

Food in the Metaphysical Orders: Gender, Race, and the Family^{*}

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ABSTRACT

By looking at human practices around food, the paper brings novel evidence linking the social constructionist and the naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family, evidence that is based on the analysis of developmental trajectories. The argument rests on two main theoretical claims: (i) unlike evolutionary explanations, developmental trajectories can play a decisive role in exhibiting the biological underpinnings of kinds related to gender, race, and family; (ii) food constitutes a point of convergence between constructionist and naturalist perspectives because it embeds practices of particular significance for establishing identities of gender, race, and family that, at the same time, are rooted on skills and habits acquired through specific developmental patterns. The paper illustrates (i) and (ii) via two case studies involving women hunters and the diet of the Obamas. The latter also suggests that kinds associated to gender, race, and family are entangled.

I. Linking Social Constructionism With Naturalism

To date, distinctions of gender, race, and family structure are regarded as a matter of social construction by a number of scholars. Introducing a collection of essays devoted to sexual meanings, Ortner & Whitehead write: «What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them – all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological “givens,” but are largely products of social and cultural processes»

^{*} I am most thankful to Larry Cahoon, Elena Casetta, and Vera Tripodi for their copious and precious comments on previous versions of this work.

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(Ortner & Whitehead, 1981, p. 1). A few years later Judith Butler, even more starkly, claims: «perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender» (Butler, 1999, p. 10). Social constructionists about race defend an analogous position regarding racial distinctions and their biological bases.¹ Finally, that family structure can take multiple forms, even within the same population, is all the more evident and is regarded as an indication of its social, rather than biological, derivation.²

Opposed to the constructionist, stands what might be labeled the *naturalist* camp. Naturalists with respect to genders, races, and family structure view the respective kinds as capable of being defined (or, at least, characterized) in terms of biological facts of some sort and, from a methodological point of view, hold that studies in biology or natural sciences can foster the understanding of said kinds as well as their purpose in the public sphere.³

The dialogue between the two camps has been sparse and difficult. In part the impasse can be explained by pointing at the diverging research methods and scholarly traditions employed to work on the same issue; but an important responsibility seems to be shared also by the ill-suited argumentative strategies pursued by the naturalists. Attempts to rebut, complicate, or mediate social constructionist positions by means of biological arguments have so far hinged on the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens* and some of its most direct ancestors. The typical schema of an argument explaining cultural facts on the basis of evolutionary processes goes roughly like this: if within population *P* we find the peculiar custom of grouping members of *P* according to some apparently cultural feature *C*, this is because the possession or lack of *C* is linked to some evolutionary advantage *A* bestowed only upon those ancestors of *P*'s members that possessed a certain biological feature *B*; thus, what appears as a cultural construct is explained in terms of a biological story. The schema, however, has more often than not produced far-fetched and hardly provable hypotheses regarding human evolution (Machery & Faucher, 2005) is a good example), which have done little to challenge constructionist analyses of specific case studies and even less to question their key assumptions. After all, one should be mindful of Darwin's admonition in Chapter 4 of the *Origin*:

We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has

¹ Cfr. Omi & Winant, 1994; Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Mallon, 2004.

² Cfr. Berger & Luckman, 1966; and Guba, 1990.

³ The current research in this area is extensive; for some more or less recent philosophical imports, see Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Machery & Faucher, 2005; and Kitcher, 2007.

marked the long lapses of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages, that we only see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were (Darwin, 2003, p. 146).

That evolutionary stories can hardly settle disputes between naturalists and constructionists is not, however, to say that there are no better mediation strategies. The goal of this paper will be, in part, to start presenting one of them, based on ontogenetic – rather than phylogenetic – factors. Since phylogenesis concerns the evolutionary development of a species, arguments based on phylogenetic factors need to ground on the too-often undefined history of *Homo sapiens*; ontogenetic factors, instead, which relate to the complex of biological processes marking the development of an organism throughout its life, can be more reliably studied by observing contemporary humans. It is indeed striking that ontogenesis has so far taken a back seat in the disputes between naturalists and constructionists: the “natural” underpinnings of distinctions of gender, race, and family structure can often find evidence within more visible short-term processes of individual development (such as the acquisition of particular skills and behaviors) rather than within the larger schema of human evolution. “Development” here stands for any genotypic or phenotypic change that an individual organism undergoes during stages of its life; this will include not only morphological or physiological traits, but also typical behaviors and skills.

