

# Chapter 14

## Food and Culture

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*Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships . . . [W]e see how food-sharing creates solidarity, and how food scarcity damages the human community and the human spirit . . . Food is both a scholarly concern and a real-life concern.*

*Because food crosses so many conceptual boundaries, it must be interpreted from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. In fact, the study of food can be used to question the limitations of academic disciplinary boundaries.*

(Counihan and Van Esterik 1)

One of the fastest-growing fields of scholarly research on popular culture has been food studies, the interdisciplinary investigation into the social and cultural dimensions of food. Using a variety of theoretical perspectives and models, food studies examines the personal and political economy of food. Questions of gender, ethnicity, class, consumption, agribusiness, globalization, and semiotics frame the wide-ranging field of inquiry. Examining foodways requires us to understand the complex ways in which social norms, cultural meaning, historical contexts, and economic realities underlie food habits. Texts in the field are of necessity interdisciplinary, drawing on a wide range of sources from cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literature, women's and gender studies, history, film, and media studies.

The study of foodways shakes our assumptions about what we often presume are personal preferences – our so-called taste – in foods. As Pierre Bourdieu explains in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, “There is an economy of cultural goods but it has a specific logic” (1). “Taste classifies, and it classifies the

classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make . . ." (6). Taste is a specific product of the confluence of class, context, and social habit that creates the categories of "good taste," producing the classifier that pretends to make independent decisions of preference. Taste "has a specific logic" that frames our choice of foods and the preferred modes of serving and consuming them. The habits and patterns enacted by "what we like" are in fact contextualized by a complex set of social classifications linked to nation, class, gender and culture. As Bourdieu's work alerts us, the upper-class preference for champagne and the working-class fondness for beer have as much to do with classifying the classifier – and an articulation of the material specifics of class and culture – as they do with personal preference.

### The Polysemy of Food

Therefore, foodways can only be understood by examining the symbolic function of food objects and practices; food is both an object of material culture and an object contextualized in ritual practice. Thus, we need to consider a semiotic analysis of cuisine:

"[The] polysemy of food characterizes modernity. . . . For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of images, situations and behavior." (Barthes 21)

The polysemy of food is its ability to have multiple and different meanings in various contexts. Food is, then, a system of communication, a type of language through which we express identities and relationships, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, festivity, and sacrality. This rich capacity of food to mean must be investigated from multiple angles: semiotics and linguistics, analyses of visual culture, and the anthropology of ritual. The birthday cake is more than a symbol of excess in marking a milestone. The symbolic functions of candles, fire, color, decoration, ritual song, and – perhaps above all – the consumption of sugar as a marker of exceptional time are all deployed in the consumption of a celebratory dessert. In Barthes's analysis, food *signifies* and any effort to understand food requires that we decipher this signification. Food has a twofold value, "being nutrition as well as protocol. . . . It is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used" (Barthes 25–26).

When we buy, consume, or serve food, we do not simply manipulate an object in "purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies" (Barthes 23). Substances such as sugar and wine are institutions that "necessarily imply a set of images, dreams, tastes, choices, and values" (Barthes 20). The consumption of food is a highly structured, highly coded, complex act that means so much more than nutrition. There is, it seems, a

“veritable grammar of foods” (Barthes 22). As Barthes explains, “this polysemy of food characterizes modernity” (25). Food is not just a foodstuff but rather a way of conceptualizing basic philosophical concepts. Sugar, for example, “is an attitude, bound to certain usages, certain ‘protocols,’ that have to do with more than food” (20). When Barthes attempts to understand why consumption is nationally specific – that is, why folks in the United States consume almost twice as much sugar as the French – he concludes that “Sugar is a time, a category of the world” (20). This strange capacity of food to embody conceptual – even philosophical – frameworks, such as time, nature, or home, points to the fundamental ways in which we articulate ourselves and are ourselves articulated by and through foodways.

### Food and Nationalism

The noted anthropologist Sidney Mintz questions the link between cuisine and national culture when he asks whether there is such a thing as an American cuisine (“Time” 23–33). Variety and habits, he insists, do not equal a cuisine. These habits should be cataloged, because class, regional, and ethnic differences profoundly affect our eating behaviors. For example, we know the top sources of calories in the American diet: milk; white breads, rolls, and flour; soft drinks, margarine, and sugar; ground beef and American cheese (Mintz, “Time” 29). Likewise Mintz articulates the most frequent habitual features of American foodways, including eating out; fast foods; prepared and packaged foods; diets high in animal protein, salt, fats, and processed sugars and low in fresh fruits and vegetables; drinking more soda than tap water; and the consumption of labeled foods – designed to make consumers feel less guilty about what they eat (low fat, no cholesterol, transfat free!) (29). However, these traits and habits do not make a cuisine.

What lurks behind these traits and the “dizzying overdifferentiation of food” (Mintz, “Time” 31) are metaphysical concepts linked to American identity. In particular, the concept of time – mainly the intense belief that we don’t have enough of it – dictates foodways arranged around convenience. “Americans are repeatedly told that they do not have enough time . . . because it serves to increase their aggregate consumption” (Mintz, “Time” 31). The dominance of packaged, processed, take-out, drive-thru, and convenience foods in the American diet is a factor of our investment in prior conceptions about the shortness of time and, moreover, a result of the view “that our time is in short supply, but also already appropriately distributed” (Mintz, “Time” 31). The inverse correlation between the time spent consuming media and the time spent cooking is fairly clear. The increasing homogenization and convenience-orientation of the American food supply is one result.

