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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Power of Food

> It is to serve the farmers of this great open country that teeming cities have arisen, great stretches of navigation have been opened, a mighty network of railways has been constructed, a fast increasing mileage of highways has been laid out, and modern inventions have stretched their lines of communication among all the various communities and into nearly every home. Agriculture holds a position in this country that it was never before able to secure anywhere else on earth. . . . [I]n America, the farm has long since ceased to be associated with a mode of life that could be called rustic. It has become a great industrial enterprise.
>
> Calvin Coolidge, Address to Farm Bureau Federation (1925)[1]

> [T]oday in cosmopolitan Dublin, you can choose to eat an Indian curry, a Mexican burrito, or an Irish breakfast. With an increasingly global food trade a single meal can originate from ten locations across the planet. . . . In eagerness to minimize the distance our food travels, and connect flavours to places, we may risk over-simplifying the complex systems that comprise our food systems. But, whether one grows local or eats global, food will always be inextricably linked to place; and places are in constant flux.
>
> Center for Genomic Gastronomy,
> *Edible: The Taste of Things to Come* (2012)[2]

In 1925, Calvin Coolidge looked out on an audience of farmers and policymakers and effectively broke with the agrarian rhetoric of his predecessors. If Thomas Jefferson imagined the United States to be a nation of yeoman farmers, Coolidge called 150 years later for a rural workforce savvy in "management," "intricate machinery," and "marketing."[3] Even as the president announced the arrival of industrial agriculture, his rhetoric anticipated a postindustrial era in which farming would be just one among many "enterprises" constituting the human food chain – what the *Harvard Business Review* would call in 1956 "agribusiness."[4] The speech captures a new dimension of the American national imaginary, I contend, according to which food and agriculture propel, rather than offer a retreat, from modernity. A concept of *the food*

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system thus takes hold in American culture, calling into question what is currently an intellectual separation of agricultural history from food studies.[5] At World's Fairs that took place from the 1930s through the 1960s, the systemic connections between the nation's farms and kitchens were evident in exhibits about the future of food, which were also very much about the U.S. appetite for international power. These futuristic displays presented a cornucopian nation whose agricultural surpluses and scientific innovations combined to generate a global utopia of edible goods. The Fairs gave symbolic expression to a material reality: the nation's agricultural economy, in Warren Belasco's words, "had reached its geographical limits," and the power Coolidge correlated in 1925 to food production would now require not (or at least not only) territorial expansion but new technologies and new markets.[6]

At the same time, a neo-Malthusian streak haunted the American vision of a global food frontier. Plans for futuristic farms and kitchens foresaw a world in which the reduction of farmland and the growth of the human population would make technological fixes vital to manufacturing experiences of culinary abundance out of a handful of staple crops. In the 1960s, the decade in which the Fairs came to an end, American Pop Art painter Tom Wesselmann exposed the rhetoric of American abundance as a fallacy in his "Still Life #30," a garish painting of a kitchen teeming with food (Figure 1). The apparent cornucopia in the still life is, in fact, a monoculture of consumer brands, while the repetition of packaged meat, bland starches, and canned goods undercuts the colorful kitchen scene and the verdant townscape beyond its open window. Notwithstanding a smattering of vegetables and a bright red apple (whose singularity suggests the post-Edenic character of the Cold War food supply), "Still Life #30" offers a mosaic of culinary monotony. The "Electrified Farm," which appeared at the 1939 New York World's Fair, suggests that the conceptual origins of Wesselmann's homogenous yet overflowing kitchen lie in earlier designs for standardized and productive farms (Figure 2).[7] Today, we may not find the push-button farms that engineers forecasted in the thirties, but we can find farmers who spend their time, as novelist Ruth Ozeki pictures a character in *All Over Creation* (2003), "at a computer, sweating at it, trying to input data and generate readouts and maps."[8] So, too, can we witness a global market for biofuels that require more energy to produce and distribute than the energy they provide.[9] In line with Coolidge's claim that the "network" of railroads, highways, and communication lines served above all to support the industrialization of food production, future-oriented designs like the "Electrified Farm" predicted a time when power would be all too literal as an organizing concept for the modern food system.