The stance adopted in this work aligns with the quest for a more palatable methodology to study cultural processes from a naturalistic perspective. In part, such methodology is hinted at in this passage by Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, criticizing the shortcomings of the approaches to cultural evolution grounded in memetics or evolutionary psychology:

*What is missing from both memetics and evolutionary psychology is development ... Memetics and evolutionary psychology have little to say about how cultural constructions actually begin: they tell us almost nothing about ways in which social, political, and economic forces transform societies and culture through the plans and actions of people (Jablonka & Lamb, 2005, p. 218, my emphasis).*⁴

A chief underlying premise of this work is thus that developmental processes constitute a key component of the evolution of culture; the goal of the present

⁴ Among the most distinguished examples of studies of cultural evolution that are not centered on phylogenetic processes: Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981; and Boyd & Richerson, 1985.

endeavor is to start showing that, by looking at the development of practices surrounding food, we can come to understand how specific genders, races, and family structures come to be adopted. To illustrate the point by means of a parallel example, consider the processes typical of (natural) language acquisition.⁵ Properties such as *Being a native speaker of Tagalog*, for instance, depend on social interactions whose details may be left to the will of individuals and groups, but at the same breath are subjugated to biological constraints on the developmental trajectories suitable for the aim at hand (e.g., a person can hardly become a native speaker of Tagalog if before age fifteen she has never been exposed to it). Once socially determined practices such as studying a foreign language are shown to influence certain ontogenetic possibilities, speculation regarding the broader evolutionary meaningfulness of ontogenetic possibilities can be undertaken on common grounds. In other words, the study of language has found a meeting point between social constructionist and naturalist theories by studying specific social characteristics and pairing them with specific ontogenetic trajectories.

The cases of gender, race, and family structure, I submit, follow that of language. The link between social constructionist and naturalist theories dealing with those issues can be proved by pairing distinct social processes with distinct developmental trajectories. The typical schema of an argument of this sort goes roughly like this: within population *P* we find the peculiar custom of grouping members of *P* according to some apparently cultural feature *C*; in order to acquire *C*, however, a member of *P* has to undergo some developmental trajectory *D*; thus, what appears as a cultural construct is inextricably linked to a biological story (rooted in *D*).

In the sequel, the schema shall be exemplified by focusing only on a class of social processes, namely, food practices. “Food” in this context stands for that complex system of knowledge, technologies, skills, ceremonials, meanings, ecological relationships, nutritional, biological, and chemical properties within which human populations find their sustenance. Although philosophers have scarcely paid attention to foods, these may provide excellent material for speculation. As the examples to follow shall testify, over the past three or four decades, both social and natural scientists have looked into food matters from a

⁵ Ever since the publications of Lennenberg (1967) and Chomsky (1968), which defended an evolutionary savvy form of innatism regarding the capacity of acquiring natural language, natural language acquisition has been at the center of heated debates from an evolutionary perspective. See also Pinker, 2000; and Chomsky, 2000 for more recent takes on the topic.

wide spectrum of angles; there is plenty to dig for those coming to the topic with a special attention to the metaphysical status of social kinds. The contention is, hence, that the study of food practices can provide the right sort of evidence needed to prove the links between constructionist and naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family.

II. Food in the Metaphysical Orders

Perhaps not surprisingly, also in the area of food studies – broadly construed – we find a strong divide between the constructionists (anthropologists and sociologists especially) and the naturalists (such as geneticists, evolutionary biologists, nutritionists). In a methodologically innovative work on the theme, Mary Douglas speculated that the lack of attention to culinary matters was due to a split analogous to the one portrayed in the section above: «The absence of serious research into the cultural and social uses of food is caused by a more fundamental separation between food sciences and social thought» (Douglas, 1984, p. 2).⁶ While anthropologists and sociologists debate as to the social significance of habits and skills associated with, e.g., controlling fermentation processes, geneticists aim to detect which genes are linked to – say – the capacity to detect bitterness.⁷ There are of course some exceptions,⁸ but much more can be done to bring the contestants from the two camps to a fair terrain of dispute. The present work constitutes an attempt to move in such a direction. The underlying metaphysical perspective will serve both to prove a point with respect to kinds related to gender, race, and the family as well as to establish a certain approach to food studies.

Food will be here regarded as both a social construct *and* a natural product. This is because while the adoption of specific activities, manners, and recipes may be seen as a resultant of socially-driven choices, the habits and skills

⁶ Unfortunately, the research presented in the rest of the volume edited by Douglas arguably conceives of its subject matter under a constructionist point of view; it provides, nonetheless, a good case for the methodology here adopted.

⁷ Some remarks on cheese production and gender divisions can be found in Camporesi, 1985, pp. 63–65; and Naso, 2000, pp. 98–99; but see also the very first treatise on cheese production by Pantaleone of Confienza (Pantaleone, 2000, pp. 191–192); I thank Paolo Savoia for insights on this topic. On bitterness, see for instance Wooding, 2006.

⁸ For an anthropological perspective taking into account the importance of the development of skills and abilities, see Ingold, 2000; Mennella et al., 2001 is one of the best examples of a biological study of the dependence of food habits upon development, centered on the preferences for carrot juice; for a study of the transmissibility of food habits in rabbits by means of behavior, see Bilkó et al., 1994.

associated with those choices exhibit clear biological underpinnings. Of course, a parallel division can be spotted on the part of the ingredients as well: Granny Smith apples or Florence fennels, for instance, are best accounted for by means of their biological traits paired with their social histories; the evolutionary histories of apple trees and Florence fennel plants are really histories of co-evolution with humans, which find a rationale in their phenotypic and developmental traits as well as in their gustative properties.

