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American Food Culture, the Language of Taste,
and the Edible Image in Twentieth-Century Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Stacie Cassarino

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

American Food Culture, the Language of Taste,
and the Edible Image in Twentieth-Century Literature

by

Stacie Cassarino

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Michael North, Chair

In a study ranging from Futurist cookbooks to fast-food lyrics, this dissertation opens up new perspectives on modernist writing in relation to key developments in American food culture. It resituates popular culinary texts within a discourse of literary aesthetics and rereads literary texts as they reflect the conditions of alimentary production and consumption. Pairing chefs and poets — Julia Child & Gertrude Stein, Poppy Cannon & Frank O'Hara, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor & Harryette Mullen — I show how a modernist fixation on the materiality of edible things, expressed through the language of food, became a way for American writers to respond to the culinary, political, and aesthetic tastes of a nation undergoing tremendous shifts: from an austere wartime sensibility of patriotic eating, to the postwar excess of culinary cosmopolitanism, and finally, to racially inflected supermarket pastorals in the second half of the century. My research engages an

interdisciplinary cross-section of literary and visual forms, drawing on culinary history, art theory, cultural anthropology, race and gender studies, eco-criticism, and food studies, while remaining invested in literary analysis, to illuminate the correlating aesthetic economies of foodstuff and language, and to rethink the collision of popular culture and high art. I consider how modernism positions food as an innovative site for the ingestion and reflux of ideas, reconceptualizations of art, reflections on embodied humanity, and broader queries of taste. I argue that just as cooking makes an aesthetics of everyday food by lifting it from routine to art, literature reflexively uses food to address its own necessariness; sustenance for the physical and imaginary palates of Americans during moments of significant change.

The dissertation of Stacie Cassarino is approved.

Monica L. Smith

Richard Yarborough

Michael A. North, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

For my parents,
who fed me well

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¹ Andrew Marvell, “The Garden” (my capitalization)

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Thanks to Professor Richard Yarborough: for understanding my “velcro mind,” for patience throughout the early sketches of multiple projects before this one materialized; for believing in me. Thanks to the generosity of Monica L. Smith, whose voice from outside my discipline pushed against my project invaluable from the inside, in ways that I will continue to draw from. For the steadfast support, friendship, poem-sharing, and tennis through the years, and for bringing me West, thank you Rob Watson.

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And in memory of Giustina Vignone and Matthew Power, for their vibrancy, and without whom food and words, respectively.

Stacie Cassarino

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- Summer Solstice, *The Writers' Almanac* with Garrison Keillor, NPR, 2011
Song for the Unborn Mother, *Willow Springs*, 2011
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Apple Orchard / Firework, *Radical Society*, 2006
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Early Snow, *The New Republic*, 2005
Early December, Vermont, *Massachusetts Review*, 2005
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Italian, French, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Neapolitan, Sicilian, Old English

The segments of the trip swing open like an orange.
There is light in there and mystery and food.
Come see it.
Come not for me but it.
But if I am still there, grant that we may see each other.

– John Ashbery, “Just Walking Around”

Preface

sugar is not a vegetable
– Gertrude Stein

This project emerged in my imagination sometime while slicing lambs' tongues and pounding pigs' feet as a chef in Mario Batali's restaurant *Babbo* in New York City (where I missed the debates of the classroom), and sometime while teaching a course entitled "Literary Feasts" as a professor at Pratt (where I missed the heat of the kitchen).²

As a second-generation Italian-American and a citizen of Italy, food is my birthright. Here is the perfect cliché: I grew up in my grandmother's kitchen, where Sunday suppers of ragù and gnocchi and pizza were holy matters. I learned from watching. Convening to eat was the most important part of the day. The lessons of my family were of a work defined by the hand not the mind: my teachers were vegetable farmers, restaurateurs, winemakers. Before farm-to-table was even a popular concept, it was a way of life. My other teachers were those of the literature classroom, where I escaped the kitchens of my matrilineage, and tasted stories on the page. Foods and words, I came to realize, were of equal weight: vital forms of communication, ritual, intimacy, art, and especially, pleasure.

Years later living in Italy during college, the practices of cooking & reading, writing & eating, coalesced: as I studied the stories of Boccaccio (my namesake), I learned the art of Tuscan *ribollita*; as I visited the paintings of Fra Bartolomeo, I apprenticed in a *panetteria* in Sicily; as I analyzed the films of Antonioni, I made ricotta in the same apartment in Naples from which my *nonna* had fled during "the Mussolini years"; as I translated the comic plays of De Filippo, I learned about wine. The continuities were apparent. They were visceral. In food was a home in language.

Other kitchens would lure me throughout my studies: the bakery in Portland where Julia Child tore open a baguette to evaluate its authenticity; the hole-in-the-wall in Seattle where I honed my skills as a *pizzaiola*; the company I co-founded in Brooklyn to teach cooking and host feasts for others. But it was in the academic classroom where I could think about food in new, uncharted ways in literature, through reading and writing it. I put aside my spatula for my pen, and so began this dissertation

² See Bill Buford's description of me as a poet "who thinks too much" in the kitchen, in *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

Introduction

one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless [...] the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food.

– Pierre Bourdieu

The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain.

– Gertrude Stein

I *Reading Food:* origins of project

The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat

– William Ralph Inge

Food is everywhere these days, in some form or fashion, for better or worse. People are talking it, writing it, reading it, thinking it, disputing it, and of course, eating it. To some degree, this has always been so. After all, food is something we need to stay alive. So what could be new about food to create such a frenzy? Perhaps now more than ever, the question of sustenance crops up from every direction in popular culture, and nothing is more democratic or divisive than food in our contemporary “theater of consumption.”³

City rooftops are being converted into farms⁴ as Obama signs the Monsanto Protection Act⁵ and the Denny’s Wedding Chapel hosts its first pancake wedding. Media broadcast of pink slime elicits national backlash while Hostess (the company known for the Twinkie and Ding Dong) declares bankruptcy. Starbucks ditches the crushed-insect red dye coloring its frappes, a flame retardant is detected in Gatorade, and Frito Lay is sued for

³ Timothy Morton, ed. *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 3.

⁴ In NYC, Gotham Greens is the first professional rooftop greenhouse operation, whose urban farmers harvest vegetables and herbs from a 15,000-square-foot roof over a former bowling alley in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and supply to local grocery stores and restaurants.