“If our eating is more homogeneous today than in the past, we can thank (or blame) a national marketplace through which the standardized foods of modern food industries have circulated” (Gabbacia 39). Historian Donna Gabaccia links “these closely related histories – of recurring human migrations and of changes in

the production and marketing of foods” to understand how American eating habits and identities have evolved over time (38). Her fascinating case study of the bagel traces how this symbol of Eastern European Jewry in New York is translated to mean the urban, northeastern multiethnic mix called “New York deli,” then becomes mass-produced (by Murray Lender) in connection with the legacy of English Quakers (Philadelphia cream cheese), corporatized and frozen in a sweetened bread version, then sent to the Dunkin’ Donuts in Tel Aviv as an “authentic” American food. This history of the bagel shows us a constantly evolving hybrid identity. As Gabaccia warns,

Americans’ shifting, blended, multiethnic eating habits are signs neither of postmodern decadence, ethnic fragmentation, nor corporate hegemony. If we do not understand how a bagel could sometimes be Jewish, sometimes be “New York,” and sometimes be American, or why it is that Pakistanis now sell bagels to both Anglos and Tejanos in Houston, it is in part because we have too hastily assumed that our tendency to cross cultural boundaries in order to eat ethnic foods is a recent development – and a culinary symptom of all that has gone wrong with contemporary culture.

It is not. The bagel tells a different kind of American tale. It highlights ways that the production, exchange, marketing, and consumption of food have generated new identities – for foods and eaters alike. (38)

Gabaccia argues that “to understand changing [American] identities, we must explore also the symbolic power of food to reflect cultural or social affinities in moments of change or transformation” (40). This means that the question of food for cultural studies can be taken up by any one of multiple identities and must be taken up at moments of transformation in specific historical conjunctures.

Following Benedict Anderson’s scholarship on imagined communities (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm’s analyses of invented traditions (1983), studies on the construction of nationalism have emerged on the meaning of food-based rituals. A reflection on nationalism and food can be found in investigations of the invention of Thanksgiving, a ritual of American nationality. “Though traditions are invented and nations imagined, Thanksgiving is a day on which all persons who consider themselves Americans celebrate or avoid a ritual family feast, centered around a stuffed turkey” (Siskind 41). This invented tradition purports to link all Americans to a common pilgrim ancestry, but there is “no direct continuity between the feast at Plymouth in 1621 and our November Thanksgiving feast” (Siskind 43), with Thanksgiving first emerging after the editor of a ladies’ magazine “browbeat President Lincoln into proclaiming it a holiday” in 1863 and only officially becoming a legal national holiday in 1941 (Pillsbury 17).

The menu “seems to have been largely invented by cookbook writers and home magazines with a little help from Norman Rockwell’s iconistic painting” (Pillsbury 17). Virtually none of the “traditional” foods would have been available at the “first” Thanksgiving, a largely nationalistic myth “created to provide a past that never was” (Pillsbury 17) at the late nineteenth-century moment when fear of immigrants made the Pilgrims the center of “full-fledged ritual re-enactment of an origin myth of the

nation” (Siskind 52). Americans – the vast majority of whom have no social, cultural, or religious connection to the Pilgrims – were produced by means of rituals. “Like all myth, the power of the story of the Pilgrims and the First Thanksgiving is shown by its capacity to refute experience; it is validated not by lived experience, but by the recitation of the code – in schools, in speeches, in the ‘common sense’ of the culture” (Siskind 53). Participation in this event, symbolizing group membership, refutes “the reality that many of our ancestors probably would not have been welcome even if they had been in the vicinity at the time” (Pillsbury 18).

The foodstuffs, none of which would have been available, produced, grown, or harvested at the time of the mythical Pilgrim feast, center around the modern domestic turkey, a creation by “modern genetic engineering” after the “idealized full-breasted bird” in Rockwell’s painting (Pillsbury 17). This American bird “symbolizes the bounty, the conquered wilderness, the imposition of civilization on the American continent”; in short, the turkey at the center of the ritual “powerfully symbolizes the Indians” (Siskind 48). It is “a symbol of a symbol, since the concept of ‘Indian’ is already a reduction of all the varied individuals and nationals of Native America into a homogenous ‘other’” (Siskind 48). Siskind explains how seasonal rituals must provide the feast with symbolic energy by stylizing, blowing up, miniaturizing, and then exploding their central images. The stuffed bird presented whole at the table and then cut to pieces in the dramatic moment of carving is the food that in its mythic status lends “an aura of naturalness and inevitability” to the invasion and colonization of North America (Siskind 55). As Siskind writes, “No Virginia, there was no first Thanksgiving.” Its celebration is “purely but significantly, mythological” (43).

Critical studies of the Thanksgiving meal illustrate an important trend in food studies, revealing how marketing and consumption patterns of a single commodity at a particular moment “[can] shed light on a wider range of social and cultural shifts” (Roseberry 124). A number of analyses have emerged on everything from beans (Freidberg), coffee (Jiménez; Roseberry), sushi (Bestor), and tortillas and Pepsi (Pilcher) to Coca-Cola (Weiner). Perhaps the most groundbreaking is Sidney Mintz’s work “Time, Sugar, and Sweetness,” situating coffee, tea, and sugar within the historico-cultural nexus of colonialism. Of particular centrality to a cultural studies approach is his analysis of the “proletarian hunger killers” (Mintz’s phrase for coffee, sugar, tea, and chocolate) as commodities through which we can view a range of relationships and social and cultural formations.

