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## INTRODUCTION

### The Spatial Turn and the “Second Wave” of Food Studies

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Food studies is no longer fighting for respect. Given the rapid maturation of food studies in the first decades of the twenty-first century, scholars in the field no longer need to preface their publications with once-common assertions about the vital importance of food to the supposedly more “serious” topics—race, gender, labor, war, and so on—engaged by their work. Classic statements, such as Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s often cited quotation, “Food has a claim to be the world’s most important subject. It is what matters most to most people, most of the time,” have become truisms.<sup>1</sup> Today, seventeen years onward from the publication of those sentences, whenever I read words like that in a new manuscript, it makes me wonder about the future growth of food studies. It seems that everyone now knows about food’s vital importance to cultural identity, political expression, environmental transformation, social relationships, and other topics. Simply adding in “food” as a new dimension of study in an existing field no longer stands on its own as a meaningful intervention. The field’s first wave of provocations have lost their power. Even more distressing, all the good food puns have “gone stale.”

So, what’s next for the field? What might be the “second wave” of food studies? Where does it seem that authors and publishers are taking us? And, in particular, how might future relationships between geographers and the field of food studies evolve? In April 2019, at the American Association of Geographer’s conference in Washington, DC, I organized a roundtable session to gather insight on these questions from several authors and editors who have each played prominent roles in shaping food studies over the last five or ten years, and longer. I also wanted to open up a space for members of the audience to respond to our panelists and to offer suggestions and answers of their own. One

of the outcomes of the session was this special issue on food and place in *Historical Geography*. Another outcome was the ongoing discussion about the roles of place and space in food studies: How have food studies scholars engaged work in geography, both knowingly and unwittingly? And how might focusing on spatial questions more deeply—at an empirical level as well as on an epistemological register (by thinking through how regionalities, localities, and a multitude of scales affect the production of knowledge within food studies scholarship, in both knowing and unwitting ways)—yield new energy and insights for a field now established in the academic mainstream and in need, perhaps, of some fresh excitement?

Two of the questions that I have had in mind over the last several years—at the risk of putting them too simply—are (1) “how much ‘food’ needs to be in food studies?” and (2) “what counts as ‘food,’ anyway?” Food exists at so many scales that it requires a geographer’s classificatory sensibilities to map out the different levels and registers in which food enters into food studies scholarship. If we grasp food at its widest possible set of meanings, then it encompasses literally the entire earth, and definitely the sun and the moon too. For many food studies scholars in the humanities, I think this wide-angle lens can be a blurry and somewhat unappealing frame of analysis. With our deepest roots, perhaps, in the anthropological traditions of ethnographic description, we have often yielded the floor on these kinds of big-picture food studies projects to the social and the physical scientists, preferring instead to drill down into the details of individual eaters, individual cooks, individual ingredients, and individual cuisines.

Within the bifurcated discipline of geography’s wide-ranging considerations of the relationships between food and place, it seems to me that this difference is especially clear. In short, geographers trained in cultural studies have tended to ask questions about the role of food in the production of place—the function of food in regional identities, for instance—while physical geographers and those trained in the social sciences tend to consider the role of place in the production of food—what I might call, for convenience’s sake, a “foodshed” approach to thinking through the relationship between food and place. In the first instance, food is vital to questions of selfhood and identity; in the second, food is vital to questions about environmental relationships.

What would food studies look like if we reversed these tendencies?

If, instead of looking at the small details to tell larger stories, cultural geographers and other humanities scholars started with the larger food stories “served” us by the physical and social scientists to find new angles from which to view the gritty details? Starting with a sociological darling like the “Standard American Diet,” for instance, we could hone our critical perspectives on undertheorized components of the food system. We could write political ecologies of agricultural runoff, or critical geographies of dyspepsia. But would there be enough “food” in such a project? Would *Constipation: A Global History* ever sell as many copies as another book written about cod, or about salt? Would it win a book award?

