



## *Martha Stewart Roundtable*

# **Introduction: Martha Stewart and Taste Cultures**

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American studies scholars continue to struggle with the issue of social class, a concept at once fundamental to critical analysis and frustratingly elusive in the study of American cultures. The popularity of continental theory in the waning decades of the twentieth century only made things worse, as concepts of social class derived in the European context seemed (to many of us) not very useful in discerning patterns of identification and resistance in the United States. When Douglas Foley tried to apply the ideas of Paul Willis and other Birmingham cultural studies scholars to the circumstances of a Texas town and the cultures of its high school students, for example, he found that the cultural reproduction model, which seems to make great sense of the behavior of working class “lads” in England, did not get him very far in understanding the ways gender, ethnicity, and class were operating in that Texas community.<sup>1</sup> What he needed, instead, was a performative model of identity based on the work of Erving Goffman and others.

What Foley rediscovered was a truth that American studies scholars learn and forget in regular cycles—namely, that the evolution of commodity capitalism and its interaction with other elements in the cultures of people living in the United States make the study of “taste cultures” in the United States an absolute necessity. Taste cultures intersect other, more familiar categories people invoke for understanding their own lifeworlds and those of others. Inchoate feelings of

affiliation and repulsion often have their origins in taste cultures. And in puzzling over the ways other people assemble their “lifestyles,” we often fall back upon the American proverbial declaration that “there’s no accounting for taste.”

Accounting for taste, of course, is a mission of American studies. The six essays gathered here for a special section of *American Studies* devoted to the “Martha” phenomenon offer the reader forays into understanding the taste cultures of the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. Each essay comes at Martha (who, like Elvis, needs only a first name for recognition) with a different focus, from domestic advice and cooking to crafts and gardening. Through these essays we see that Martha belongs to a long tradition of domestic advice literature, and we see precisely how the advice is aimed at helping readers and viewers “perform” a white, middle-class gentility through the careful arrangements of the commodities—the props, sets, and costumes—essential to that performance.

By their own admission these essays only begin to chart the scholarly work ahead, and I would like to suggest briefly what I think needs to be done in the “Martha project.” With one exception—Amy Bentley’s quotations from an “unofficial Martha Stewart website”—these essays take an exclusively textual approach to understanding the taste cultures connected with Martha. But as Janice Radway taught us so well in her *Reading the Romance* (1984), we must pair textual analysis with ethnographic study of audiences in order to ask and answer certain crucial questions.<sup>2</sup> Radway’s fieldwork with readers of romances yielded some surprises and led her to revise and complicate her initial, text-based judgment that the romance novels were “bad for women.” Her fieldwork shows how complicated is the construction of meaning as a person “consumes” a text and as she comes to use the text in the performance of her everyday life.

Similarly, we need systematic audience response analysis of the Martha phenomenon. I say “systematic” to distinguish what I recommend from the more casual self-ethnography and conversations with “fans” of Martha. The status of internet sites and chatrooms as ethnographic sites is a matter still being developed and debated by scholars, but the sites seem useful. Only through fairly extensive conversations with Martha’s audience can we get at some of the following questions. What is the place of the Martha text in the whole constellation of “texts” the viewer consumes, such as the shows on Home and Garden television or the Food Channel? Can the same person enjoy both Martha and the Iron Chef, for example, and what are we to make of that? How many men consume Martha texts and how does gender lead to different readings of those texts? Does sexual orientation matter in the consumption of the texts, and what is the role of gay men in creating and consuming certain taste cultures in the United States? How can we extend Bentley’s observations about ethnicity (contrasting, as she does, Barbara Smith’s cooking show with Martha’s cooking segments) and explore further the role of race and ethnicity in taste cultures?

Most fascinating of all, I think, would be to ask a version of Radway’s question, “Are romance novels ‘good’ for women?” Is the Martha phenomenon

“good” for women? The years 1985 and 2001 are very different cultural moments, not least as moments in the history of feminist thought and practices. Karal Ann Marling comments in her essay on Martha’s construction of Christmas as a “postfeminist holiday,” and we ought to take up this issue of the meanings of Martha in the context of third-wave feminism. Is the consumption of Martha pure fantasy, an escape from unpleasant reality, or do some women who consume Martha actually acquire some strategies for living as meaningful and “authentic” a life as possible within a patriarchal society? Martha, both in the model of her own life as a strong woman and in the domestic scripts she provides her audience, might actually “empower” women in ways we won’t understand until we do the ethnographic fieldwork.

Weighty questions aside, these essays are fun to read. I was in the audience at the American Studies Association session where earlier versions of these papers were read and illustrated with slides. The room was packed to overflowing, and we laughed all the way through the session. It was fun to mock Martha, but the laughter had an edge of self-mockery, as more than a few panelists and people in the audience admitted to being Martha addicts to one degree or another. It is easy to ridicule the Ayatollah of taste (as Marling puts it), but it is a more complex matter to reflect on that nervous laughter and to understand the power of taste cultures in our own identities.

### Notes

1. Douglas Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Hearts of Texas* (Philadelphia, 1990).
2. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984).