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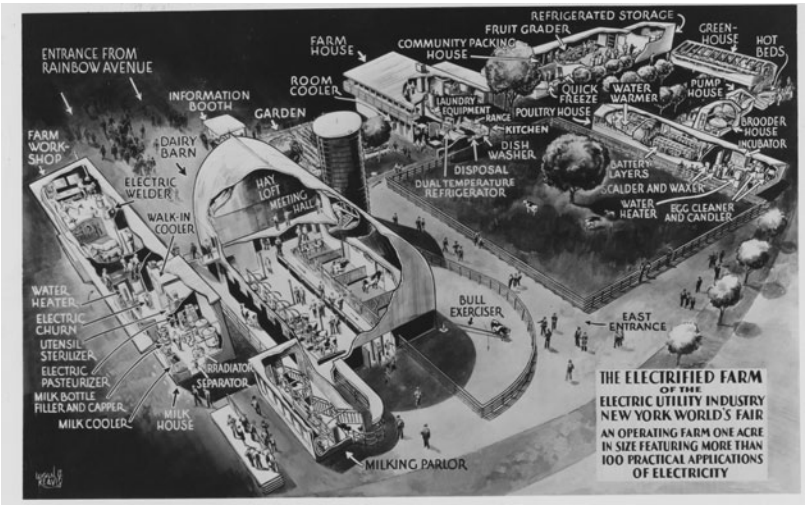
1 "Still Life #30." 1963. Museum of Modern Art, Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen Exhibition. © Estate of Tom Wesselmann / Licensed by VAGA, New York. Reprinted with the permission of VAGA and Art Resource.



2 "Electrified Farm." 1939–1940. New York World's Fair Exhibition. Courtesy of the New York Public Library, Manuscript and Archives Division.

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More information

Since the moment when Coolidge addressed the Farm Bureau, the political and economic power that has accrued to those who control the world food supply has turned out to be an indicator of global power writ large, and the hegemony of the United States has had a great deal to do with food ever since. Today, what I term *U.S. food power* is both global in scope and subject to manifold forms of opposition: it drives the international adoption of genetically modified seeds (GMOs), but fuels anti-GMO movements and seed-saver organizations; it inspires the post-9/11 revival of "victory gardens" as instruments of national food security, but spurs community supported agriculture (CSA) as a means to make food systems ecologically and socially sustainable; and it enables the global reach of American food brands, but energizes alternative dietary practices. The United States is, moreover, not the world's sole food power. Nearly a century since Coolidge delivered his speech, the "great industrial enterprise" has taken root in China, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, India, France, and elsewhere, while transnational social movements have mobilized to contest that enterprise. Put simply, food has become a political mobilizer and cultural buzzword. In the United States, the number of protests, activist groups, conferences, books, films, art installations, and websites devoted to food and food politics grows by the year. This popular discourse attests that food both participates in "complex systems," from regional watersheds to international markets, and circulates in multivalent cultural forms, from traditional genres like almanacs and cookbooks to new media like blogs and bioart experiments. To invoke Roland Barthes, the "polysemia" of food in contemporary society – as in the multiple social and, I would hasten to add, ecological structures it shapes – is a constitutive feature of modernity.[10]

The reasons for the proliferation of food movements and food media during the last decade are numerous. Perhaps most importantly, environmental groups have publicized scientific findings that industrial agriculture is a major contributor to climate change at the same time that volatility in rice, wheat, and corn prices have highlighted a troubling paradox of the modern food system: despite tremendous gains in the productivity of agriculture, nearly one billion people are hungry.[11] The 2012 exhibition *Edible: A Taste of Things to Come* illustrates another paradox of the modern food system, one that inspires this book: the richness of cultural responses to the system's perceived failings. Organized by the playful art collective known as the Center for Genomic Gastronomy, the exhibition assembled artists, activists, cooks, scientists, and hobbyists to imagine possible futures of food. With installations like "Disaster Pharming" and "Vegan Ortolan," the exhibition showcased the outer reaches of molecular gastronomy and agricultural genetics alongside more familiar "countercuisines"[12] such as

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vegetarianism and raw food. In positing these futures, the exhibition was highly critical of the status quo. The *Edible* catalog concludes with two infographics: one showing disinvestments in small farmers and increases in obesity rates and another charting the decline of agricultural diversity under the industrialized food regime (in which wheat, rice, milk, potatoes, sugar, and corn have displaced the thousands of edible plants long cultivated around the world).[13] Paired with this lament about the present, however, is a celebration of the culinary cosmopolitanism that the present affords. De-centering the United States, and indeed the nation state, as the locus of food power, the *Edible* curators suggest that the global circulation of foodstuffs and food cultures allows the individual eater to act as a world citizen.