## Consumption and Democracy

The examination of food commodities offers insight into the historical conditions producing capital, class, and nation. Scholarly and popular texts have emerged around French fries, hamburgers, and cola (Pollan; Schlosser; Weiner), shedding light on dominant patterns of fast food consumption, but also the ecological, nutritional, and political stakes in foods serving as global metonyms for Americanness.

"[P]eople tend to think of nations in culinary terms" (Weiner 123). "Coca-Cola is what Roland Barthes has called a 'totem-drink,' and more than any other food (except, perhaps, hamburgers, with which it is often served), this beverage has come to symbolize the American nation" (Weiner 123). Fast food embodies values and serves as "both commodity and metaphor" (Schlosser 3). Schlosser's popular tome *Fast Food Nation* exposed fast food as a driver of corporate agriculture, standardization, franchising, the American service economy, and the food-industrial complex. He ties the study of foodstuffs to larger global and economic concerns, noting that "what we eat has changed more in the last forty years than in the previous forty thousand" (7). He argues that:

the values, the culture, and the industrial arrangements of our fast food nation are now being exported to the rest of the world. Fast food has joined Hollywood movies, blue jeans, and pop music as one of America's most prominent cultural exports. Unlike other commodities, however, fast food isn't viewed, read, played, or worn. It enters the body and becomes part of the consumer. No other industry offers, both literally and figuratively, so much insight into the nature of mass consumption. (10)

Weiner argues that among these fast food commodities, "Coca-Cola is special among patriotic symbols in at least one important respect: the national characteristic it represents is a political one, a democratic vision of consumer abundance known as the 'American Way of Life.' Inexpensive, simple for the palate, and providing a sweet, caffeinated release," Coca-Cola represents the "egalitarian, self-directed spirit of consumer society in the United States, but also explicitly served as an international symbol of that society during the Cold War" (123–24). Weiner traces the history of Coke from the 1920s through the drugstore soda fountains of the thirties to the World War II context in which Coke became "deeply linked with *American* identity" to explore how an "icon of national values" can illuminate the nature of 'the culture of consumption'" (124–25). He argues that collusion of state and corporation during the war redefined citizenship in terms of consumption in the "seemingly innocuous language of soft drinks, arms and household appliances" (Jean-Christophe Agnew quoted in Weiner 125).

Weiner examines the wartime advertising "which surrounded Coke with the language of American identity" using the techniques of American wartime propaganda, in particular by linking a consumer good with personal self-interest and political identity (129). In his semiotic analysis of the = symbol in Coca-Cola advertisements during the War, Weiner traces the theme of moral equivalency whereby consumer goods were associated with the public material of war and the communal. "Coke associated its very private product with communal life," transforming what was "private into what was public – an ontological movement of tremendous significance" (130–31). This "ideological redefinition" and steady "refiguration of the American identity in the language of commodities" was also accomplished through political means, in particular the "deep interpenetration of the Coca-Cola Company and the U.S. government" (127).

Relations between Coke and the American state were so close that the U.S. government often offered to assist the corporation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt supported a controversial policy giving soft-drink makers large amounts of scrap metal for their bottle-cap production because “soft drinks . . . are part of our way of life” (127). General Dwight Eisenhower wanted a steady supply of Coke to boost morale and decrease alcohol consumption. The War Department officially encouraged selective (that is, brand-name) consumption, “authorizing overseas commands to order beverages by ‘name’” (127). While the war provided opportunities for product placement and public relations, it allowed Coke (and others) to expand their markets during global conflict. The U.S. government brought Coke to American soldiers by means of 148 T.O.s, “Technical Observers,” who were Coke employees with military status, *in military uniform*, who moved with Allied forces bringing Coke to the troops, but more importantly were “simultaneously laying the foundation for Coke’s postwar global expansion, setting up sixty-three bottling plants around the globe, in locations from Tripoli to Okinawa. This was business–government cooperation in its highest incarnation and at its most efficient” (128). When the state “directly assisted the distribution of the beverage by dressing Coca-Cola representatives in military uniform and charging them with quasi-military duties, it implicitly transformed Coke into a symbol of the very cause for which Americans were fighting” (128–29). While Coke protected its market interests, symbolically aligned itself with the Allied cause, and sponsored the Victory Parade of Starlight Bands, it created an unprecedented global distribution network for postwar economic domination. It did so, patriotically, through concert sponsorships and giveaways to soldiers, but also by creating Fanta, an orange carbonated beverage for the German marketplace, allowing Coke to sell to the enemy without tarnishing its patriotic image. In their “dual role as Coca-Cola Men and Government Men,” the T.O.s indicate that “during the war, the state underwent a qualitative change, becoming less an organ for the exercise of republican virtue than a provider of mass-market consumer products” (Weiner 129).

“The transformation of Coke into a national icon” was predicated on the relationship of state and corporation, the advertising of cola and “the emotional response of American servicemen to Coke,” which for many signaled peaceful civilian life (135). Weiner reads servicemen’s letters to determine whether individual soldiers came to perceive Coke as a symbol of the United States and their own identity. He argues that because “food often serves as a cathexis for emotions,” GI correspondence reveals a “highly charged portrait of Coke as the only stable object in a world of total chaos, as the one familiar point-of-reference in acutely disorienting situations” (132–33). Servicemen’s writings refer to Coke in an admixture of nostalgia for home, the soda fountain, and women and courtship. “If anyone asked us what we are fighting for, we think half of us would answer, ‘the right to buy Coca-Cola again—as much as we want’” (Weiner 129). The study of this iconic foodstuff reveals not only the complexity of sugar, postal, scrap metal, and other wartime government policies with regard to corporate producers, but also opens onto the larger debate around consumer society and its relation to democracy. Weiner asks, “When American soldiers

claimed to be fighting for the right to purchase Coke, were they in fact fighting for an impoverished notion of political life?" (136). With U.S. government help, Coke shipped more than five billion cases over the course of the war (127). But the larger question is whether "one of the most important functions of the state" was "to supply brand-name consumer products to its citizens" (136).