⁵ This protects biotech corporations and agriculture giants in the production of GMOs. In recent times, genetically engineered foods have gone from the fringe to the national platform, and in the 2012 election, almost six million Californians voted for new food labeling. Overall, consumers have begun to demand more transparency, and the ethical, moral, and legal issues around food continue to escalate.

misleading consumers with its use of the litigious term *natural* as a marketing tool. The CEO of Papa Johns threatens to raise prices in protest of Obamacare, and Chick-fil-A's donations to anti-gay organizations spawn boycotts. At the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt's "victory garden" is recycled into Michelle Obama's vegetable garden on the south lawn, and newly enacted federal nutrition guidelines immediately impact school lunch programs. Super-sized soda is banned (then revoked) in New York City in an effort to curb the obesity epidemic, while farmers in the Midwest feed their cows candy (gummy worms, ice cream sprinkles, marshmallows, chocolate) to reduce costs, and gluten-free becomes a cultural trend. Films such as *Food, Inc.* and *Ratatouille* are box-office hits, and more than half of Americans tune in to cooking shows (of which there are hundreds) making a national pastime of visual eating. Cookbooks are being bought by the millions.⁶ Chefs have attained the status of celebrity. Across the arts, Lady Gaga flaunts a dress of raw meat and is all the rage, as it were,⁷ anthologies of food poetry dominate shelves, chef Ferran Adrià contributes to *documenta12*, an exhibition of contemporary art, and in academia, "food studies" becomes a new major.⁸ Food trucks, food blogs, food porn. Fast, slow, local, global: we are spinning in a foodscape in which our appetites, palates, and tastes are our primary compasses.

Or at least that is the idea we are pressured to buy into. As Brillat-Savarin wrote in 1825, "Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are." What one consumes (or does not) constitutes the political, ethical, and aesthetic practices and proclivities, values and identities, upon which civilization evolves. Within a discourse of diet is a more general query of culture,

⁶ Jane Kramer. Some 1500 cookbooks are published in America each year, and this number doesn't include the trend of the culinary memoir. Even actress Gwyneth Paltrow published *It's All Good*, a faux-populist cookbook about eating well, criticized for catering to the super wealthy, as well as a "family" cookbook, *My Father's Daughter*.

⁷ Her dress was shown last year in the National Museum of Women in the Arts in D.C.

⁸ Adrià is a famous chef from Barcelona, Spain, who revolutionized cooking through his stylistic innovation of molecular gastronomy at his renowned restaurant, *El Bulli*, which was the subject of a documentary by Gereon Wetzel in 2011, entitled *Cooking in Progress*. The cited art exhibit occurred in Spain in 2007.

and consequently, art.⁹ Or as Salvador Dalí wisely admonishes the reader of his cookbook, *Les Diners de Gala*: “Do not forget that, a woodcock flambé in strong alcohol, served in its own excrement, as is the custom in the best of Parisian restaurants, will always remain for me in that serious art that is gastronomy, the most delicate symbol of true civilization.”

*

Early in my reading life, perhaps because I was raised in an Italian-American family in which all of life revolved around food, scenes of eating in literature resonated: the plate of cold fried chicken between Daisy and Tom in *The Great Gatsby*, Mrs. Ramsay’s ceremonious Boeuf en Daube in *To The Lighthouse*, the burnt kidney Leopold Bloom cooks in butter for breakfast in *Ulysses*. The questions were at first rudimentary: Did it matter that the chicken was fried? Why did she cook this classic French dish? What did the kidney symbolize, particularly in its charred state? Though obvious canonical examples, they spurred my initial thinking about the potentiality of food as a language, what Roland Barthes identifies as a “system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.”¹⁰ The questions that evolved, around which this study critically hinges, engage aesthetic transactions between gastronomy and literature as a way of considering the relation of modernist writing to key developments in American food culture. This project opens a series of studies in eating across significant cultural transitions in the twentieth century as they coincide with modernist instances, to examine food as an innovative site for the ingestion and reflux of ideas, for new reconceptualizations of art, reflections on embodied humanity, and broader queries of taste.

⁹ In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot points to the pervasive “indifference to the art of preparing food” as one symptom of the British decline of culture (318), with the concept that a people with a cuisine (aka, a language) is a people with a culture. In addition, Emily Gowers, discussing the Roman table, describes how Roman writers used dinner parties to frame the material differences between Greek and Roman civilization (29).

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan (New York: Routledge, 1997) 29. Barthes’ description alludes to how commodity production infiltrates the literary/art realm in the modern era.

One cluster of questions guiding this project examines the convergences of gastronomy and art not to emphasize their continuity, but to cast new perspectives on American high modernism: How is alimentary discourse a productive site for rethinking avant-garde aesthetics in the twentieth century? Does food tell us anything new about modernism? Is there something about food as an imaginative medium that is especially useful for understanding modernist forms as they produce new literary tastes? Is gastronomic literature a viable new category? This study will not contribute to the profusive controversies surrounding (re)definitions of the term *avant-garde*, but will instead use the category to refer more loosely to twentieth-century experimental art along a continuum extending from modernism to contemporary postmodernism.¹¹

Other key questions of this project point to how food as a reflexive medium opens an aperture to the broader material aesthetics shaping twentieth-century culture: How do culinary practices and eating habits influence the production and consumption of literary and visual art forms, and how does food enable artists to perform and reflect on this?¹² The following chapters attend to how literary texts invest in popular food rhetoric, even embodying (through mimesis) the conditions of consumption shaped by culinary culture, and likewise, how cuisine adapts modernist aesthetics, converting food into an avant-garde form. It also takes into account related visual and design arts, including architecture, sculpture, performance, and film. In rethinking the literary text through cuisine, I borrow Cecelia Novero's model of reading discursive and textual "interferences" between the avant-

¹¹ Many of the writers in this study have been influenced by both Anglo-American modernism and European avant-gardism, but more generally by an experimental poetics that seeks to incorporate art and life, something we poignantly see through the subject of food as it simulates the consumption of language and meaning. I address their work in terms of the formalist concerns of High Modernism and the more politically-driven aesthetics of an avant-gardism that seeks to disrupt the category of art.

¹² In his discussion of the formation of taste in the Romantic era, Timothy Morton highlights the critical reflexivity with which the poetry of John Keats, whose representations of spice invoke a specific critique of class, positions the author-as-consumer reflecting on consumption. *Cultures of Taste*, 2.

garde and the culinary; the “active rhetorical strategy that displaces food from its regular uses and turns it into words...thereby destabilizing both the usual practical grammars of food and the grammars of language.” I point to how these interferences, which mark a temporally specific dynamism linking the gastronomic and literary fields through a tradition of avant-gardism, alter conventional strategies with which we eat and read.¹³

At the intersection of gastronomy and literature emerges another critical set of questions important to the discourse of taste: How do issues of taste mobilize new aesthetic concerns? How does taste get disputed in literature? While a discussion of taste as aesthetic propels the theoretical impulse of my project, it is as much informed by the etymological and literal sense of taste, *taxare* – as touch, tangibility, tactility – and with this dual lens, I navigate the socio-historical contexts of twentieth-century avant-garde literary production.¹⁴ By examining texts in which gustatory and aesthetic taste remain in continuous interaction, we see how eating opens new readings of literature, and art opens new encounters with taste.