The main claim of the present paper is, then, that human practices around food can bring novel evidence to link the social constructionist and the naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family. This claim is based on two sub-claims: (i) unlike evolutionary explanations, developmental trajectories can play a decisive role in exhibiting the biological underpinnings of kinds related to gender, race, and the family; (ii) food constitutes a point of convergence between constructionist and naturalist perspectives because it embeds practices of particular significance for establishing identities of gender, race, and family structure that, at the same time, are rooted on skills and habits acquired through specific developmental patterns.

In the sequel, the main claim will be illustrated by means of two case studies involving women hunters and the Obama family. They will be considered in order. In each case, the relevance with respect to gender, race, or family identity will be first explained; then, links to underlying biological processes will be suggested. According to recent statistics (Griggs, 2011), there are over two millions of women hunters in the United States, a data that may seem surprising to most and that contrasts with stereotypes. Despite the appearances, it is argued that the fact is not a proof of a mere social construction of the stereotype of Man the Hunter: developmental trajectories can influence to great extent hunting skills, thus partaking in characterizing a woman as a hunter and, consequently, women's image at large.⁹ The case of the Obamas, instead, is most interesting for understanding race and family

⁹ Several alternative case studies would deserve to be examined. Just to list some other topics that may speak to the metaphysics of gender: the increasingly prestigious part played by women in defining standards of haute cuisine; the rise of women butchers; women's function in the production of alcoholic beverages; women's legacy in the history of cheese production. Each of those topics may be employed to test and illustrate the main claim of the present paper. The case involving women hunters was chosen because it apparently challenges said claim. It would seem that, if more and more women are turning to hunting, then women's relationship to such practice is of pure social derivation; consequently, it would seem that gender-identity is, at least in this respect, socially constructed. At a closer inspection, the initial impression will prove to be defective.

distinctions (although Michelle Obama's insistence on dietary advice suggests some gender considerations as well). Food has arguably played a key role in the construction of the racial profile of the Obamas, setting standards for distinct, at times unprecedented, culinary preferences of the presidential family as well as suggesting family roles and educational standards. The food choices of the Obamas suggest that eating habits depend on developmental trajectories – skills and habits connected to gathering food and cooking it, dining, or exercising, that one acquires through years of appropriate apprenticeship; such skills and habits are often associated (although they need not to) with specific racial and family profiles. The example of the Obamas uses food to make a parallel argument with respect to the biological underpinnings of kinds associated with race and family structure; moreover, the Obama family demonstrates the difficulty of disentangling identities associated with race, gender, and family structure.

III. Woman the Hunter: a Rediscovery or a Reconstruction?¹⁰

The contemporary gender division among American hunters has left many baffled. It is the picture of a rapidly changing situation. According to data collected by the National Sporting Goods Association, in the United States alone, «between 2004 and 2009, the number of women hunting with firearms jumped 50%, from 2 million to 3 million ... Bowhunting women climbed from 500,000 to 800,000, and female target shooters increased from 4.3 million to 4.7 million».¹¹ Among other things this means that, during the period under consideration, women outnumbered men among newcomer hunters in the U.S.; no surprise, then, if some are wondering whether women can save the survival of hunting practices within our society.¹² Now, to these data we shall add that the vast majority of the hunters in question eats the prey: it is in fact illegal in North America to sell the meat of any wild animal, so that we can safely claim that hunting is by and large a food-driven sport, increasingly motivated by ethical considerations related to animal suffering and environmental preservation.¹³ Thus, by delving into hunting, women are at

¹⁰ I am much indebted with, and grateful to, Larry Cahoon for numerous conversations on hunting practices in the United States and the philosophy of hunting.

¹¹ See Griggs, 2011. It should be noted that the numbers include women of age 7 and above; when counting women of age 17 and above, the figures suggest that around 2.5 millions women hunt.

¹² McCombie, 2010.

¹³ See Kowalsky, 2010 as well as Pollan, 2006 for a further exemplification of those points.

once modifying their relationship to meat. What should we make of the turn that seems to be taking place? Does it prove that Woman the Hunter is a possibility as much as Man the Hunter is, and that gender divides among hunters are a sole matter of socially constructed roles? Or, is predating rather an activity sitting within human “nature”, one that feeds into an ancient ecological relationship that humans bore and still bear to their environment? In other words, does the turn prove that woman the hunter was reconstructed, rather than rediscovered?