This privatized, consumerist understanding of national life threatens democratic participation in that the language of citizenship is recast in terms of consumer choice, access to brand-name products, and the "freedom" to consume, reframing consumer goods into "items of quasi-political entitlement" (Weiner 137). Consumer society "conceals the anti-democratic relations of economic power on which it is based, and encourages an ethic of individual self-focus incompatible with republican ideals of virtue and community" (Weiner 136).

### Consumption and Capitalism

Cultural studies analyses of a single food reflect the current trend in scholarship and can offer insights into the relationships between consumption, class, market forces, and taste. William Roseberry's insights into the rise of "yuppie coffees" and the reimagination of class in the United States lead to his argument: "New coffees, more choices, more diversity [of product], less [market] concentration, new capitalism: [coffee is] the beverage of postmodernism" (123). If the polysemy of food characterized modernity for Barthes, then the era of market specialization gives rise to the beverage of postmodernity. Roseberry's work concentrates on the "*shaping* of taste" through a twofold historical analysis – first, "the complex relation between the recent rise of specialty coffees and an earlier period characterized by standardization and mass-marketing," and, second, "the specific history of specialty coffees themselves" (123). He traces how a stagnant market for coffee in the 1980s (sold in cans in supermarkets, with bland roasts, limited product choices, and considerable homogeneity across brands) was completely upended when market differentiation targeted yuppies, college students, and the newly affluent by shifting the sale of coffee from price-based to image-based marketing. Coffee drinkers were quite literally dying off with 74.7% of the U.S. population drinking coffee in 1962 and a mere 50% doing so by 1988. Niche marketing targeted a segmented rather than a mass market in class and generational terms, creating a culture of coffee connoisseurs.

Their new cultural capital was shaped by the sponsorship of coffee houses on college campuses by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) and by the "sale of whole beans in barrels or burlap bags," recalling a preindustrial past through the ambiance of the nineteenth-century general store. Suddenly, the inexpensive proletarian beverage of the working-class factory coffee break (Jiménez) was once again transformed into an elite and expensive beverage. Despite the general-store aura, this transformation depended on numerous technological and commercial developments, including "the containerization revolution in international shipping"; warehousing practices in the United States; the changing relationship between



roasters, traders, and bankers; and the development of valve packaging (Roseberry 129–30). Specialty coffee sales introduced new modes of discrimination into the market: styles and flavors. These flexible (and more or less meaningless) categories shaped the discourse of connoisseurs, who also responded to the marketing of social responsibility. Consumers concerned with the ethics and environmental impact of consumption were highly receptive to techniques designating coffee sellers as a socially conscious business. With a highly responsive socially conscious consumer willingly paying a 400 to 600% markup for specialty coffees (consider the now-standard comedic trope around the four-dollar cup of Starbucks), the real irony is that the grave inequities structuring these transactions have barely shifted. “The disparity that exists between the coffee-growing world and the coffee-consuming world is rooted in the centuries and remains the true inheritance of 500 years of colonialism” (Bill Fishbein and Dean Cycon quoted in Roseberry 132). Against this backdrop, specialty coffee sellers “invented variety where none exists” and created a consumer “who acts and feels like a gourmet” (Roseberry 134–35).

Roseberry’s analysis supports Jiménez’s claim that “coffee is the beverage of U.S. capitalism” (Roseberry 135), not because coffee has a unique relationship with capitalism but because “it provides a window through which we view a range of relationships and social transformations” (135). Twentieth-century food processes of standardization and industrialization are typified in the history of coffee. These commodities:

belong to a small subset of commodities [increasingly called “drug foods”] that can illuminate capitalist transformation in . . . that they link consumption zones (and the rise of working and middle classes that consumed the particular products in ever increasing numbers) and production zones in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia (and the peasants, slaves and other rural toilers who grew, cut or picked the products). (Roseberry 135)

These special commodities – coffee, sugar, tea, and chocolate – once called dessert foods, accurately called by Mintz “proletarian hunger killers” – reveal how food studies can explicate the workings of capital (Mintz, “Eating American” 56–73).

How, then, is coffee considered “the beverage of postmodernism” (Roseberry 135)? Following David Harvey, Roseberry places coffee in two historical periods of capitalist accumulation: the Fordist regime of flexible accumulation (postwar industrial mass production) and the post-1970s regime of flexible accumulation, characterized by specialty market niches, downsizing of plants and production processes, the shrinking of inventories, the revolution in shipping and warehousing, and the reconfiguration of financial markets (136–37). The “emporium of styles” available to the postmodern consumer assembles the world’s cuisine and beverages in one place: “The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labor processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production” (Harvey qtd. in Roseberry 136).

In fact, “my newfound freedom to choose, and the taste and discrimination I cultivate, have been shaped by traders and marketers responding to a long-term decline in sales with a move toward market segmentation along class and generational lines” (Roseberry 137). A new “fetishism of the consumer” obscures how commodity flows and marketing strategies “mask . . . the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production. . . . The consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser” (Arjun Appadurai qtd. in Roseberry 137). The very clear mystification of this relationship is seen in the social details of consuming branded coffee in the twenty-first century. The secret quasi-Italian language, the insider discourse, the barista who knows “your” drink, the list of detail modifications all involved in ordering a cup of coffee create a consumer immersed in “choices” to conceal the very real lack of agency in consumption.