*

This study engages a cross-genre mix of literary and visual forms from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on culinary history, art theory, cultural anthropology, and food studies, while remaining invested in close textual analysis, to underscore

¹³ Novero describes the performance of thinking food as it both “invokes and breaks with mimesis.” Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2010) xv. See also “Edible Ecriture,” in which Terry Eagleton argues, “Language is at once material fact and rhetorical communication, just as eating combines biological necessity with cultural significance” (in *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, ed. Sianne Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (UK: Manchester UP, 1998) 397.

¹⁴ *Taste*, *n.* 1. The sense of touch, feeling (with the hands, etc.); the act of touching, touch. *Etymology*: < Old French *tast* touching, touch, = Italian *tasto* a feeling, a touch, a trial, a taste (Florio); < Old French *taster* (modern French *tâter*), Italian *tastare*. Compare also Old French *taste*, Italian *tasta*, a surgical probe. *Taste*, *v.* I. Of touch, feeling, or experience generally. **1. a.** *trans.* To try, examine, or explore by touch; to feel; to handle. **b.** *intr.* To feel, touch; to grope. **3. b.** To have carnal knowledge of. **II.** Of the special sense that resides in the tongue and palate. *Etymology*: Middle English *tasten*, < Old French *tast-er* to touch, feel (12th cent.), in 13–14th cent. also to taste, modern French *tâter* to feel, touch, try, taste, = Provençal *tastar*, Old Spanish *tastar*, Italian *tastare* to feel, handle, touch, grope for, try (Florio) < Common Romanic or late popular Latin **tastare*, apparently < **taxitāre* < **taxitāre*, frequentative of *taxāre* to touch, feel, handle. (Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. <<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/198050>>; accessed 14 February 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1910.)

connections between food and language. Yet it differs from its critical predecessors in that it takes a more explicitly comparative approach, pairing otherwise unrelated texts from the culinary and literary fields in order to investigate more closely the edging between them. A discussion of the cultural coincidences in modernist thought at the conjunction of food and art has until recently been disregarded. I consider the culinary culture of three periods in America – wartime, postwar, contemporary – through the paired lenses of gastronomes and writers, reading them as coextensive of an avant-garde aesthetics.

This project was initially prompted by the proximity of recipes, poems, stories, words, and art objects – in practice and performance – not solely for the purpose of reading the metaphorical uses of food in contemporary literature and art, but to understand a peculiar literary and visual fixation on the materiality of edible things. Moreover, where the self confronts – or assimilates – the physical matter of foodstuff, we get a complex picture of modern notions of body and subjectivity. Though the forms at hand have always already been culturally colliding, putting one medium or form against another helps us to understand modern attempts to produce meaning, to be nourished through the doings of taste, during times of profound cultural shifts. From Julia Child to Frank O’Hara, from Gertrude Stein to Andy Warhol, invoking F.T. Marinetti all the way to Harryette Mullen, the selected examples highlight the relation of food aesthetics to twentieth-century experimental art.

At once ubiquitous and exclusive, material and metaphor, habit and play, food is the system upon which our physiological and cultural sustenance depends. According to the anthropologic claim of Sidney Mintz, “No other fundamental aspect of our behavior as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating.”¹⁵ If eating is the axis of human culture, it is essential not only for physical survival but as the dynamic energy that impels

¹⁵ Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) 8.

ideas, thus language and art, into the nutritive materials of daily life. The subject of food in anthropology exposes, in Mintz' definition, "the power of culture or cumulative tradition, to shape food behavior."¹⁶ Anthropologists study the evolving meanings of "cuisine," how food systems cross-culturally interpenetrate and affect the future of human culture along cultural, linguistic, economic, archaeological, and biological matters of food consumption. The making, eating, and thinking of food, from an anthropological perspective, reveals culturally determined racial, class, and gender-power relations across diverse societies. Anthropologist Mary Douglas' analogy of the meal and versification is apropos.¹⁷ The feast and the poem, forms that distinguish order, are interchangeable experiences for how they engage processes of production and consumption that confer new meaning on the associative materiality of food and language. From raw to the cooked, words metamorphose like foods, for as Terry Eagleton argues, "writing is a processing of raw speech just as cooking is a transformation of raw materials."¹⁸ By reading avant-garde embodied

¹⁶ <http://sidneymintz.net/food.php>

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan (New York: Routledge, 1997). "The cognitive energy which demands that a meal look like a meal and not like a drink is performing in the culinary medium the same exercise that it performs in language. First, it distinguishes order, bounds it, and separates it from disorder. Second, it uses economy in the means of expression by allowing only a limited number of structures. Third, it imposes a rank scale upon the repetition of structures. Fourth, the repeated formal analogies multiply the meanings that are carried down any one of them by the power of the most weighty. By these four methods the meanings are enriched...From coding we are led to a more appropriate comparison for the interpretation of a meal, that is, versification. To treat the meal as a poem... The meal is a kind of poem, but by a very limited analogy. The cook may not be able to express the powerful things a poet can say (44)...The rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse to which the poem submits" (53). Consider also the *ars poetica* as recipe. Such studies point to the structural similarities between meals and poems (the feast as an aesthetic figure, the text as an alimentary form); the literary composition as a recipe; the dish/dinner table as the "concealed description of the work itself" in which principles of cooking (proportion, variety, order) are transferred to literature in such a way that the writer invites the reader to a meal, which is also "a metaphor or programme for the literary composition that contains it" (Gowers, 41-46).

¹⁸ Levi-Strauss CITATION. From "Edible Ecriture," 396. We might also think of the trope of eating as an everyday activity in relation to avant-garde uses of the mundane; the consumption of conventional language, like the ingestion of quotidian foodstuffs, is a disruption that deconstructs words and reconstructs them into new forms. Novero emphasizes the link between diet and discourse that occupied the avant-garde: "These actions (eating, cooking, and their metaphorical counterparts) bear more or less directly, and more or less politically, on the avant-garde's immersion in and decomposition of this world that they ingest, bite into, and thereby construct anew in their works. The effect is a kind of active mimesis that varies depending on the artist." Morton also addresses how diet achieved politicized meaning in the Romantic period, when eating became an

experiences of food, we identify how eating becomes an energy that incites artistic production; how political issues of taste galvanize a new aesthetics.

In thinking about the correlating aesthetic economies of foodstuff and language, it is apparent that the modern need to construct meaningful stories during pivotal moments of change has created an enlivened contact zone for convergences of gastronomy and literature. For writers of the early part of the century, when less food is available, literature is substantively nourishing in that it recreates the physical experience of eating through reading; whereas, for those of the postwar period of plenty, literature is affective, enabling the emotional sensation of eating even though the body may be satiated. We may eat to live, but we are equally rapt with the composition of a meal, and through some conversion-by-aesthetic, we therefore live to eat. Likewise, we may turn to literature for diversion, but a good poem (according to one's standards of taste, though it is encoded culturally in class and social structures, rather than individually-derived) is the antidote to our own inevitable vanishing, and through its consumption, art keeps us animate. Just as food, a necessity, is a matter of aesthetic, art, a superfluity, is nourishment.