Hunting sits deep into the evolutionary roots of *Homo*,¹⁴ so much so that – in the words of Valerius Geist – «before discussing the morality of hunting, we need to consider hunting and meat eating in our evolution. It may be that questioning the morality of hunting questions our humanity» (Geist, 2010, p. 131). It is through the ability of hunting that hominids gained an unprecedented advantage over predators such as wolves and coyotes. Moreover, it is likely that the development of hunting practices played a relevant role in the selection of traits that were most advantageous to human evolution such as balancing on one foot, skills for fashioning protective niches and weapons, cooperation. Now, those traits are – at once – of chief social significance: even a simple trait like balancing on one foot assumes a cultural flavor when regarded as a key aspect of dancing; and the availability of weapons may have posed some of the most challenging ethical dilemmas to our ancestors. It seems plausible, then, to suggest not only that the development of a whole series of cognitive and skilled abilities throughout the life of a human is indeed connected to hunting; but, most importantly, those abilities will facilitate or hamper certain social behaviors.

Hunting practices carry some strong gender connotations within Western culture. The notion of Man the Hunter, first employed at a 1966 University of Chicago symposium on the ethnography of hunter-gatherers organized by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore,¹⁵ has later been effectively borrowed to represent and reinforce the special relationship of men with meat. It is part of a somewhat mythical depiction of a refined society, where roles are properly separated: men go hunting (or procuring the primary sources for survival), women tend to household matters, including the preparation of the meals. Men have thus the duty and privilege of exercising their dominion over animals,

¹⁴ For a clear-cut case in favour of the evolutionary importance of hunting, see Geist, 2010.

¹⁵ See Lee & DeVore, 1968.

which gives them priority over meat consumption and establishes their more eminent societal position with respect to women. The rise of women hunters is clearly challenging this picture. Hence the question: is Man the Hunter a socially constructed narrative or is it rather the unavoidable resultant of some underlying natural distinctions between men and women? To address such questions, we shall look at three clusters of features with respect to which women and men differ in their relationship to hunting: (i) body traits; (ii) ecological relationships; (iii) emotional responses. An important premise to the discussion to follow is that hunting-related skills are acquired in conjunction with other conditions that may influence hunting practices. Some of those conditions will have a more naturalistic flavor, while others will largely be accounted for on the basis of social conventions; finally, a great deal of them will exhibit aspects from both sides.

(i) *Body traits.* Bodily differences between men and women may impinge, in some circumstances, on their respective hunting abilities. For instance, on average it may prove more difficult for a woman to drag a large buck out of a field by herself than it would be for a man; or, on average a woman will have less arm strength in shooting a bow than a man; differences in butchering abilities may be spotted as well, even though they may be harder to prove. Here, traits most likely developed independently from hunting-related abilities may interfere with the activity. The relevance of this sort of considerations is well exemplified by some historical and literary depictions of women hunters. Addressing human specimens in the mountains of Albania, Strabo chronicles of the unusual women inhabiting those lands – the Amazons; according to the Greek historian, it is said

that the Amazons spend the rest of their time [i.e. ten months of the year] off to themselves, performing their several individual tasks, such as ploughing, planting, pasturing cattle, and particularly in training horses, *though the bravest engage mostly in hunting on horseback* and practise warlike exercises; that the right breasts of all are seared when they are infants, so that they can easily use their right arm for every needed purpose, and especially that of throwing the javelin; that they also use bow and sagaris (Strabo, *Geography*, Book XI, section 5, tr. by H.C. Hamilton, Esq. and W. Falconer, M.A., 1903; my emphasis).

Strabo's Amazons of Albania have their right breasts cut in order to be able to properly handle their weapons: women have to renounce to part of their most intimate and treasured anatomical features in order to become hunters. The

lesson for the readership seems to be that, if women wish to preserve their biological integrity, they better not hunt: this is a man's world. Still in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. literature we find portraits of the Amazons and imaginative discussions of their lifestyles. For instance, in the twentieth chant of his epic poem, the *Orlando Furioso*, whose first edition dates back to 1516, Ludovico Ariosto narrates of the female army lead by Orontea, «the youngest, the most beautiful, and the most clever».

At the same time, the mythologies of Artemis and Diana, two related and central figures of the Greek and Roman pantheons, accorded central place to women hunters: the two were often represented with bow and arrows, dwelling on high mountains and sacred woods. How these goddesses could be part and parcel of that social order to which Strabo would have subscribed needs to be carefully sorted out, a task laying outside of present purposes. Still, the contrast with the narratives of Strabo and Ariosto is stark and we can imagine that their most loyal readership would have been appalled by contemporary statistics.¹⁶ We shall look into two more clusters of features before attempting to dissolve the issue.

(ii) A second cluster of features concerns the broader *ecological relationship* that men and women have with hunting sites. Consider even just the capacity of “making sense” of a forest: being able to read off a trace or a sound or an animal's behavior; devising possible paths and hiding spots; keeping a good sense of orientation; possessing the skills and tactics to wonder through the woods. Arguably, those are skills dependent upon a series of developmental traits that one can no longer so easily acquire and master once beyond adult age, in analogy with the ability to speak a given natural language. Are women less prone than men to develop appropriate ecological relationships to hunting sites? If so, is such a difference socially constructed or does it depend on some more basic natural distinctions?