Although *Global Appetites* makes the case for the cultural significance of the modern food system and the power of a nation like the United States within it, U.S. food power in the period since the First World War certainly has historical precedents. Coolidge acknowledged in 1925 that the farm had "*long* . . . ceased to be associated with a mode of life that could be called rustic." Broadening his point, we can identify in European empires and in the colonial United States the twin impulses to expand the geographic scale of food distribution and transform the technological apparatus of agriculture. We also can trace back to the ancient world the very forms of cosmopolitan consumption that the *Edible* exhibition identifies as uniquely modern and urban. Food historian Massimo Montanari observes that the "social expansion of globalization" should not lead us to "forget its ancient origins as a cultural model."[14] At the same time, Montanari contrasts the "infinite local variations" that once defined international cuisines with the current "tendency toward uniformity of consumer goods" that multinational corporations have effectively promoted.[15] It is my contention that literature provides a powerful medium through which to chart both the historical continuities and cultural ruptures that inform late modern appetites for world cuisines and national aspirations for global food power.

Moving from the First World War to the post-9/11 era, *Global Appetites* argues for the centrality of food to accounts of globalization and U.S. hegemony that pervade the literature of this period. Across genres, literature is a vehicle attuned to the modern food system due to the capacity of imaginative texts to shuttle between social and interpersonal registers and between symbolic and embodied expressions of power. Just as importantly, literature has a facility with shifting from macroscopic to intimate scales of representation that can provide an incisive lens on the interactions between local places and global markets that are so central to how communities and corporations produce, exchange, and make use of food in the modern

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period. While wide-ranging in its primary materials, the book zeroes in on one question: What forms does the writing of food take in the age of American agribusiness? This question proves pertinent to a wide array of texts, from cookbooks that challenge the products and ideologies of fast food to novels that depict the modernity of rural communities. The literature of food that this book maps includes not just culinary writing and agrarian narrative, but also experimental poetry, postmodern fiction, government propaganda, advertising, memoirs, and manifestos. This body of literature takes shape after the First World War, when industrial agriculture really took off in the United States, and gains momentum during the Cold War, a period in which U.S. corporations began to market food brands and packaged foods internationally. Engaging with these historical shifts, writers elucidate and at times challenge what Henry Luce called in 1941 "The American Century."[16] For Luce, the exceptional history of the United States underwrites a national imperative to lead the world in the twentieth century toward the arguably competing goals of "free enterprise" and political "freedom and justice."[17] From Willa Cather to Toni Morrison, the writers whom I discuss in the pages that follow articulate this sense of American exceptionalism, yet often through a negative form that defines the United States as the main origin of imperialist and unjust practices attending the globalization of food.

One could argue that the literary history this book traces reaches back at least to the turn of the century, when writers such as Upton Sinclair and Frank Norris begin to investigate the rise of industrial agriculture and the corporate ownership of food infrastructure. Hsuan Hsu reminds American Studies scholars that 1898 is a particularly pivotal year for the history of U.S. power as a moment when the Spanish-American War crystallized the nation's imperial aspirations and actions.[18] Although writers like Sinclair make cameo appearances in *Global Appetites* and although I concur with Hsu's historical argument, I show that it is not until the First World War that a discourse of food power pervades both politics and literature, just as it is then that the methods of industrial agriculture and the products of U.S. food companies pervade the world system.[19] Investigating a set of writers who tackle these historical developments, the book contributes to cultural theories of globalization. Since the 1980s, globalization has come to describe a set of institutions, ideologies, and practices that advance modes of border-crossing connectivity – what sociologist Anthony Giddens terms the "disembedding" of communities from local contexts.[20] While the term *globalization* offers a kind of clarity in connoting free trade, mass media, and consumer culture, scholars have employed it in often sharply

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divergent analyses. As Ursula K. Heise observes in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, some theorists "see globalization principally as an economic process and as the most recent form of capitalist expansion, whereas others emphasize its political and cultural dimensions, or characterize it as a heterogeneous and uneven process whose various components . . . do not unfold according to the same logic and at the same pace," an insightful gloss of a field that includes the work of Arjun Appadurai, Ulrich Beck, Daniel Bell, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Saskia Sassen, and others.[21] The now omnipresent concept of globalization in the social sciences and humanities serves, furthermore, to encapsulate a host of social conditions associated with the contemporary period as well as to synthesize the overlapping historical designations of late modernity (Beck), late capitalism (Harvey), postmodernism (Jameson), postindustrialism (Bell), and postcolonialism (Appadurai and Sassen).