*

The Futurist Cookbook

the distinction of the senses is arbitrary
– F.T. Marinetti, *Manifesto on Tactilism*

The initial idea for this project originated in my discovery of F.T. Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook*, which was first published in the 1930s and made food into a national debate in Italy. One meal, an art experiment entitled "Aerofood," instructed diners to eat from a plate

ideological practice, and the rhetoric of vegetarianism (defended by Shelley) aimed to reclaim the body's power in the everyday choice (of what/how) to consume: "Drawing on the aversive rhetoric of vegetarianism, Shelley refashioned taste, in revolt against what he conceived to be the hierarchical powers which controlled consumption, production and culture. The revolt in taste delineated new relationships between bodies and their environments" (*Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, 1).

of black olives, fennel hearts, and kumquats, while stroking a tactile rectangle made of sandpaper, silk, and velvet, as waiters sprayed their necks with carnation-infused mist and discordant sounds of an airplane motor combined with Bach played from the kitchen.¹⁹ That such a dissonant experience of taste could be the mode for producing and consuming new forms of food and art, served as a compelling starting-point for an inquiry into the ways in which writers of the American avant-garde have aesthetically innovated similar developments where cuisine and language interpenetrate.

Since *diet* is etymologically linked with *culture*, it is no stretch to the imagination that the Futurists proposed a new diet with the intention of radically modernizing Italian culinary, cultural, and artistic practices.²⁰ In their venture, food would be the primary conduit with which to change the nation of Italy (and subsequently its art).²¹ The principles of a new type of eating were delineated in their manifesto: originality, rapid consumption, exotic ingredients, an anti-foreign lexicon, the integration or mimicry of machinery (modernity in the kitchen meant the replacement of traditional with scientific equipment), fanatical attention to food presentation and table setting, and the involvement of multiple senses concurrently (olfactory, aural, visual, tactile), sometimes without actual eating, to enhance the experience of taste. Though many of their recipes rouse the impression of absurdist comedy, underlying their playful approach is a nationalist agenda with Fascist sympathies aimed to

¹⁹ “The diner is served from the right with a plate containing some black olives, fennel hearts, and kumquats. From the left he is served with a rectangle made of sandpaper, silk, and velvet. The foods must be carried directly to the mouth with the right hand while the left hand lightly and repeatedly strokes the tactile rectangle. In the meantime, the waiters spray the napes of the diners’ necks with a *conprofumo* of carnations, while from the kitchen comes contemporaneously a violent *conrumore* of an aeroplane motor and some *dismusica* by Bach.” F.T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991). The cookbook was originally published in 1932.

²⁰ The Greek *diatita* implies Raymond Williams’ idea of “a whole way of life.” Morton, *Cultures of Taste*, 257. Etymology: “from L. *diaeta* “prescribed way of life,” from Gk. *diaita*, originally “way of life, regimen, dwelling,” related to *diatitasthai* “lead one’s life.” (www.etymonline.com)

²¹ The first omission to the national menu was pasta, a staple at the culinary core of Italian society; Marinetti once declared: “Spaghetti is no food for fighters.” Pasta was banned because it was associated with tradition, nostalgia, and general languor.

bolster state power in the shadow of impending war through the dictates of alimentary self-discipline. Yet despite the bellicosity with which these self-assigned tastemakers imposed their ideology of taste, art remained at the forefront of their concerns. What the Futurists model is an artistic revolution based on taste, using food to catalyze political and creative action.²²

In the Futurist vision, gastronomy was requisite to redefining the category of art.²³ Through a process of defamiliarization, the Futurists convert the habit of eating into a reflexive performance, staging the consumption of food in order to open a provocative discourse about the consumption of art. Their poetic food experiments expose an obsession with matter, as well as “attempts to treat cooking as a means of redefining the parameters of the edible and the non-edible,” through the precarious mixing of life and art.²⁴ Moreover, they redirect the formalist components of their poetry and art to the realm of food.²⁵ Even the cookbook, beyond its pragmatic appeal, functions newly as an art object and poetic text, embodying a new style they hoped would resonate more broadly across the nation as they sought to determine “whether their revolution in aesthetics could include a revolution of the

²² Futurism, a social and artistic movement originating in Italy in the early part of the 20th century, highlighted contemporary concepts of the future such as technology, industry, and speed across a range of visual and literary media, with links to Dada, Surrealism, and Vorticism. Food was just another medium with which the Futurists played out their aesthetic experiments, and did not impact the national cuisine of Italy.

²³ This link between the dietetic and artistic is the subject of Michel Delville’s essay, “Contro la Pastaciutta: Marinetti’s Futurist Lunch,” in which he describes how the Futurists “endeavored to dissociate food from nourishment and shift the discourse and practice of cookbooks to art production and consumption” (15). Delville cites Marinetti’s *Futurist Cookbook* as an “important example of an aesthetic détournement of the language of cooking towards a poetics of micro-sensations and polysensory inspirations...Far from confining itself to an act of poetic “defamiliarization” of foodstuff, ...[it] appears as a logical extension of his more general attitude to the lyrical mode which sought to surpass the limits of free verse in the name of the pictorial dynamism and “unchained lyricism” of the parole in libertà” (23). Michel Delville, “Contro La Pastaciutta: Marinetti’s Futurist Lunch,” *Interval(le)s* 1,2 (2007).

²⁴ Delville, 23

²⁵ The Futurists applied to cooking the techniques of composition used to produce their art in order to test their aesthetic strategies via the culinary.

stomach and the mouth.”²⁶ Not only did the Futurists rupture the boundaries of taste through cuisine, so did they “[reconsider] their own tradition of avant-gardism,” a critical endeavor undertaken by many of the experimental writers and artists constituting this discussion.

II *Taste*: gustatory + aesthetic foundations

How might it have happened that the modern languages particularly have chosen to name the aesthetic faculty of judgment with an expression (*gustus, sapor*) which merely refers to a certain sense-organ (the inside of the mouth), and that the discrimination as well as the choice of palatable things is determined by it?

– Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 1798

The other impetus for this project is to situate twentieth-century texts within critical discussions of taste. This study originates in Kant’s theories and in the philosophical reactions his work incited (David Hume, Pierre Bourdieu), then makes the leap to Brillat-Savarin’s physiological survey of the senses, to trace the evolving tension in the broader category of taste.²⁷ If, as Bourdieu writes, food is the “archetype of all taste,” then food is an invaluable topic with which to open inquiries of aesthetic taste in avant-garde literature and art. Kant’s theory of taste, which positions sensory taste (gustatory) as distinct from taste as reflection (aesthetic), is critical to this study as it enfolds the discourses of both forms of

²⁶ Delville, 17-19. Novero, xv. Perhaps the format of the *Futurist Cookbook* invites an experience similar to that of a literary text, serving as a linguistic intervention not only in practices and modes of everyday eating, but in the intellectual and creative vitality of a nation, which implicates our relationship to the art of food as citizen-consumers. Cookbooks codify the materials and processes of the culinary into a narrative that reads poetically, as seen in “the contrapuntual and eminently poetic nature of the living experiments of Futurist cuisine. According to Marinetti himself, these recipes were an attempt to transpose the aesthetics of simultaneity that had characterized the earlier manifestations of the movement, especially in the field of literature” (Delville, 22).

²⁷ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”; “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno. I also turn to cultural theorists of taste who emphasize the gustatory, such as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson’s *Accounting for Taste: the triumph of French cuisine*, Herbert J. Hans’ *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Russel Lyne’s *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste*, as well as critics who engage the tension between philosophical and materialist concepts of taste.

taste. In reading the materiality of food in literature, we inevitably confront the idea that literal taste is the potential for an encounter with aesthetic taste.

Although Kant endorses a definition of taste as the ability to judge the beautiful, an aesthetic act separate from physical sensation because it is disinterested and universally validated, he repeatedly relies on culinary analogies to support his theories. For example, in making the distinction between the agreeable and the good as terms of aesthetic taste, he refers analogously to the experience of tasting “spices and other condiments.”²⁸ Though the pleasure made possible by a meal retained, for Kant, a wholesome relation to aesthetics – in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), he alludes to dinner as merely a “vehicle” with which men of taste are only “aesthetically united” – many of his lectures on taste contemplate its physicality.²⁹

At one point in *Critique*, he explains the subjective quality of gustatory taste in contrast to abstract conjecture: “even if someone lists all the ingredients of a dish, pointing out that I have always found each of them agreeable, and goes on to praise this food – and rightly so – as wholesome, I shall be deaf to all these reasons: I shall try the dish on *my* tongue and palate, and thereby (and not by universal principles) make my judgment.”³⁰ The challenge for Kant’s philosophical theories seems to be that aesthetic taste necessarily derives from bodily sensation, though he doesn’t address (or admit) this, and is what Denise

²⁸ *Critique of Judgment*, 50.

²⁹ *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 187. Even where an ostensibly pure engagement with aesthetic taste is presented, the original gustatory vocabulary is depended upon.

Emily Gowers discusses this in regard to the Romans: “However much a Roman writer might want to disdain contact with the body, the fact remained that the Greek and Latin vocabulary of taste, appetite, consumption, satisfaction, pleasure, and disgust rested squarely on physical metaphors, as it still does in English” (*The Loaded Table* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 8). Novero discusses this in regard to Theodor Adorno, who “explicitly used the comestible as a derogatory metaphor of pleasure or enjoyment found in art; in short, he strongly rejected any association of art with the culinary. Yet even he refers to violent devouring as opposed to assimilation to illustrate his aesthetic theory” (xxiii).

³⁰ 148

Gigante points to as the “stumbling block to a coherent aesthetics” in his work.³¹ As Voltaire attests, the “capacity for discriminating between different foods, has given rise, in all known languages, to the metaphorical use of the word ‘taste’ to designate the discernment of beauty and flaws in all the arts.”³²

While the concept of taste in eighteenth-century British empiricist aesthetics distinguished mental discrimination from bodily experience (though the gustatory metaphor remained intrinsic), the nineteenth century, fueled by the Romantics, established what Gigante refers to as “committees of taste,” which philosophically revered food as fine art and considered “physical pleasures of the palate to be the pinnacle of aesthetic appreciation.”³³ Accounts of twentieth-century American literature discount gustatory taste, which is rife with an equally significant aesthetic tension in the production of radically new ideas of the body, nation, food, and art.³⁴ If food and eating are “ripe for contribution to [the] intellectual direction [of philosophy] and to an increased understanding of the roles of bodily experience in knowledge, valuation, and aesthetic encounters” (Korsmeyer), an examination of taste likewise broadens the intellectual direction of literary studies.

³¹ Denise Gigante, *Taste: a literary history* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005) 13.

³² Francois-Marie de Voltaire, “Taste,” in Diderot and d’Alembert, *Encyclopedia: Selections*, trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 336.

³³ She adopts this phrase from the introduction to William Kitchiner’s cookbook, *The Cook’s Oracle...* (London: Robert Cadell, 1831), 3. *Taste*, 1. She goes on to argue that “For Milton, as for aesthetic philosophers in the Century of taste, the beautiful, the true, and the good were all bound up together in the philosophical complexity of taste, which as a gustatory metaphor now expanded to include pleasure in aesthetic experience” (23). Gigante and Korsmeyer revive the gustatory aspect of taste from its long aesthetic history – Gigante provides a literary history of taste, (traced as far back as 1425), that begins with John Milton to trace material consumption in the Romantics, while Korsmeyer (*Making Sense of Taste*) unveils a latent bodily sensuousness in the aesthetic metaphor of taste in philosophy to insist that eating affords cognition

³⁴ Just as the philosophical concept of taste is informed by an originating vocabulary of the gustatory, so does the physical articulation of taste render aesthetic import. Moreover, gustatory taste informs a reading of not only the body but of subjectivity, for literal taste as an “ontopoetic” ability is “constitutive of subjectivity,” and involves pleasure as a way of constructing the self. (Gigante, *Taste*, 24). Gigante emphasizes the lesson we can learn by discovering “the creative power of taste as a trope for aesthetic judgment and its essential role in generating our very sense of self” (2).

Emphasizing the interchange between the gustatory and aesthetic, Delville points to how Futurist formulas literalize Barthes' claim that taste develops like narrative: "taste is that very meaning which knows and practices certain multiple and successive apprehensions: entrances, returns, overlappings, a whole counterpoint to sensation."³⁵ It is this approach to taste, as both a language of real food and the plot of a story, which propels my discussion of twentieth-century literature. Brillat-Savarin's theory of the senses in his eminent text *The Physiology of Taste* (1852), translated into English in 1949 by M.F.K. Fisher, composes a narrative of taste that is useful for clarifying the correlating structures of corporeal experience and aesthetic consumption that inform this study.³⁶ According to his model, three types of taste temporally occur: *direct*, *complete*, and *reflective*. *Direct* sensation is felt upon immediate physical contact via the mouth; *complete* sensation refers to the passage into the body of ingested material, the impressing upon the body of what has been incorporated; and *reflective* sensation is the opinion formed by the transmission of food. If we project this template onto a theory of reading literature, the format of literal taste, as a sequence of narrativized phenomena, has something to show us about the process of reading-as-consumption along a similar axis of coordinates.³⁷

Drawing the connection between eating and reading, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson attributes the construction of a culinary culture with the literature of food:

³⁵ In Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, Transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987) 250.