(iii) Finally, consider *emotional responses* to death. For an older person who has never participated in the killing of a large animal, to adjust to the emotional challenge of a buck falling to the ground because of *her* deliberate shooting may prove extremely difficult, thus shying the person away from hunting practices. To show how far apart the sensibility of women hunters is from that of other women, Ariosto has Orontea's army adopt ferocious and

¹⁶ One can even conjecture that during their respective times there were women hunters (at least in non-urban settings) and that their writings had been offered to encourage others to abstain from such a custom.

wildly implausible social rules, the sole conditions under which their hunting practices can be prosecuted. Are women less apt than men to emotionally respond to the killing of an animal? If so, is such a difference to be explained in terms of natural or, rather, socially constructed traits?

Those three clusters of features with respect to which men and women may differ in their relationship to hunting highlight their distinct respective relationships to meat. The thesis I wish to defend is that the difference is at once naturalistic and socially constructed: indeed, contemporary women hunters testify to the mixed character of their skills. Consider, first, emotional responses. The difficulty here seems to be true no less of men than women. Michael Pollan's report of his first boar hunt – which occurred at a mature age – does a great job, for instance, in highlighting manly fears.¹⁷ Women that turn to hunting at an early life stage, indeed, demonstrate greater emotional strength than older women. Here is how a seventeen-year old reports shooting at her first turkey: «The bird was less than thirty yards away and I had never been that close before ... He was beautiful and he was going to be dead. I gently squeezed the trigger, never feeling the recoil» (Zeiss Stange, 1997, p. 5). We can imagine (although of course that's not a necessary assumption) the seventeen-year old girl having previously marched through more tormented emotional states while growing up using a weapon. This strikes us as fundamentally no different from the process of emotional development that Nathan Kowalsky (a male hunter, and now a professional philosopher as well) had gone through when, at age 14, he ventured for the first time on a hunt with a rifle and a license in hand. He couldn't shoot, on fear of not killing the animal well.

So Dad took the shoot instead. BANG! ... I remember running like hell towards him [the buck]... as if there was only one thing that existed in the world, that buck, and my entire consciousness was nothing but a giant tube through which something else beyond me was able to look through the fabric of the universe and see that buck, right there, die. *Whoosh* (Kowalsky, 2010, p. 2).

In the end, women and men seem to be capable of developing similar emotional responses to hunting practices. But this is not to say that the emotional response is socially constructed: it is part and parcel of a developmental process that has roots in our evolutionary history of predators. As far as we can tell, in that history men have no exclusive or special role as hunters; rather, the

¹⁷ Pollan, 2006.

plasticity of development, for both men and women, is what's emerges most starkly.

As for the second cluster of features, women and men hunters seem to feed into the very same ecological relationship – that ancestral drive to procure food by predating. Women seem no less capable than men in reading off traces and behaviors, recognizing paths, getting around places, hiding themselves. The possession of analogous hunting-related capacities, however, doesn't entail that women's and men's hunting practices will develop similarly. Women hunters seem to interpret that relationship in a distinct way, based on the different upbringing received, which gives women plenty of reasons to want to hunt with other women. An example relates to the development of musical taste. In a discussion of hunting soundtracks, hunter Kim Hiss reports how, on her first hunt, immediately after shooting a mule deer «the guide swung open the doors of the cab, hit the cd player, and blasted Queen's *Another One Bites the Dust*». Clearly the guide was a man.

But my best song-hunt association to date – continues Kim – came in the spring of 2006, when I was back in New Mexico on a turkey hunt with the folks from *Women in the Outdoors* magazine. Editor Karen Lee is a music head too, and on the drive to the lodge we talked about favorite songs, with Seals and Crofts' *Summer Breeze* topping the list that particular afternoon.¹⁸

What goes for music preferences goes for a whole series of themes apparently unrelated to hunting, including jokes and conversational preferences, so that in the end – as Mary Zeiss Stange writes in the introduction of her *Woman the Hunter* – «these women do not seem to want to be, or to act like, men» (Zeiss-Stange, 1997, p. 6). The irreversible components of upbringing, hence, contribute some natural distinctions to the bonding of women hunters, reinforcing the grouping of women as a separate category.

Finally, as for body traits, while some average gender distinctions of anatomy and strength may apply, it need not be the case that they all feed into a higher capacity for men to hunt. American women, for instance, may on average be better able to balance on their feet or make sudden moves because of the lighter weight and greater acrobatic skills, and most may have some familiarity with the butchering of an animal. Moreover, of course, we shall be mindful that the average differences in body traits between genders are just that: averages, based on somewhat conventional distinctions. Several women

¹⁸ Hiss, 2007. I'm indebted with Larry Cahoon and Chris Dustin for pointing out this passage to me.

will possess as much, or more, strength than most men; and in some cases the gender divide will not neatly apply. It seems thus hard to conclude, on the score of body traits, that there are significant gender distinctions justifying the notion of Man the Hunter.

