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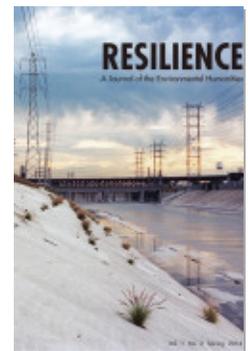
Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food

by Allison Carruth (review)

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Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

This is an exciting time to be a scholar in twentieth- and twenty-first-century food studies. Two areas in particular have seen an efflorescence of captivating critical work: global and diasporic studies that theorize the cultural imaginary of food and cultural histories of modern nutrition and food science in the United States. In the first vein, Parama Roy's *Alimentary Tracts* and Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions* track the metaphorical and material consequences of eating and empire in postcolonial and diasporic fictions of writers who reimagine food systems and power. In the second, Helen Zoe Veit's *Modern Food, Moral Food* and Charlotte Biltekoff's *Eating Right in America* trace the promulgation of digestive discipline in the twentieth-century United States as a consolidation of racial and national identity in the name of scientific progress and the bourgeois subject.¹ Allison Carruth's *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* unites these lines of inquiry in a masterful investigation of the literary imagination and the American project of globalization.

Each chapter of Carruth's study links the technological and industrial development of the American food system as a global force with the literary vision of modern writers who acknowledge and often question that unnerving ubiquity. She begins with Willa Cather, a figure often viewed as a modernist purely nostalgic for an earlier frontier moment, which appears (deceptively, Carruth suggests) pristine and undeveloped in contrast with World War I America. Carruth's reenvisioning of Cather will be crucial for future scholars grappling with the author's ambivalence about the technological and economic consequences of modernity. As Carruth writes: "Narratives of farmer debt in *O Pioneers!*, the railroad in *My Ántonia*, and wartime food production in *One of Ours* reposition the pioneer-farmer as an agent of industrial capitalism; and they do so by co-locating technologies of food production and modern war."² From Cather's representation of the transformation of Midwestern family farms into models of industrial monoculture, Carruth moves to perhaps her most complex chapter, a consideration of late modernist engagements with food rationing. In this chapter she demonstrates the rewards of the cross-genre conversations permitted by her category "the literature of food," considering imagist poetry (Lorine Niedecker) alongside wartime food writing (M. F. K. Fisher and Elizabeth David) and dramatic absurdism (Samuel Beckett). From this international cast of characters and their diverse ideological perspectives, Carruth derives the formal complexity and emotional ambivalence surrounding food, scarcity, and propaganda during World War II and dramatizes a transatlantic conversation regarding the appropriate imaginative form(s) for symbolizing want. The reading of *Waiting for Godot* here is particularly superb and unexpected and will affect my future teaching of that play.

In the second half of her study Carruth moves into the postwar ascent of industrial food and the postmodern responses of contemporary fiction. She offers a tour de force reading of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and its evocations of the Caribbean chocolate industry, the cosmopolitan consumer, and the literal and figurative hunger of the laborers who profit little from either. Morrison depicts the American chocolate industry as an inheritor of imperial structures that transmutes a history of exploitation into new (and equally pernicious) forms of corporatism, exoticism, and touristic escape. Showing her impressive formalist chops as well as historical acuity, Carruth argues that "The novel's formal hybridity—its rapid alterations between folklore and material culture and between magical realism and social realism functions to historicize the U.S. presence in the Caribbean by chronicling the intersections of colonialism and neoliberal free trade."³ In her penultimate chapter Carruth reevaluates the postmodern muckraking novel. She argues that Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* is not simply a novelistic exposé of factory farming and embrace of feminist solidarity (as it has heretofore been read) but also provides a model of formal pastiche and informational accessibility. This formal capaciousness and media citation, Carruth contends, dramatize the possibilities of contemporary networks that can offer counter-narratives to the triumphalist message of American Beef. In her final chapter Carruth considers the contemporary locavore memoir as evidence of participation in a global and virtual network rather than solipsistic detachment and pastoral fantasy.

Wai Chee Dimock has proposed that one of the challenges facing the contemporary ecocritic is finding new ways to conceptualize history and time, since our yardsticks for time tend to be anthropocentric and frequently nationalistic as well.⁴ Although Carruth's *Global Appetites* does not take up Dimock's call to contemplate "deep time," it does provide an exciting model for the environmental humanities in its doubled perspective. Carruth is insistently and helpfully presentist in her recognition of political urgency and contemporary significance; making political and pedagogical connections explicit, Carruth notes the continuing applicability of Toni Morrison's political critiques of the chocolate trade and the prescience of Ozeki's fictionalization of the American beef lobby in Japan.⁵ At the same time that Carruth animates the activist's investment in the now, her study is also impressively wide ranging and well researched in its consideration of the historical antecedents for our corporate-industrial moment: plantation exploitation and imperial global economies; the Coolidge-era embrace of the industrialized farm and the World's Fair fetishization of that ideal; the marketing of baby formula to mothers in Africa and Latin America in the 1970s by corporations such as Nestlé; factory farming and hormone experiments, and many more.

In addition to showcasing the rewards of connecting past, present, and

future in the assessment of food politics and the literary imagination, *Global Appetites* also expresses a view of space and globalization that complicates a top-down vision of corporate hegemony and economic exploitation. Attuned both to exploitation and to subversive innovation, Carruth insists that even movements to reclaim a pastoral moment of premodern agricultural simplicity acquire their do-it-yourself ethos from a networked, globalized world. As she writes stirring in her introduction,

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.⁶

Certainly Carruth's book will provide a touchstone for scholars working to express both the mark placed on literary enterprise by the corporate industrialized food system and also the transformative promise of form, whether that form is the shape of the novel or the form of global food systems themselves. In this sense Carruth's book articulates and enacts a broad and crucial tenet of the environmental humanities: to suggest that change is imaginable is the first step in its implementation. The *global appetites* referred to her multivalent title, then, are not only the appetites of the US nation-state and international corporations for power, but also the appetite for change shared by artist, critic, and activist alike.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Keyser is associate professor in the English Department at the University of South Carolina. Her current book project, tentatively titled Modern Taste: Food Innovations and U.S. Literature (1890–1965), traces transformations in modern food systems and technologies as literary tropes of cultural anxiety and aspiration.

NOTES

1. Kyla Wazana Tompkins addresses the nineteenth-century antecedents for these rhetorics of nutritional and cultural control in her chapters on Sylvester Graham and Louisa May Alcott. See "'She Made the Table a Snare to Them': Sylvester Graham's Im-

perial Dietetics,” and “A Wholesome Girl: Addiction, Grahamite Dietetics, and Louisa May Alcott’s Rose Campbell Novels,” in *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 53–88, 123–44.

2. Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 20.

3. Carruth, *Global Appetites*, 115.

4. See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

5. Carruth, *Global Appetites*, 116, 148.

6. Carruth, *Global Appetites*, 8.