Shifting the lens of globalization inquiry to food, I have come to question a central premise within this body of theory: the idea that globalization separates spaces of production and consumption, intensifying the process Karl Marx termed "commodity fetishism" and giving rise to decolonial modes of resistance to late capitalism (or what Harvey labels the "new imperialism").[22] *Global Appetites* addresses decolonial movements that resist economic globalization, such as those calling for food justice and seed sovereignty. So too does the book credit those late capitalist ideologies – from free trade to global branding – that depend on the geographic and psychic distance between people and that profit from our enchantment with things. Indeed, we see commodity fetishism at work nowhere more clearly than with food. Outside a small if growing subculture, most consumers in the contemporary United States shop weekly at supermarkets, where the labor conditions and environmental consequences of the produce are as hidden as those of the brand-name packages overflowing from the center aisles. If global commodities like a can of Coke and the Big Mac exemplify Marx's theory, one's indulgence in a fair-trade-certified bar of chocolate is surely no less an instance of commodity fetishism than the hurried purchase of a fast food meal. However, despite how robustly the modern food system reinforces the idea that globalization is the apotheosis of capitalism, there is a countervailing pattern to apprehend. Globalization, as this book concludes, also provides the imaginative frameworks and material structures for the contemporary movement to re-localize food and reconnect producers and consumers. This contention speaks not only to globalization studies but also to environmental criticism, and especially to recent work that has questioned the centrality of place-based politics and localism in North

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American environmentalism.[23] From Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) to Novella Carpenter's memoir *Farm City* (2009), the primary materials I examine span a century to provide a new account of globalization that emerges out of an environmental sensibility at once local and global in its coordinates. Imaginatively reconnecting farmers and eaters – cities and countrysides – the literature of food shows us that the endgame of globalization may not be the free market that the United States has underwritten for decades and backed with its military. Rather, it opens up the possibility that the outcome of globalization may be a postcapitalist system defined by interchanges between regional communities and the global networks that not only fulfill appetites for exotic foods but also circulate the knowledge and resources that advance alternative food movements, from organic agriculture to urban farming.

This thesis informs my analytical methodology, which expands the parameters of food writing beyond taste, the table, and cuisine. I depart from what has been a tendency in the humanities to treat as separate objects of analysis, on the one hand, culinary practices and gastronomical rhetoric and, on the other, agricultural production and agrarian discourse. This intervention informs the predominance of women writers in the book, which emerges out of my finding that the distinction observed between writing about eating and writing about farming is gendered as much as it is formal. Scholars of the American pastoral and agrarian traditions have emphasized male writers, from Frank Norris to Wendell Berry, particularly when their interest is in how rural literature treats the sweeping forces of industrialization and U.S. expansionism. Although Cather is among the exceptions to this pattern, in focusing on her importance to American regionalism, critics tend to diminish her attention to matters national and global in scope. With respect to culinary literature, critics have defined that rhetorical mode primarily around the spaces of the kitchen and the table, thus bracketing it from the wider food system. Rethinking the divide between agriculture and cuisine in literary and cultural studies, I examine a group of women writers whose texts mix formal modes to depict the entanglements of growing, procuring, and consuming food and the interdependencies of food culture and agriculture under globalization.