In a recent article on women hunters, Brian McCombie lays down some exemplary remarks of what may be labeled “the social constructionist fallacy”:

Research by Southwick and Associates notes that hunting is essentially a social activity: a way for friends and family to bond. Not surprisingly, women want to share their hunting with other women; as a result, it is important that programs such as Women On Target continue to grow; for example, a recent report on hunting trends, done by the National Shooting Sports Foundation, found that over a five-year period only 15 percent of women bought a hunting license each year, while 37 percent of men did (McCombie, 2010).

Claims such as that of McCombie’s are misleading because they undermine the kinship of nature and culture in devising that social kind we refer to as “women”. Such a kind has – most likely within the confines of each society – certain behaviors that are characteristic, including body movements, emotional responses, manual skills. Those behaviors do have biological underpinnings: they realize certain ontogenetic possibilities of humans,¹⁹ possibilities that beyond a certain age cannot as easily be acquired or cannot be acquired at all, just as one cannot become a native speaker of Tagalog if, at age twenty, one still hasn’t been exposed to it. Thus, women come to be defined not simply on the basis of social traits, but also on the basis of the biological traits that are – as a matter of fact – the other side of the coin of the social traits towards which we point our fingers. Of course, the traits in question are just realizations of *some* of the ontogenetic possibilities of women: several other possibilities are open. But they cannot be actualized unless different developmental trajectories are pursued.

Hunting stands as a case in point for the broader relationship that women bear to meat. That women in most Western societies have a distinct relationship to meat seems to be a platitude. In his book on the topic, for instance, Nick Fiddes brings abundant evidence to indicate that

the macho steak is perhaps the most visible manifestation of an idea that permeates the entire western food system ... a beef steak can send powerful

¹⁹ Some of those possibilities may even be tied to specific sexual traits, but I shall leave this more contentious supposition on a side here.

sexual signals. The larger and juicier the piece of meat, the more red-blooded and virile the consumer should be supposed to be (Fiddes, 1991, pp. 146–147).

Statements, images, and behaviors underlying Fiddes’s claim abound in contemporary media as well and remind us of a much recited sentence of Lord Byron according to which a woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be lobster salad and Champagne, the only true feminine and becoming viands.

Byron’s opinion can and should be resisted. Yet this is not because women’s relationship to meat is solely, or even mainly, socially constructed. To stay within the case in point, if women have found it difficult to change their relationship to hunting, this is because: (a) hunting practices are founded upon certain developmental constraints (body traits, cognitive and emotional abilities), that cannot be easily changed by adult women; (b) hunting practices are entrenched with a host of other practices, presumably tied to additional developmental constraints. Hunters and farmers bear a special tie to their prey and properties, hence (typically) they also have special access to the consumption of the animals’ meat. And yet little evidence shows that the tie is better embodied by men rather than women. At the same time this is not to deny that the tie is both naturalistic and socially constructed. In so far as gender categories are defined through a distinct relationship to practices, such as hunting, genders are neither naturalistic nor socially constructed: they are both.

IV. Eating Like a Healthy Black Family: the Diet of the Obamas

On November 4, 2008, the day Barack Obama won the presidential elections in the United States, many celebrated the coming of the very first non-white American president. Taking quarters at the White House in early 2009, however, was not Barack alone, but the whole presidential family. Together, this now stands as the symbol of “the other” America and a quick look at the family histories of Barack and Michelle can start explaining why that’s the case.²⁰ Barack represented at best America’s mixed racial identity. He is the first U.S. president to be born in Hawaii. His mother – Stanley Ann Dunham – was of European ancestry, mostly English and some German, Irish and Swiss;

²⁰ Obama’s family history is the central subject of Obama, 2005.

she was born in Wichita, Kansas, and lived in different American states and countries during her life. Barack Obama, Sr., instead, was from Kenya and in his early years traveled extensively throughout the world.²¹ When in 1959 he enrolled at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, he was the first African student to ever attend the institution. In Manoa, Barack Sr. and Ann met during a Russian class in the Fall of 1960: later that semester Ann dropped out of school upon becoming pregnant with Barack Jr. On February 2, 1961 Ann and Barack Sr. got married. It turned out, though, that Barack Sr. had already married once in Kenya in 1954, and the two divorced in 1964. Shortly after, Ann married Indonesian geographer Lolo Soetoro, with whom she moved to Jakarta in 1967, bringing Barack Jr. with her for four years. In 1971 Barack Jr. moved back to Hawaii, to live with his maternal grandparents and attend school. He finished high school in 1979, moved to Los Angeles for college, then to New York City, then Chicago, Cambridge (Mass.), then Chicago, then to the White House in early 2009. Michelle Robinson Obama, on the other hand, descended from a typical African American family, with roots in South Carolina on the paternal side and a biracial great-great grandfather on the maternal side (the son of a woman slave and a slave-owner). Michelle grew up in Chicago; attended school in Princeton and Harvard; moved back to Chicago.

