized self-punishment associated with 'unhealthy' diets.

For others the concern was not calories but the potential impurities introduced to the body through eating food processed and handled by others. The wide spread media coverage of genetic modification, false food labeling, the supplements and medications introduced by 'factory farming' processes and food borne illnesses filtered into the concerns expressed by mothers and police officers. Mothers especially were worried about the fast food industry putting children's bodies at risk. The act of feeding the family in the car was characterized by a pervasive sense of guilt.

All participants felt powerless to stop eating on the go. The practice they said was necessary to achieve broader goals, interests and responsibilities. Eating on the go for example occurred because car time was required to advance children's skills. One woman noted: 'Look,

when there is a dance competition, we are on the road, packed [with costumes] to the rafters, and anything goes' in terms of food. Children enjoyed the palatable fast food which calmed mealtime during transit: "Anything to keep the kids happy on the road is ok by me'. Fast food helped keep fussy eaters content: 'the kids are always happy to eat a hamburger pack'. Other participants suggested road dietary rules differed from those enforced at home: 'look, at home I take the time to make them eat broccoli, but when we are on the road they can eat what they like'. With jobs, education and child care demands on their shoulders, mothers punished themselves less for eating in the car, because it helped them accomplish two activities at once in their busy lives.

Police officers resented how eating in the car became part of carrying out their job. Unpredictable work schedules produced distinct eating patterns. Investigations often took officers away from food sources for long periods. They spoke of eating quickly and in excess in anticipation of the next call. University students discussed hectic schedules, long commutes and frequent short trips between school, work, and leisure activities. Due to exhaustion and lack of skill many off loaded the time and effort of cooking onto fast food outlets. Many said they habitually ate breakfast in the car to allow longer periods of sleep. Younger participants were most subject to the drag of travel time, mentioned they ate in the car out of boredom.

Despite doing it regularly, many participants constructed eating in the car as an unwelcome, but necessary part of contemporary life. Yet their complaints varied with their circumstances but always contrasted with the invisible ideal of home cooking. For example, a male university student constructed eating in the car as a norm: "No one wants to do it but you have to". On the other hand, a mother felt responsible for providing good home cooked meals for her children, but was compelled to feed her family mobile food because 'sometimes you just don't have a choice right?' A female student blamed her busy lifestyle for her far from perfect car food diet: 'I get really irritated about the fact that I have to do it [eating in the car] like it bothers me that my life is so busy that I can't eat at home'. For a police officer the primary focus was how the nature of his work presented a barrier to eating healthy: 'I'd rather... be relaxed, be at a place where I'm not confined to a 4 foot area. You know we're dressed all in uniform with our gun belt, with a gun, our vest our heavy boots and you're trying to stuff down something so you are not hungry later and you're in a confined space. It's either starve or eat so it's got to be done, right?' The comments above present a gulf between an idealized diet and behavior.

Eating for Convenience

The fast food infrastructure and mobile lifestyles are prevalent features of modern life. Participants regularly ate in the car, but often against their wishes. Many of the concerns participants raised mirrored wider critiques of the fast food industry. But why is mobile food such a prominent feature of North American food culture? British sociologist, Alan Warde, (2005) pointed to the sweeping changes in consumption generally during the 1970s as new more flexible labour arrangements, privatization, and deployment of technology transformed global socio-economic circumstances. One of the consequences of these changes, says Warde, was the blurring of lines previously demarcating separate spheres of production and consumption. The drive for productivity intensified time anxieties in both spheres.

Although many people in the affluent west have more free time, and more individual control over how they spend their time than pervious generations, they felt a greater sense of time stress and responsibility to maximize productivity in all domains of their lives. Warde argues fast food offered a sense of control over daily events to time pressured consumers who substituted convenience for quality. Available everywhere, delivered rapidly, at any time of day, fast food easily fit into the hectic and demanding situations of accelerated post-industrial life styles. In freeing people from the need to prepare and plan meals, the mobile food infrastructure enabled people to eat while performing other tasks. Studies confirmed one of the most valued features of fast food was convenience (Monreal, 2013).