These are questions that have much meaning to me, personally, as a food studies scholar in the humanities who has never really taken on “food,” at least as conventionally defined, as my surface-level object of analysis. In my first monograph, for instance, a book about the intertwined histories of beef production and wolf eradication in the northern Rockies, I wanted to explore the history and geography of carnivorism by turning to the critical study of predators and producers as cultural logics, rather than thinking of them as biological agents.<sup>2</sup> Influenced heavily by my readings in the history and philosophy of science, as well as in cultural geography, I wanted to unseat and critique the very concept of “food” itself as a boundary-making device—one that helped establish a specific logic of settler-colonial possession based on the ownership of domesticated meat animals as property.

The time is “ripe” for the blending of new kinds of interdisciplinary sensibilities in food studies, and one “fruitful” avenue for food studies scholars is to complete our spatial turn toward the discipline of geography, with its emphasis on situatedness and embodiment, and its interests regarding bodies’ interfaces with their spatial contexts. It seems to me that food studies as a field of scholarship is more than ready to untether itself from the kind of literal “food” that Fernández-Armesto had in mind when he published those iconic sentences seventeen years ago, and to begin taking the very idea of food as our object of study under critical consideration. From a spatial point of view, how we think about how scale, location, and boundary making are essential components not only to food’s proximate, quotidian experiences of digestion and taste but also to the ways that food and discussions about food frame our broader ways of seeing and sensing the world in which we live.

Along these lines, then, this special issue of *Historical Geography* ap-

proaches food studies and the spatial turn from two of these geographical perspectives: location and scale. Kelly Spring’s research article on the Imperial War Museum’s historical representations of gender and the British home front during the Second World War takes up the first perspective, locating the spatial object of food studies within not the kitchen but the exhibit hall. Spring’s article reveals how historical narratives of food and gender are situated well beyond the places typically set aside for food studies scholars. Casey Baker’s research article on the history of British blockades of Mediterranean France during the War of the First Coalition takes up the issue of scale in the historical geography of food studies scholarship. Developing a big-picture discussion of famine, diplomacy, and political pressure on a world-historical scalar level usually reserved for the “food systems” approaches of contemporary twenty-first-century food studies, Baker’s history of Europe in the late eighteenth century offers a unique mash-up of empirical content and analytical perspective.

Three short works of commentary from our AAG roundtable reflect on these conversations regarding the spatial turn in food studies. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, coeditor of this special issue, discusses the transformation of food studies from a field characterized by some as “scholarship lite” into a robust area of scholarly publication where we now a struggle “to decide which books [of the] new generation of scholarship to assign.”<sup>3</sup> Megan Elias, the journal editor of the Association for the Study of Food and Society’s *Food, Culture and Society*, discusses the field’s attraction across a wide set of both academic and nonacademic readers, and maps the interdisciplinary contours of the field’s diversity of approaches. David Scott Cunningham, director of the University of Arkansas Press, observes the “aggressive trans-disciplinarity” of food studies and traces its rise as a major area of academic publishing, in part due to the fact that so many of us in the field are “intellectual refugees from traditional departments,” an observation that may ring true for many readers of this special issue.<sup>4</sup>

“Vegan Fermentation in Place,” an interview with the noted ecofeminist scholar, activist, and food writer Carol J. Adams, rounds out this collection of articles and commentaries. Recently crowned “The Vegan Queen of Dallas,” Adams introduces her latest work on the historical geography of veganism in Texas and beyond, as well as discussing the shock and surprise of her readers, over the last four

decades, when they discover that she lives in Texas, what the South African author J. M. Coetzee famously described as “meat country.”<sup>5</sup>

Taken as a whole, this special issue of *Historical Geography* is suggestive of both the pasts and the possible futures of food studies as a field of scholarly inquiry, as a field of activist concerns and interests spanning the academy and the public, and as an arena of publication. My hope is that it offers some points of departure for food studies scholars hoping to leap toward new, creative projects and to identify new, shared matters of concern.

#### NOTES

1. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Near a Thousand Tables: A History of Food* (New York: Free Press, 2002), xii.
2. Michael D. Wise, *Producing Predators: Wolves, Work, and Conquest in the Northern Rockies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).
3. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, “Publishing in Food Studies,” *Historical Geography* 47 (2019).
4. David Scott Cunningham, “You’re Only Young Once,” *Historical Geography* 47 (2019).
5. J. M. Coetzee, “Meat Country,” *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing*, December 5, 1995.