The symbolic strength of the new presidential family, however, cannot be explained just by pointing at Barack's and Michelle's respective family histories. Consider two other notable figures in the recent history of American government, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. The first was born in Harlem to Jamaican parents with some Scottish ancestors, and grew up in the South Bronx; Condoleezza Rice's family, instead, has roots in the American South, much like Michelle Obama's. But, despite the affinity, the racial profiles of Powell and Rice did not nearly receive as much public attention as the ones of the Obamas. Granted, Powell and Rice were not part of a presidential family; but, more should be said to explain the difference in symbolic power. Now, it has been already noted how Barack's walking style differed, for instance, from his predecessor's: just a few steps along the White House's colonnade on November 10, 2008 were enough to embody a clear-cut racial divide. *Ditto* for Michelle's decision to appear in sleeveless dresses at several ceremonial events, including the official White House portrait and the first President's address

²¹ A piece of information that is curious for our purposes: his father (Barack's grandfather) was employed as a cook for missionaries in Nairobi.

before Congress.²² Both of those instances reveal certain somaesthetic traits (bodily traits that play a role in world-making practices) that are distinctive of a racial profile.²³ Still, more needs to be excavated to show how such a profile has been incarnated. Two examples related to food shall be examined here, both of which exhibit a mixture of socially constructed properties along with naturalistic ones. One deals with the selection of the White House Executive Chef; the other with the White House Kitchen Garden and the *Let's Move* campaign against childhood obesity, both heartily supported by the First Lady.

As one can expect from a family relocating from one place to another, when the Obamas moved to D.C. from Chicago they aimed at taking with them their culinary traditions and dietary manners. For this reason, several speculated that they would have brought at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. some chef aligned with their own taste. Three names circulated for some weeks: Art Smith, specialized in Southern cuisine and for some time now Oprah Winfrey's personal chef; African American chef Daniel Young, once upon a time also Carmelo Anthony's personal chef, best known for his focus on healthy American cuisine; and Rick Bayless, of Topolobampo and Frontera Grill Mexican restaurants in Chicago.²⁴ If the first two are associated with African American celebrities, Bayless runs one of the favorite Chicago dining options for the Obamas.²⁵ In the end, however, a fourth option prevailed: Cristeta Comerford, the chef selected by the Bushes in 2005, who was indeed confirmed in her role. Born and educated in the Philippines, Cristeta was also the first woman to hold the prestigious position of supervising the preparation of all meals for the presidential family and its numerous guests. What can we gather from such a pool of options and from the diet that was then chosen by the Obamas?

First of all, it should be noted that each candidate would have represented an unconventional choice for a presidential family: a woman from Philippines, a chef specializing in refined Mexican cuisine, one versed in Southern cuisine, and an African American focusing on healthy American eating. Each of them symbolizes the other America that the Obamas brought to the White House.

²² I owe this remark on Michelle's arms and the previous one on Barack's walking style to Paul Taylor, whose research on the somaesthetics properties of the Obamas inspires the whole section.

²³ For an introduction to the principles of somesthetic, see Shusterman, 2008.

²⁴ See Piazza, 2008.

²⁵ Bayless was indeed guest chef at the White House on May 19, 2010, for the state dinner hosting Mexican President Felipe Calderón and his wife Margarita Zavala.

Even if the Obamas would have not been the first presidential family to appoint an African American as head chef (George Washington and Lyndon Johnson, for instance, had opted for this choice), what seems to be most remarkable is the manner in which a chef's profile can be used to suggest a certain image of the presidential family. Indeed, what matters is not just *who* is doing the cooking, but *what that chef* is asked to bring to the table. Here we find the tie between nature and culture: a family and a racial profile are formed through the perseverance of a diet.²⁶ A family's diet is not something that can be changed overnight without considerable re-educational efforts and sacrifice for the palate. If G.W. Bush was famous for having claimed that he would not eat anything green or wet, the Obamas made themselves known for their opting for fresh, healthy foods, often with an international twist. In bringing their culinary tradition and dietary habits into the White House, the Obamas did not entirely socially construct their racial identity: they followed – at least partially – the developmental patterns of their bodies, used to be fed on foods others than the ones of the Bushes. A family was hence brought together by means of its relationship to food, one constituted – at least partially – of a distinct biological component: the choice of a head chef representing the other America was placed along with a distinctive dietary history, to which Barack's and Michelle's bodies bear witness.

In the quest to reconfigure her image as a care giver and an educational model geared towards black mothers, re-establishing a White House vegetable garden (where both the Carters and the Clintons had failed) was one of the most successful accomplishments of Michelle Obama.²⁷ Not only did the garden reinforce the idea of an unprecedented presidential family whose diet consisted in fresh and healthy foods as well as in a close body relationship with nature's gifts; it also helped to re-configure Michelle's ideal place within the family, shifting the focus on her mother-role and sensitivity to the daily challenges and needs of African American mothers and children. Under these lenses, the *Let's Move!* campaign was the most obvious initiative to place next to the gardening initiative.²⁸ Launched by the First Lady on February 9, 2010,

²⁶ The case studies discussed in Douglas (1984) constitute an excellent proof of the strong ties between land, foraging and cooking skills that require specific development, and the formation of family or group identities.