Roseberry reveals the irony that “urban, urbane, professional men and women who distinguished themselves through consumption” demanded variety and quality from “the old proletarian hunger killers. In doing so, they almost certainly did not imagine themselves in connection either with proletarians or with the rural toilers who grew, cut, and picked what the yuppies chose to consume” (Roseberry 140). The identification they made connected to “the commodities’ ‘prehistory,’” representing “a kind of preindustrial nostalgia” (Roseberry 141). Choosing specialty coffees as a “lifestyle choice” can be “seen to represent an attempt to re-create, through consumption, a time before mass society and mass consumption. It could be seen, then, as a symbolic inversion of the very economic and political forces through which this particular class segment came into existence” (Roseberry 141). We see in this examination of coffee “close attention to class-conditioned patterns of consumption” that can “provide another window onto the cultural history of U.S. capitalism” (Roseberry 141).

## **Hegemony and Globalization**

Food studies can also offer insight into globalization by tracing how food products, trends, and taste circulate in the global economy. Food consumption patterns, while clearly reflective of corporate hegemony and the power of transnational agribusiness, also resonate with site-specific meanings that “reinforce group identity” (Weiner 136). These meanings are often powerful motivations for political action. Mark Weiner explores how U.S. servicemen in World War II attached personal meaning to Coca-Cola and reminds us that everyday consumer items “provided America with a shared language of consumption” (136). He cites Timothy Breen’s analysis of eighteenth-century commercial culture, which shows how “material commonality among Americans” armed them with a shared language of revolution, when the medium of tea was the conduit through which the principles of the American Revolution were expressed (Weiner 136). Similarly, Weiner notes how the denial of service at a lunch counter spurred the Civil Rights movement, where

the wide appeal of consumerist language spread outrage through “the image of *denied* hamburgers and Cokes” (Weiner 137). “If Coke was an essential part of the American Way of Life,” its refusal to U.S. citizens was a persuasive symbol of injustice understood by Americans molded in the language of consumer access (Weiner 137).

Already in the 1970s, farm activist Jim Hightower warned of “the McDonaldization of America” (Schlosser 5). Fast food has been received around the world as a symbol of a much-desired Americanness and as a beacon of modernity. Regarding restaurants as “part of a system of social codes,” Yunxiang Yan explores the fast food restaurant as an organized experience in social space, an approach which acknowledges that McDonald’s represents “an exotic Other” for Beijing residents seeking American modernity (Yan 81) or for French youth who want to explore “an American place” (Fantasia 213–15). The immense popularity of Western fast food, especially Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald’s, in China has little to do with the food and much to do with the cultural experience of “American-style service and social interactions” (Yan 87). Chinese consumers often comment that the food is not good, but they are still keen on patronizing fast food restaurants for “the experience of being there” or “consuming the culture” (Yan 87). Consumers seem to be interested in “the spectacle created by this new form of eating” (87). Yan sets these perceptions against the backdrop of public eating in China, which was dominated by socialist canteens, in which the state fed the workers and service was not emphasized. In socialist-era public restaurants, women were not free to act for themselves or even order their own food. Women eating in restaurants unaccompanied were presumed to be morally suspect. Against these traditions, the spectacle of Western fast food was of such novelty that the first Beijing outlets of KFC and McDonald’s became national tourist attractions. As a global symbol, “[t]he Golden Arches are now more widely recognized than the Christian cross” (Schlosser 4).

Western fast food outlets have been described in Beijing media as “concrete examples of modernity” (Yan 88). Customers seeing news reports, magazines, and movies assert that “the Big Mac and fried chicken are what make Americans American” (Yan 88). For many around the globe, Americanness is synonymous with modernity. “To many Beijing residents, ‘American’ also means ‘modern,’ and thus to eat at McDonald’s is to experience modernity” (Yan 88). Yan’s interviews with Chinese parents saw many expressing this sentiment, and some saved meager wages to give their children this experience. Others “believed it was in good taste to be modern,” one mother bringing her daughter to McDonald’s twice weekly as part of a plan – including Big Macs, learning English language typing, and computers – to prepare her child for a modern society (Yan 88).

Perhaps incomprehensible to American fast food customers is the Chinese motivation to “patronize McDonald’s to experience a moment of equality” (Yan 89). The structure of the social interaction is one in which employees and customers remain standing during the ordering process, creating an equal relationship between the two parties. Chinese patrons proudly follow the fast food protocols, explaining “that when they disposed of their own rubbish they felt more ‘civilized’ . . . than the other customers because they knew the proper behavior” (Yan 90). Whereas fast food in

the United States is associated with “low income and simple tastes,” Beijing patrons are “middle-class professionals, trendy yuppies, and well-educated youths” (Yan 90). Yan breaks down the customer base as follows: professional and white-collar workers; young couples and teens; and children with parents. Women of all ages tended to frequent McDonald’s more than men. In an inverse of American codes around fast food, Chinese customers with high incomes have incorporated fast-food patronage as part of a new consumer lifestyle. “Eating foreign food, and consuming other foreign goods, had become an important way for Chinese yuppies to define themselves as middle-class professionals” (Yan 91). As noted, Chinese women prefer the fast food experience for their ability to engage in otherwise socially prohibited acts of ordering their own food and participating in conversation while dining (Yan 92). As Yan notes, prior to the invasion of Western fast food, there were no proper places for women, children, and urban youth in the traditional restaurant culture of China. In restaurants, according to Yan, socializing has shifted from state-controlled public spaces to commercialized arenas. A new form of sociality has been “developing in market-controlled public places” (97). Yan attributes these social changes to a transformation in the contemporary Chinese family structure.