Food studies scholars such as Warren Belasco, Amy Bentley, Denise Gigante, Harvey Levenstein, and Doris Witt have shown just how significant dietary habits and culinary regimes are to cultural histories of race, class, and gender.[24] This scholarship revitalizes structuralist theories of cuisine that

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Barthes, Mary Douglas, and Claude Lévi-Strauss formulated in the sixties, while also asserting the value of historicist approaches to the study of food.[25] That early cohort of structuralist thinkers argued for the social significance of eating by defining food as a system of communication with the capacity to create meaning beyond its "material reality."[26] In turn, their semiotic analyses provided the intellectual foundation for foodways[27] to become a subject first in anthropology and cultural geography and, more recently, in the humanities. As Jennifer Fleissner notes, the turn to food in the humanities has focused since the late nineties on reexamining an established philosophical distinction between "aesthetic and gustatory taste," a distinction Barthes called into question in his seminal comparison of French and American cuisines.[28] At the same time, the work of Terry Gifford, Leo Marx, Raymond Williams, and others has made rural culture and agricultural industry important subjects for literary history.[29] These scholars demonstrate how multivalent the pastoral tradition is by comparing ideas of rural landscapes that draw on idyllic poetry to realist narratives of farm life that activate the georgic and almanac traditions. The arc and argument of this book are indebted to both of these trajectories within literary and cultural studies. *Global Appetites* departs from prior scholarship, however, in showing that the history of modernity centers in no small measure on *the interactions* between places of food production and experiences of food consumption. The book thus recontextualizes Berry's assertion in "The Pleasures of Eating" that "eating is an agricultural act" by intervening in the localism that his assertion has inspired in sustainable agriculture and related environmental movements.[30] In the period that *Global Appetites* covers, the term *food* signifies a chain of activities that travels all the way from planting a seed to relishing a square of chocolate and from farms near and far to one's evening meal.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the literature of food breaks from two genres that map onto the scholarly gap I am identifying between studies of the culinary and studies of the agricultural: namely, gastronomical primers focusing on taste and fine dining and pastoral narratives about the relative simplicity of rural life. Although both genres remain active, as we will see, new cultural templates emerge alongside them to articulate how the social structures and experiential realities of food most change with the rise of factory farms and branded foods. My aim is to define these templates and situate them within the social, technological, and environmental histories of food in the context of agribusiness and in the related context of globalization. Chapter 2 elaborates on this keyword of agribusiness through a reconsideration of Cather's Nebraska novels *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia* (1918), and *One of Ours* (1922). Central to these novels is a story of rural

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modernity: a sense of agrarian communities as new sites for industrial infrastructure and consumer culture that Coolidge lauded in 1925. Although her fiction conveys ambivalence about the modernity of rural life, Cather disturbs the myth of the United States as a nation of small-holding pioneers by chronicling the importance of modern farms and farmhouses to the nation's expansionism in the first decades of the twentieth century. The "great industrial enterprise" of food became even more interwoven with U.S. global power during the Second World War, as evident in propaganda that made the productivity of farms and efficiency of kitchens vital to the Allied war effort and to U.S. economic growth. By 1945, the United States had become the world's largest food exporter.[31] Challenging the imperialist character of wartime and postwar food rhetoric, writers on both sides of the Atlantic lay bare what they saw as a growing rather than diminishing stratification of the world's edible resources. These mid-century writers politicize modernism by juxtaposing rhetorical assertions of American abundance to lived experiences of hunger within and outside the United States. Chapter 3 develops this argument through discussions of the experimental lyrics of Lorine Niedecker, the unconventional culinary writings of M. F. K. Fisher and Elizabeth David, and the absurdist theater of Samuel Beckett (an arguable outlier in this group of writers, but one who makes poignantly visible not only mid-century famine, through the existential sparseness of his stage and the meager rations of his tramps Vladimir and Estragon, but also the power of those – like Pozzo and Godot – who control agricultural land).

The second half of the book turns to contemporary novelists and journalists whose accounts of globalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries revolve around agricultural corporations and cosmopolitan consumers as well as countercultural food practices that aspire to disrupt American agribusiness. Chapter 4 focuses on Morrison's 1981 novel *Tar Baby*, which is set on a fictionalized Caribbean island that Philadelphia candy executive Valerian Street develops into an enclave of vacation estates. A novel that speaks to the environmental justice movement, *Tar Baby* links bodily desires for exotic foods – chocolate and other delicacies – to the historical forces that give rise to the supermarket and its promise of plenty. Extending the mid-century dialectic of "luxury feeding"[32] and physical hunger, the novel offers a searing critique of free trade that moves from the hemispheric impact of U.S. food companies on the agriculture of island states to everyday acts of food indulgence and food resistance. The chapter has a distinct position in the arc of *Global Appetites*, as it breaks from the focus on the interconnections of world war and American agribusiness that centrally

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