³⁶ *The Physiology of Taste*, Transl. M.F.K. Fisher.

³⁷ Even Barthes realizes this analogy, referring to Brillat-Savarin's concept of taste as a "perspective in vision" decomposed in time: "the entire *luxury* of taste is in this sequence; the submission of the gustative sensation to time actually permits it to develop somewhat in the manner of narrative, or of a language: temporalized, taste knows surprises and subtleties." *The Rustle of Language*, 250.

Referring to this same passage in Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste*, M.F.K. Fisher writes, "He is pleased. He is awakened. At last he can taste, discovering in his own good time what Brillat-Savarin tabulated so methodically as the three sensations: (1) direct, on the tongue; (2) complete, when the food passes over the tongue and is swallowed; (3) reflection – that is, judgment passed by the soul on the impressions which have been transmitted to it by the tongue ... Yes, he can taste at last, and life itself has for him more flavor, more zest" (*Serve It Forth*, 58).

Whereas food calls for eaters, a culinary culture contends with a different sort of consumer, the reader-diners whose consumption of texts rivals their ingestion of food. Reading and evaluating, like eating and cooking, are so many “taste acts” by which individuals “perform” their connections to a taste community. That participation in turn – the culinary practices, norms, and values that derive from and support the cuisine in question – sets us in a culinary culture.

The social survival of food in any given form depends entirely upon the critical discourse that translates the cultural presuppositions about food for the reader-diner. Just as the written word fixes speech, so culinary discourse secures the transitory experiences of taste. It figures the material as intellectual, imaginative, symbolic, aesthetic.³⁸

If we attend to literary representations of eating in twentieth-century America, we get a picture of how culinary culture and the food system has evolved, how diets as well as tastes have been continually remade, negotiated, agitated, and influenced. Such a critical discourse of food reveals the development of taste communities along class, ethnic, and racial practices, and their relation to literary and visual art forms. Literature, as a site for food politics, thus indicates the modern fate of food; and food, as a site for aesthetics, points the way of new tastes in art.

III *The Modern Table*: food in modernism

If you see a plum, it is invariably a decoy plum.
– Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*

From the banquet dialogues of the ancient Greeks to the baroque food orgies of the Romans to the epicurean mode of the early moderns, through a long eighteenth century of “culinary retro or camp”³⁹ into the rebellious eating styles of the Romantics across the Victorian pages of silenced food, appear the Modernists, for whom food is an especially

³⁸ 17. This recalls the contemporary influence of *Chowhound* and *Yelp*, online taste communities that have shaped the dialogue of where and what people eat, forming a digital culinary culture.

³⁹ *Cultures of Taste*. Consider Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.

ambiguous thing: important yet trivial, real yet illusory, necessity yet aesthetic, material yet conceptual.⁴⁰ While for some writers, food is a metaphorical means with which to extend social or political critique – T.S. Eliot’s “Prufrock,” Elizabeth Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast,” Wallace Stevens’ “Cuisine Bourgeoise,” Sylvia Plath’s “Lesbos” – it is for others an aesthetic artifact.⁴¹ This study is most concerned with the latter, the modernist use of food as a poetic, conceptual object that embodies the creative process and reading experience as it is cyclically consumptive and excremental.⁴² If the modern body’s relation to things is what generates meaning, how is this more clearly marked through its (hedonistic, erotic) encounters with the sensations of food? How does the avant-garde carry art into the gustatory realm (rather than separating aesthetics from the bodily, or elevating the mind over the body) in order to create a new conception of pleasure? By looking at how tasting is haptic for the modernists, new relationships between bodies and their environments in the modern world may be illuminated.

In his discussion of scenes of feasting in the French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais’ work, Mikhail Bahktin makes significant claims about the physical body (his focus is the grotesque) as it interacts with the world through eating.⁴³ His theory of eating is

⁴⁰ In addition, the nineteenth century brings Emily Dickinson’s poetic crumbs; a voice that is at times “Deprived of Other Banquet” (773) and “hungry, all the Years” (579), yet that dares not eat (791), revealing a sense that language and food are interchangeable, that words might be eaten (1587) although “Fame is a fickle food” (1659).

⁴¹ Dissociated from its use-value, food is a material with which to produce socially conscious questions about human subjects, identity, consumer fetishism, collective hunger, and other forms of consumption, as in Bishop’s sestina, which effectively embodies the repetitive condition of hunger.

In thinking about the figurative quality of food, and its literary uses, I prefer to borrow Vivian Sobchack’s definition of metaphor as *displacement*: “a nominative term is displaced from its mundane (hence literal, nonfigural) context and placed, precisely, elsewhere so as to illuminate some other context through its *refiguration*,” thereby creating analogy (*Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (CA: UC Press, 2004)).

⁴² See the banana motif in Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Bloom’s relishing and expelling of offal in *Ulysses*.

⁴³ Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 2009) 281. “...the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. Man’s awakening consciousness could not but concentrate

especially applicable to certain modernist works in which eating is: action, collision and rupture, the transgression of threshold, confrontation with otherness, a translation of the incorporated ordinary object into ecstatic pleasure and power. Similarly, Novero describes one of Walter Benjamin's stories: "The unusual circumstances and foreign food, language, and place in which the narrator eats disclose eating – an everyday occurrence – as a potential act of profane communion with the object as other" (111). This conceptual approach is useful for readings of the avant-garde in which eating is a point of contact, an erotic encounter with the other, intimacy in an otherwise industrializing world; eating becomes one mode of repairing the self's losses, of metamorphosing on a personal and cultural level.⁴⁴ In the texts discussed, food enables us to see how incorporation is the active translation in language (rather than mere assimilation) of modern experience.

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During World War Two, food became a different kind of political matter, and therefore a new preoccupation in the imaginary of writers, especially those expatriated. National rationing programs altered eating habits, agriculture was explicitly linked to military power and trade, food corporations (and their advertising campaigns) manipulated consumers with aspirational rhetoric, cuisine was repositioned as economic power, and the effects of global scarcity reverberated.⁴⁵ In the post-war, foods continued to be mass-

on this moment, could not help borrowing from it a number of substantial images determining its interrelation with the world. Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage."

⁴⁴ David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (London: Routledge, 1997) 23. In neurosurgeon Dr. Wilder Penfield's pictorial map of the body (his sensory homunculus), we see the mouth (and the hand) as predominant parts reflective of the whole body; these contain the most sensory neurons, analogous also in their function to touch. If eating is, as David Bell and Gill Valentine argue in *Consuming Geographies*, a way of shaping and remaking the space of our bodies, then taste offers this possibility, and the mouth as its medium, with the tongue that both tastes and expresses, remakes the spatial presence of the body.