The major questions concerning the global expansion of fast food are larger issues of sustainability. The export of American fast-food culture – “the dark side of the All-American meal” – has been examined in terms of labor, commerce, agribusiness, low wage jobs and the service economy, and the problem of obesity (see Schlosser; Vidal). These studies point to the most pressing political question in food studies: can we transform the food system? As Watson and Caldwell suggest, conversations are needed around the limits of globalization, the translatability of culture, and the nature of capitalism. Food studies is taking on a series of vital political issues in these arenas: the biotechnology revolution; genetically modified crops and the anti-GMO (genetically modified organisms) movement; the organic revolution; the links between food and ideology, especially the relation of states to nongovernmental organizations on issues of hunger and starvation; and the politics of obesity as “the hot-button issue of global health” (Watson and Caldwell 6–7).

### **Transforming the Food System**

Margaret Mead located these political problems in a fundamental shift in our conceptualization of food, dominated by a dichotomy “which distinguished food that was ‘good for you, but not good’ from food that was ‘good, but not good for you’” (14). This split led to the “manufacturing, on a terrifying scale, of food and beverages that were guaranteed not to nourish” and to the contradiction of a nation “overnourished and undernourished at the same time” (15). This change accompanied a shift in commercial agriculture in which food was not seen as nourishment but “as a staple crop on which the prosperity of a country or region” depends (15). “Divorced from its primary function of feeding people, treated simply as a commercial commodity, food loses this primary significance; the land is mined instead of

replenished and conserved" (17). In their work on the myths of hunger, Lappé and Collins assert that "Since hunger results from human choices, not inexorable natural forces, the goal of ending hunger is obtainable" (402).

We face the bewildering contradiction of global starvation – including poverty and malnutrition in the most prosperous nations such as the United States (see Fitchen) – and the new claim that "the world is fat" – specifically, that more people in the developing world are now overweight than hungry, with an attendant health crisis in diabetes and heart disease (Popkin 88). The nutritional consequences of a partial transition from peasant to industrial diets has been profound, creating an epidemiological trap in which the poor "have fallen victim to the dietary diseases of the rich world without escaping the nutritional deficiencies of the poor world," with adults suffering from obesity and anemia at the same time and infant mortality from nutritional deficiencies escalating (Pilcher 247).

In the case of Mexico and many postcolonial nations, food policy has "sacrificed the countryside in search of industrial development" (Pilcher 236). The infusion of Western processed foods into peasant diets has cost a high nutritional price in the developing world, where the poor, "suspended between traditional and modern diets, eat . . . the worst of both worlds" (Pilcher 233). Many "[p]easant cultures throughout the world have developed nutritionally balanced diets of complementary vegetable proteins, for example, rice and soybeans in Asia, or maize and beans in the Americas, to replace expensive animal proteins" (Pilcher 236). These pairings have been disrupted by "the devaluation of traditional cooking through transnational advertising and misplaced ideals of modernity" that have "primarily increased the consumption of junk foods" (Pilcher 236). These changes in food supply are the result of the "more visible cultural imperialism of Ronald McDonald" but equally of the homogenizing efforts of "national food processing companies" (Pilcher 236). The replacement of corn and beans by sugar and fats in the case of Mexico resulted in disastrous health consequences when the rising price of beans forced the poor to buy cheaper wheat pasta. "While corn and beans together provide high quality protein, corn and spaghetti do not" (Pilcher 245). Pilcher concludes that the food-processing industry has "waged a century-long campaign to remove consumers from the source of their nourishment, to make packaged foods seem natural and living plants and animals unwholesome" (245). The ironic consequence of these transformations "is that only the wealthy can afford to eat like peasants" (Pilcher 247).

Popkin reveals that "many governments and industries are contributing to the growth in obesity by flooding developing countries with cheap sweeteners, oils and meat while doing nothing to promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables" (88). Alleviating this damage "will require new policy research, long-term funding commitments and a hefty amount of political will" (88). Perhaps the most challenging example arises when global agribusiness replaces the complex ecosystems of traditional societies with farming monocultures – often importing single nonnative crops not developed to flourish in the region – that lead to the narrowing of the food supply, susceptibility to drought, and numerous economic instabilities for local farmers.

In her pioneering scientific and activist work, Vandana Shiva has traced the consequences of monocultures, corporate agribusiness, and GMO seeds. As Shiva notes, "Global chemical corporations, recently reshaped into 'life sciences' corporations, declare that without them and their patented products, the world cannot be fed" (*Stolen Harvest* 11). She exposes the falsity in these claims, explaining how the diversity of local food cultures is being destroyed by corporate monocultures that claim to offer higher crop yields. Monocultures require significantly more water, pesticides, and other inputs of production, which support these so-called cash crops while decreasing staple food production. "The hungry starve as scarce land and water are diverted to provide luxuries for rich consumers in Northern countries" (Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* 13).