Studies confirmed one of the most valued features of fast food is convenience (Monreal, 2013). Participants in the study echoed the quest for convenience on the road. Many experienced travel time as wasted time. Traffic jams caused frustration and rage because they halted movement and frittered away time, thereby obstructing potential experiences, opportunities, and productivity. Amidst heightened anxiety levels and increased car time, people shifted eating into the automobile. Eating in the car enabled multi-tasking, in which people engaged in two activities at once to gain time (Kenyon and Lyons 2007). Of the 2.5 hours a day US citizens spend eating, 68 minutes or 45% occurred along with another task, mostly driving. Devine et al. (2009) found increased workload and fragmented time schedules challenged people's ability to produce daily home cooked meals. Those who spent the most time one the road, juggling multiple commitments, and under perceived time constraints made more fast food visits (Larson et al. 2009). Over half of a random

telephone sample reported eating one or more fast-food meals in the past week. Similar to other studies, the women with children in my study stressed they ate in the car due mainly to hectic schedules. Yet the focus group participants also confessed that convenience is not an ideal solution to their harried lifestyles.

Cars without Dining Rooms

Fast food and tableless cars were considered by participants as incompatible with the idealized home meal in which people gathered around the table to leisurely enjoy wholesome food and engage in civil manners and social conversation. Compared to the home, the automobile was constructed as an imperfect eating environment for several reasons. First, the car was experienced as a confining space for eating, a point made most clearly by the police officers in the study. Police officers took issue with having to eat in a cruiser in bulky clothing surrounded by equipment because it was difficult to move, breathe, and digest properly. Second, the car challenged the normative separation between food and waste. Eating in the car was described as 'messy' and 'unclean'. Food spilled, spoiled and rotted. Smells lingered, dirt and waste embarrassed participants. Witnessing the accumulated 'hamburger bun seeds', 'crumbs' and waste on the floor in the car participants felt 'overwhelmed' and sometimes disgusted.

A third problem was the car was not well designed for housekeeping. Many pointed out their cars still had ash trays but offered no covered garbage cans or recycling bins. Females, extending the cultural expectations of their gender to the road, complained about the difficulties keeping a car clean. The car simply did not wipe clean like a home table. Mothers found it impossible to guard against children who spilled and pushed food between the seats. They became frustrated by the inability to find the source of sour smells. They felt their husbands should take responsibility for cleaning the inside of the car given they cleaned the house. For example, one young woman spoke of a permanent passenger seat stain from a bacon hamburger placed there: 'It [the burger] was in a container and wrapper, but the grease oozed through; seeped deep into the seat. I can't get it out. It is so gross. Every time I look at it I feel sick'. The inevitable car messes caused anxiety.

Participants commented on how the lack of standardized design between car and food sectors made eating more difficult. For example, focus group members found cup-holders too shallow, too small or too few to accommodate fast food cups. Poorly placed cup holders lead to reaching and fumbling for the cup, which, while in motion contributed to spills and mess. Food containers failed to sit well on slopping consoles making food difficult to access. Poorly designed containers tipped. Food placed on seats slid off while driving requiring drivers to reach down to retrieve items. Unlike sturdy mugs from home beverage cups were too flimsy and prone to crumpling. Condiments packages, straws and sugar packages proved difficult to open, messy and wasteful. Participants generally understood the mobile food infrastructure as unresponsive to their concerns. Thus, although social critics Freund and Martin suggest a seamless symbiosis between fast cars and fast foods at the level of production, a cultural approach including participants' experience of consumption revealed many gaps.

The Risks of Making Do

Although they found the car an imperfect environment for eating, participants did what they could to make dashboard dining possible. Some discussed waste removal and garbage segregation techniques. 'I make sure I remove stuff from the car' said one. 'I put the stuff outside the car when I park', noted another. Waste was pushed to the floor. Fast food bags and plastic bags became make-shift garbage bags. Cupholders served double duty as waste holders. Many spoke of the importance of gathering extra napkins during drive-thru visits and maintaining them for spills [often fast food providers knowingly provide a surfeit]. Discussions of these issues often descended into a lively conversation about the wonders of disposable paper towel brands 'You must use them, pleaded a participant, they make things so much easier'. Young male drivers used the interviews as an opportunity to provide advice to fast food designers: 'They really should put more, no all foods, in a wrap. That would solve the problem', enthused one. 'That is a perfect idea', solicited another.