⁴⁵ See Waverly Root's *Eating in America*, in which he argues that a history of America is a history of food, with the perspective that wars are fought because of / for food: "Foodstuffs have to be counted among the causes of the American Revolution – or at least among the symptoms of its causes" (89).

produced in a political effort to standardize tastes. The redefinition of U.S. power as it rested in its food-centered image profoundly affected transatlantic literary culture, in that the specific material conditions of modernity began to influence the production of art. With a more pervasive shift from austerity to luxury for the middle-class came new technologies that led to new modes of circulation, the effects of which may be observed in both the culinary and literary realms of that time. We can see how modernist styles relate to and push against culinary aesthetics (popular tastes, habits, trends in food) in the modern age of consumerism; new foods summon new tastes, and consequently, new forms of art. This project considers food as it is rendered in literature as a language, one that enables the literary avant-garde to rethink the conditions of its own making, and manifests the dynamic tension between popular culture and high art in the twentieth century.

The avant-garde agenda to break from tradition on the page through certain conceptual commitments and stylistic methods is particularly manifest through food, especially insofar as food is often connected to the style of the work to which it belongs.⁴⁶ In order to refashion tastes, the writers and artists in this study are shown to actively defamiliarize then reconstrue the culinary in ways that challenge aesthetic principles, collective desires, and body politics where food is concerned. In this way, avant-garde works expand culinary discourse by inserting food into the text (food *as* text, or text *as* food), apprehending cuisine as intellectual and creative discourse, treating the cookbook as an art object, and imagining the text as something convertibly comestible. A correlation between

⁴⁶ Gowers is not the first to take this approach for granted, arguing that the presence of food in Latin literature reveals a time when “imaginative writing was still the main forum in Rome for aesthetic debate.” She points to H.J. Mette who writes of “the connection between Horace’s slender means...and his slender style.” In a similar way, Morton reads the “quasi-vegetarian poetics” of *Paradise Lost*. Terry Eagleton provides additional examples in “Edible Ecriture”: “there are anorexic texts like Samuel Beckett’s, in which discourse is in danger of dwindling to a mere skeleton of itself, and bulimic ones like Gerard Manley Hopkins’s, muscle-bound and semiotically overstuffed. The language of Keats is as plump and well-packed as an apple, while less palatable poets like Swinburne are all froth and ooze. If Dylan Thomas binges on words, Harold Pinter approaches them with the wariness of a man on a diet,” *A Slice of Life*, ed. Bonnie Marranca, 396.

diet and poetics opens a discussion of the ways in which high literary forms sometimes clash, or diminish in status, through their insertion of the low subject of food, just as they may be enhanced with a particular aesthetics of food imagery.⁴⁷ Where the Romans approached literature as something to be “tasted, sampled, or devoured” – literary production as a substitute for perishable matter, as something that can feed us (reading as a certain participation in eating) – writers of the twentieth century take this notion more explicitly into their aesthetic process, simulating the experience of consumption.⁴⁸ As Francis Bacon suggests, “some books are to be tasted others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”⁴⁹ We can trace these textual instances of consumptive play in the selected work at hand: Stein’s mundane, repetitive eating gets manifested in linguistic repetitions on the page; the recipes of Child and Cannon may be read as performance pieces; O’Hara’s fast-paced walks fill with the clutter of food commodities; Mullen’s supermarket is a language of aisles.

IV *Gastroaesthetics*: the critical field

It is a curious fact that novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten. It is part of the novelist’s convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine. Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy that convention...

⁴⁷ Here, he refers to the banquets of Milton’s epics and the fruit of Marvell’s “high” lyric, “Bermudas.” (*Cultures of Taste*, 263). He argues that “a Bakhtinian approach to the “low” – it expresses the body, is visible in novelistic but not high poetic forms – risks reifying the material realm in the same way as invoking “the body.”” Likewise, Gowers discusses how food tends to be absent from higher genres so as not to debase that text (22); “the dignity of the work dictates the kind of language or kind of food that can be used” (43). This type of analysis relates to the work of critical work of Jennifer Fleissner, who explains Henry James’ Fletcherism to describe to his subject matter, style, and effects on his reader: “The deliberate, careful form of reading as eating that he describes—the words melting gradually on the tongue—as opposed to the mind-less devouring of the mass reader, or eater, approaching food and text alike as something only to swallow. Since a major purpose of Fletcherizing—certainly for James—lay, however, in eating less as a result of chewing more, the even better comparison might be to the unfolding of artistic inspiration...the speculative facility that enables writing here resembles, specifically, Fletcherist eating” (43-44).

⁴⁸ Gowers, 41

⁴⁹ “Of Studies”

Probing the moral effects of food, Friedrich Nietzsche asked, “Is there a philosophy of nourishment?” Although the analogy between food and literature might seem apparent, gastronomy as a subject has generally been neglected in the western philosophical tradition, as well as in the field of literary studies.⁵⁰ Across humanities disciplines in recent years, from cultural theory to philosophy and geography, interest has expanded where food and literary criticism meet. The foundational works of Denise Gigante, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Robert Appelbaum, and Timothy Morton have opened historical, philosophical, and theoretical ground for examining the literary significance of food, eating, cooking, taste, and consumption in Western culture. Cecelia Novero, Michel Delville, and Allison Carruth have turned a lens onto twentieth-century literary and visual texts to consider food as a specifically modernist subject across a spectrum of media, from popular ads to performance art.

This project is indebted to the few but exceptional models of literary criticism that have led the way in matters of food, though they may address unrelated gastronomical motifs or foodscapes, or different culinary eras. Emily Gowers’ *The Loaded Table* (1997), for example, approaches Roman culture as it was cultivated and depicted by Latin writers – at the table, feasting. Her readings of diverse and even overlooked texts confront the issues faced by the Romans as they sought to translate the materiality of food into words. Though

⁵⁰ In *Phaedo*, Socrates asks Simmias the rhetorical question, “Do you think that it is right for a philosopher to concern himself with the so-called pleasures connected with food and drink?” Literary criticism has not, until recently, treated food as a subject of serious scholarship, perhaps because it is ubiquitous, commonplace, routine, taken for granted, or due to its link to baser senses (and its eventual transformation as excrement), to domesticity (the inherent gendering), or to the notion that gustatory taste is too disputable, private even, making it a slippery, unstable topic; textual references to the senses fall outside academic discourse related to cognitive notions of a self in the world. Ronald Tobin poses what he calls a “fundamental question” in his lecture, “Thought for Food: Literature and Gastronomy,” regarding the ways in which the art and act of self-nourishment has gone ignored or poorly understood: “Why, with this wealth of literature on food and food in literature, has the study of the alimentary in creative writing gone relatively untreated until just recently?” This project is one sort of response, in the form of action.

food was purportedly a minor and ignoble subject for them, it paradoxically remained the controlling image throughout much of their work, and affected the status of the text.⁵¹