Perhaps most important to the current debates on global hunger is what Shiva calls the stealing of nature's harvest through genetic engineering and patents on life forms. In addition to their genetically engineered crops, corporations like Monsanto and Cargill are securing patents on life forms, claiming seeds and plants to be their inventions and hence their property (Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* 16). After centuries of human farming practices such as seed saving, patented seeds – designed to complement certain pesticides owned by the same corporations – may not be collected and replanted by farmers. Indeed, these seeds are designed to "terminate" – that is, not to grow upon replanting. Replanting seeds is considered a violation of patent property rights and local farmers have felt the full force of international lawsuits on the matter.

"The perverse intellectual property rights system that treats plants and seeds as corporate inventions is transforming farmers' highest duties – to save seed and exchange seed with neighbors – into crimes" (Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* 90). What Shiva calls the most dramatic case of criminalization of farmers was the Percy Schiemer case in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 2004. In a landmark case, Monsanto sued the farmer for saving seeds, despite the fact that Schiemer didn't buy Monsanto seeds at all. Rather, pollen from Monsanto's Roundup Ready Canola is blowing across the Canadian prairie, invading farmland. "But instead of paying Schiemer for biological pollution, Monsanto [sued] him for 'theft' of its property" (93).

Apart from the philosophical and moral problem of patenting life itself in the form of seed DNA, this practice drastically increases monocultures and decreases sustainable farming. "We are seeing the emergence of food totalitarianism, in which a handful of corporations control the entire food chain and destroy alternatives so that people do not have access to diverse, safe foods produced ecologically. Local markets are being deliberately destroyed to establish monopolies over seed and food systems" (Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* 17). Monopolies over food and seed supplies have led to a massive loss of biodiversity, with, for example, China's 10,000 varieties of wheat species reduced to merely 1,000 by the 1970s. Eighty percent of maize diversity has been lost in Mexico. In the United States, 6,000 of the 7,000 varieties of apple are gone (Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* 80). Biodiversity produces not only the health and nutrition benefits of variety, but vital resistance to the pests, drought, and other threats increasingly attacking world food supplies.

In response, the global movement for food security is being developed across broad alliances, including seed-saving movements, questioning of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) and the World Bank's roles in agricultural policies, the development of organic agriculture, political movements around food safety, and the movements against genetic engineering. Similar alliances are forming in the global struggle around water rights, perhaps the most pressing problem in the political economy of food and drink in the coming century. In fact, water usage is one of the hidden costs of agribusiness. One of the often-overlooked ingredients of fast food beef is water: more than 700 gallons of water go into the average quarter-pound cheeseburger (Taylor and Tilford 473). The uses of water for industrial production are but one issue in the global water shortage. "The globalized economy is shifting the definition of water from common property to private good, to be extracted and traded freely" (Shiva, *Water Wars* 19). In 1995, World Bank Vice President Ismail Serageldin predicted that if the wars of that century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century would be fought over water (Shiva, *Water Wars* ix).

More than 1.1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water; 2.6 billion – two-fifths of humanity – lack adequate sanitation (Solomon). The production of industrialized food, the extraction of raw materials (such as aluminum for soft drink cans), the water-intensive manufacturing of microchips, massive WTO-funded hydrodam projects that divert or destroy rivers, water pollution from industrial processes such as papermaking and leather processing, the escalating effects of climate change on the water supply, and the conflict over water rights pitting the community against state and corporate interests are all complex factors in the water crisis. The ecological damage of bottled water is spurring political intervention, raising crucial questions about who owns water, the fossil fuels needed for production of plastic bottles, the lack of regulation over bottled water contents, the costs and profit associated with these products, the massive plastic pollution from the discarded vessels, and the destruction of local water supplies to produce them.

Of particular significance is the collusion of the World Bank and several of the largest water corporations on the planet, the latter of which have received exclusive water-distribution rights as part of the requirement for nations to receive World Bank aid. *Flow*, Irena Salina's documentary investigation, builds a case against the growing privatization of the world's water supply with a focus on politics, pollution, human rights, and the emergence of a world water cartel (*Flow*). From the privatization of municipal water supplies by global water companies to the depletion of ground water by pumping for bottled-water concerns, the question emergent from critical discourses is whether anyone can or should *own* the water supply. The water democracy movement advocates for the conservation of water and makes the argument that water – essential to life – cannot be bought and sold for profit without violating human rights (Shiva, *Water Wars* 35). Water – by nature a commons – is intrinsically different from other resources and "cannot be treated as a commodity" (Shiva, *Water Wars* 36).

## Consumption and Embodiment

Cultural studies analyses have examined the social nature of consumption, exposed the neoliberal ideology of noninterference in the market, and explained how what we buy and eat is “deeply implicated in the structures of social inequality which characterize our world” (Schor 457). The transformation of the food system is dependent not only on the will of the First World to transform its eating habits – and in the case of the water crisis, the consumption of bottled water – but on myriad changes around consumption and embodiment. In this realm, feminist analyses of food, body, and culture have been most influential in the field. Feminist interventions on the foodscape address Mary Douglas’s assertion that “Food is a blinding fetish in our culture of which our ignorance is explosively dangerous” (7).

Devault interrogates the relationship of feeding work – and housework – to the production of gender, demonstrating that the work of feeding is mostly invisible and reveals “powerful mostly unspoken beliefs about relations of dominance and subordination between men and women, and especially between husbands and wives” (182–83). Women learn to think of service as a proper form of relation to men. Devault’s study finds similar attitudes in women of all classes and ethnic groups. She argues that feeding a family is a skilled practice accepted as inevitable by many women and men and that the “everyday activities of cooking, serving, and eating become rituals of dominance and deference, communication relations of power through non-verbal behavior” (197). She notes that when fathers cook their activity is framed as “optional” or “exceptional,” whereas it is obligatory or “natural” for women (189). As Kane explains, “Sexual difference is arbitrary and must be constantly reconstructed in social practice. [Fast food] [c]ommercials are cultural storytelling about food, and their ideological significance touches the very essence of social control – the body” (320). No matter how “modern” we may be, “feeding is still woman’s work” (Kane 320).