So too did people creatively re-appropriated objects and car design to make eating on the go more amenable. The lack of a table in the car was significant. All participants recommend that designs include a pull down table, 'like airplanes'. Some made tables out of available materials – like a boxes, books and passenger seats. A mother converted cup holder trays into portable tables for children to dine upon. Another mother noted: 'You know that indent in the door? You might think it is a handle for closing the door, it is actually the most perfect french fry holder.'

People also experimented with various techniques to make it possible to eat while driving. These efforts included using legs to control the wheel so hands could be freed to get food to the mouth. At other times the heels of hands and elbows on the wheel liberated fingers to open condiments and other packaged food. Mouths ripped off lids and tore plastic and paper wrappers apart. When present, passengers sought to help drivers eat -- opening bottles, saucing fries, passing, food and even wipe faces. One young woman spoke of the fine choreography she and her regular travelling companion developed over time: 'She is great. I don't even have to ask for anything. She just knows [how to feed me]'.

From the perspective of distracted driving the focus group discussion take on new relevance. All participants said they drink coffee in the car, which is one of the most common food associated with traffic accidents (Stutts et al. 2003). Due to hot temperatures, coffee and tea are hazardous liquids to consume behind the wheel. The flimsy, portable cups with ill-fitting lids designed for movement and price point do not help the situation. Poorly placed cup holders, food containers which tip and slide on to the floor create potential dangers. Waste and clutter around the driver's feet, hands, and body can limit command of the vehicle. The bodily activities required to open mobile foods and get them to the mouth involved taking hands from the wheel and eyes from the road. The vigilant efforts made to keep the car clean and habitable for eating are potential distractions. Concern about the ketchup dripped onto a white work shirt may prove more important than the unexpected halt of the car in front. Passengers noble acts to assistance drivers eating could put them both at risk.

Several states and all Canadian provinces found texting while driving a risk worthy of levying fines against. Yet careful studies of accident data suggest eating and drinking causes more accidents than cell phone use. Some estimates associate eating and drinking while driving with up to 30% of US automobile crashes (Stutts et al. 2001). Experimental research also found that under simulated driving conditions participants, who ate while driving displayed distracted attention, reduced reaction time and limited control over the vehicle (Young 2008,). Alosco (2012) concluded eating and drinking while driving is at least as hazardous as texting. Yet, the centrality of the mobile food infrastructure and driving in everyday life makes leveling fines again eating in the car unlikely.

Conclusion

The multi-perspectival cultural approach to eating in the car presented in this article sketched the development, and everyday experience, of an embedded mobile food infrastructure. In North America, where mobility, nationhood and progress fused, automobiles colonized the landscape. Employment, education, and productive leisure opportunities are dependent on access to a vehicle. Governments subsidize and protect automotive economies. The road movie is a successful Hollywood genre. Launching alternative modes of transportation is difficult. Successive waves of food entrepreneurs reached out to a population put in motion by modernity forging a palatable, portable, profitable foodway. Few things distinguish North American food practices as much as mobile eating.

The focus group study, although limited by a small sample, suggested that a reliance on the mobile food infrastructure was not experienced as a personal choice, but as a concession to the perceived time pressures underwriting their mobile lifestyles. Echoing fast food critics, participants constructed their in-car diet as excessive in calories and toxic to bodily health. Yet, the cultural analysis of this study also pointed to moral issues little recognized by fast food critiques. Eating in the car is a difficult cultural practice experienced as both messy and uncivilized by participants. The vehicle is poorly designed for eating. While convenient, mobile food containers are flimsy, hard to manage, prone to tipping and quick to make a mess. Ultimately, eating in the car is undertaken as compromise with the forces of accelerating modernity: Yet, ironically, it also puts drivers at greater risk by distracting them from the road.

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