²⁷ See for instance Carman, 2012. On Michelle Obama's image as a White House house-wife, see also White, 2011, that however does not touch upon the role of food in the Obama's aims.

²⁸ There is a third food-related item on the agenda of the first lady that deserves to be mentioned: MyPlate, the current nutrition guide published by USDA and issued on June 2, 2011. MyPlate

the campaign targets that «slow, quiet, everyday threat that doesn't always appear to warrant the headline urgency of some of the other issues that we face».²⁹ While the urgency is certainly of concern to U.S. citizens at large, it is of special relevance for black communities:

You just heard the statistics. They're all too familiar: how nearly 40 percent of African American kids are overweight or obese. Nearly one in two – that is half of our children – will develop diabetes in some point in their lives. But I also know how easy it is to rattle off those numbers, and to shake our heads, and move on, because in the black community especially, these persistent health problems can become so routine that we come to expect it, sometimes even tolerate it.

To show her active participation, Michelle has held dancing events at several schools across the nation, involving celebrities such as Beyoncé, and she even put her daughters on a diet starting right before the launch of the campaign. While figures such as Sarah Palin have regarded Michelle's dietary advices as attempts to micro-manage the lives of American families, they seem to have been effective in bringing about a new ferment around fresh and healthy foods across the U.S.

Once again, the dietary challenges that the *Let's Move* campaign and the gardening initiative are trying to combat do not reflect just the need for cultural changes. They are unavoidably linked to developmental patterns too: the abilities correlated with gardening or training one's own body to perform physical activities require proper upbringing and are best and most easily acquired during early stages of life. This is, at least in part, the reason why both enterprises have a special focus on schools. The dietary suggestions that Michelle is bringing forward, hence, shape up her identity as an African American mother. But they do so not simply in virtue of a socially constructed image: they bear witness to the way her body developed. The challenges of obesity that the Obamas's daughters, Malia and Sasha, face are not simply

emphasizes the importance of physical activity alongside with simple, direct dietary suggestions. Because of those aspects, it confirms the points established by the *Let's Move* campaign that are most of interest for present purposes.

²⁹ These remarks are from the speech Michelle Obama delivered in front of the Congressional Black Caucus on September 15, 2010, as provided by the White House. (They can be retrieved at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/15/remarks-first-lady-congressional-black-caucus-foundation-legislative-con>).

social; they are obviously medical as well. In so far as the identity of a family, of a race, of an African American mother are shaped via their relationship to a diet and an acquaintance with gardening practices or physical activities, such identities exhibit – at once – a social and a naturalistic component.

From the present perspective, then, the relationship of the Obamas with food exemplifies one of the means of establishing family, race, and gender identities on the basis of ties that cannot simply be discounted as socially constructed. Even if the Obamas can be charged with having carefully chosen the sort of food image that most suited their political orientation, at least part of that image is rooted in the respective histories of Barack and Michelle's families as well as in the developmental histories of their respective bodies. You cannot simply choose to change your diet, or gain acquaintance with practices such as gardening, in the same way you choose to change the password of your email account. Once the naturalistic components of development have been individuated, a common ground between social constructionists and naturalists will be established, and finding links between naturalistic claims and evolutionary facts more likely will appear as methodologically compelling.

V. Conclusions

What is the metaphysical nature of kinds associated with gender, race, and the family? This paper has argued that it is fundamentally wrong to view those kinds as *either* socially constructed *or* natural. Additional research, to prove this thesis in the specifics, needs to be done. For now, we shall content ourselves with a methodological point and some hints. The case studies we surveyed suggest that kinds of agents stand in special relationships with kinds of practices around food. In both cases, we are dealing with kinds that can be characterized by means of specific properties (e.g. dark-skinned; slim; red-blooded; thick) or abilities (emotionally solid; making sense of the environment; being able to garden; surviving a simple diet); but, whether said properties and kinds be natural or socially constructed matters only to the extent that we want to know how to go about controlling them for our purposes. Thus, to the extent within which food helps to establish or reinforce identities of gender, race, and family, the dichotomy between social constructionists and naturalists loses appeal. Moreover, the identities in question turn out to be closely entangled when we examine how they gain

recognition through the establishment of specific dietary relations. Foods, in the end, reveal the purpose-oriented side of kinds; as Ian Hacking once put it: «kinds are important to the agents and artisans who want to use things to do things...The animals, perhaps, inhabit a world of properties. We dwell in a universe of kinds».³⁰ Control over specific relations to foods, often in conjunction with other relevant relational structures, such as education to arts and crafts, or the development of musical preferences, ends up creating or reinforcing distinctions across genders, races, or families.

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³⁰ Hacking, 1991: 114.

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