The body is examined in contemporary scholarship on gender, power, and food. McLean analyzes how food advertising directed toward women routinely deploys language and imagery centering on issues of control, morality, agency, and labor that are articulated to dominant ideas, discourses, and practices surrounding the female body, roles of women, and female sexuality. The relation between embodiment, gender, and foodways is powerfully examined by Susan Bordo. Quoting Foucault, she notes that “the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (227). Bordo explains how controlling women’s bodies through controlling their relationship to food and hunger is predicated on a history of dualistic thinking as well as on the “gender/power axis.” Bordo argues that from Plato through Descartes, the body was experienced as alien, separate from the “real” self, as a limitation, and as the enemy of control (231). The identification of the self with control laid the groundwork for “a triumph of the will over the body” and for the thin body, which is associated with “absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh” (233).



Expanding the feminist literature on eating disorders, Bordo takes “psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations, to be characteristic expressions of that culture; to be, indeed, the crystallization of much that is wrong with it” (229). She suggests that eating disorders call attention to “some of the central ills of our culture – from our historical heritage of disdain for the body, to our modern fear of loss of control over our future, the disquieting meaning of contemporary beauty ideals in an era of greater female presence and power than ever before” (227–28).

Bordo argues that “Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture” (229). Indeed, the body, “far from being some fundamentally stable, acultural constant to which we must *contrast* all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly ‘in the grip,’ as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices” (229). As 90% of anorexics are women, Bordo explores how the gendered body is produced through anxiety over hunger and women’s fear of “taking up space,” an anxiety that seems to peak “during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially” (242). Power relations “are etched on our bodies” (Bordo 244).

The cultural context of disease is also explored by feminist historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, who explains how “different societies create their own symptom repertoires and how the changing cultural context gives meaning to a symptom such as noneating” (159). Her study of Victorian anorexics explores the female “food vocabulary” of a distant era and elucidates the relationship between culture and symptomatology. Her study traces how “the anorexic girl used both her appetite and her body as substitute for rhetorical behavior” (162) and examines “the appetite as voice,” control of which allowed “Victorian girls a way of expressing a complex of emotional, aesthetic, and class sensibilities” in a realm that forbade their public speech, hungers, and desires (174). Through an historical analysis of Victorian norms around sexuality, hunger, morals, manners, meat avoidance, Calvinism, and Byronism, Brumberg exposes how appetite “was a barometer of a woman’s moral state” (170) but one of the only resources to which the woman had access, so that “young women searching for an idiom in which to say things about themselves focused on food and the body” (174).

Feminists “have rescued eating problems from the realm of individual psychopathology by showing how the difficulties are rooted in systematic and pervasive attempts to control women’s body sizes and appetites” (Thompson 220). Recent scholarship is careful to warn that eating disorders are not simply, merely, or primarily about women’s trivial involvement with appearances based in the culture of thinness. In fact, as Becky Wangsgaard Thompson explains, “Eating problems begin as ways women cope with various traumas including sexual abuse, racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and poverty” (219). Food is often a way of coping with trauma; Thompson indicates that from one- to two-thirds of women who have eating problems have been sexually abused (222). The prevalence of violence against women may well be marked by women’s disordered eating. Female survivors of assault, rape, and abuse – especially in childhood – often binge as a way of anesthetizing their feelings of terror.

For childhood victims of abuse, "food was the most accessible and socially acceptable drug available to them" (223). Citing the effects of heterosexism on lesbians, Thompson notes that body image is a term "typically used to describe a woman's experience of her body," whereas body consciousness is a more useful way to understand "the range of bodily responses to trauma" (227). Binging, dieting, and purging are common ways women respond to trauma. Feminist work on food, eating disorders, and embodiment shifts the theoretical discourse away from the beauty ideal, with its implicit sexist notion that women's foremost worry is about their appearance, onto groups of women who have been left out of theory formation: those women who have responded to racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and abuse through food.

The fact that food is a form of resistance in personal, gendered, and political contexts is clear when foodways are examined for their link to ethnicity, religious identity, and cultural heritage. In studies of the Passover Seder (Sherman), the origins of Soul Food in black urban identity (Poe), and the resistance of Italian-American immigrants to surrendering their foodways (Levenstein), the link between food and cultural voice is reaffirmed. For example, scholarship on Soul Food documents the history of enslaved Africans who were not allowed to write (their own histories). By combining "foodstuffs and methods of African and Anglo-American cuisines, the lexicon of South African American foodways was created" (Poe 95). The capacity of food to signify, embody a situation, or preserve communities is clear. Studying foodways allows us to contextualize and examine the (re)production of identities beyond essentialisms, and gives us entrée to the complexities of ethnicity, religion, race, gender, and nation.

If indeed the intellectual project of cultural studies is to create a radical "political history of the present" (Grossberg 2), then the study of food offers fertile ground on which to examine the everyday, the ordinary, and the extraordinary material objects we consume to locate the political and personal import of our current historical conjuncture as expressed and constituted in our foodways. As "a vital component of the struggle to change the world and to make the world more humane" (Grossberg 2), cultural studies of food have something valuable to contribute to contextualizing our consumption practices and patterns.

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