[***Good; this is better in situating the long relationship between food and text. I would suggest that you be skeptical of the idea that food was minor/ignoble: not only was

Linking the story of Early Modern food with *the* story of civilization, Robert Appelbaum's *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections* (2006) addresses gastronomic interjections (metaphors of appetite in Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's tale of "mortal taste," codifications of the culinary in early cookbooks, theatrical allusions to eating) to consider the varied symbolic possibilities of food, yet the primacy of its materiality in early modern life.⁵² He traces our contemporary eating culture all the way back to this particular period in European gastronomy, a time of culinary innovation, to prove that now, just as then, practices of production, consumption, commodification, and taste where food is concerned reveal larger cultural ambivalences. Appelbaum's attention to the intersections of the culinary and discursive, to what he, in the manner of Barthes, calls a "semiotics of food

⁵¹ Gowers, 42. There was a lot written about food (e.g. Petronius) and food production (e.g. Cicero), and food was a subject of art (e.g. mosaics featuring food and Ceres, the goddess of food).

The Roman poets – Catallus, Martial, Pliny, Propertius, and Horace, among others – wrote of baroque feasts and devouring bodies, composed invitations to dinner parties, and delighted (as well as disgusted) in gastronomic convivia, to illuminate and critique Roman civilization in such a way that the meal is readable, according to Gowers, as a "microcosm of society," as a program for structures of literary production and consumption. Their works were dominated by menus, table-talk, and linguistic fodder, with food as a pleasurable source for the connotative as well as mimetic.

⁵² *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture, and Food Among the Early Moderns* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2006) xvi. Appelbaum approaches food as "a phenomenon that exists at the border of the symbolic and the material" (9). See *Paradise Lost* (1.2), in which taste indicates mental discrimination as well as the action of eating; Milton reduces the fall to an instance: "she plucked, she ate" (9.781). Perhaps this is why Gigante refers to Milton as a "foundational theorist for aesthetic taste through his epic wrangle with the metaphor" (23). In addition, Efterpi Mitsi discusses how the early moderns allegorized the stomach, an organ of digestion, as a site for ethical and moral discrimination. ("The "popular philosopher": Plato, Poetry, and Food in Tudor Aesthetics").

and feeding,” opens a relevant reading of the genealogy of food; one in which foods may be translated into words, and words may be redeemable as food.⁵³

Just as Appelbaum attributes culinary modernism to the Elizabethan era, Morton, in *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite* (2004), makes the historical case that real food consumerism originated in the Romantic period, a time in which “colonialism and nationalism reproduced the local as the edible” and “the modern idea of national identity was born.”⁵⁴ Drawing a link between the alimentary politics and poetic practices of the Romantics, Morton attends to the philosophical implications of ingestion, digestion, and excretion as literary metaphors for the metaphysical processes of negotiating self and other, self and world, inside and outside. His study shows that the critical impulses in romanticism (and its legacies) revolve predominantly around discourses of appetite, taste, and consumption.⁵⁵

The texts that have most rounded out my study of the uses of food in and through art of the twentieth century are Cecelia Novero’s *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde* (2009) and Michel Delville’s *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption* (2007).⁵⁶ With a focus on the European avant-garde – Futurist cooking, Dada manifestos/poetry, Benjamin’s writings on

⁵³ 216. Efterpi Mitsi also considers how Elizabethan writers used food to reflect on broader issues of consumption, with regard to literature as a social and moral tool (“The “popular philosopher”: Plato, Poetry, and Food in Tudor Aesthetics”).

⁵⁴ 259. Though this might be privileging the modern too much (ancient cultures also had such musings about food), it seems relevant for understanding contemporary food politics in which ethical eating involves committing to the local edible, a movement or philosophy inherently nationalist in tone, from which certain identities may be shaped and affirmed by a shared aesthetics. See also *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*.

⁵⁵ For example, his analysis unveils how Percy Bysshe Shelley’s vegetarian poetics engage a broader discourse of taste, defining his poetry as it emerged from a rebellion in tastes, which was linked to revolution. Morton distinguishes between Shelley’s avant-garde vegetarianism and the one that became a “style of bourgeois ideology” (264) to argue that he was well ahead of his time. Shelley’s contemporary, John Keats, whom Elizabeth Bishop once described in a letter to Robert Lowell as a poet known for “his unpleasant insistence on the palate,” similarly presents the consumptive body as it tastes the world with an unrelenting persistence, in highly sensory poems that allegorize taste (Gigante, 140). Gigante’s discussion of the Romantics also makes evident the fastidious feasting in Lord Byron’s work, describing Don Juan as a “romantically revamped cannibal, a model fin-de-siecle Man of Taste” who serves the text’s critique of the cultural ideology of taste (*Taste*, 118). Bishop’s letter is from *Words in Air*, 372.

⁵⁶ Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (London: Routledge, 2007).

food, Daniel Spoerri's "Eat Art" – Novero investigates how eating and thinking food become "engines" of writing it, vital to the formation of a new material aesthetics. She reads how textual practices are enacted to estrange and deconstruct the culinary so as to transform gastronomic principles of taste, pleasure, assimilation, and digestibility, which consequently redefine art. Novero's work emphasizes eating as the practice and performance of incorporation; the anti-diet, then, is a mode of ingesting the modern world, which leads to the construction of new artworks that challenge concepts of taste.⁵⁷ Although her focus is the European avant-garde, I translate similar inquiries to the American context, in which shared conceptual ideals drove avant-garde aesthetics even if the mediums were different.⁵⁸ Delville's "gastroaesthetic analysis" responds to a similar dialectics of diet and discourse, self and matter, inside and outside, as he also reads food as a material object and conceptual/poetic element in the Western avant-garde (though his focus is poetry), regarding the tongue as a tool for both taste and expression.⁵⁹ He argues that the cooking experiments of the Futurists, the contemporary still-life poetics of Stein and Stevens, and the pop serialism of Warhol, indicate how modernists considered eating habits to be a reflection of sociological, aesthetic, and psychosexual issues, in work that exceeded the conventions of traditional forms in order to rethink the body, language, and subjectivity.

These examples of literary criticism seem to point to how food necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. The recent work of Allison Carruth also explores how a literature

⁵⁷ Novero in an interview, (<http://blog.art21.org/2009/12/02/antidiets-of-the-avant-garde/>). Novero describes her formulation of the concept of "anti-diet" in this interview: "If diet is a set of regulations that orders ways of eating, table manners, etc., the anti-diet counters these "bourgeois" and "Western" rules. For example, the ways in which we take pleasure, appreciate what is considered/constructed as the beautiful, and especially the ways we "taste" art and thus stop thinking about inherited concepts of beauty. In the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, anti-diet also refers to acquired notions of "progress," hence traditional historicist approaches to art and civilization." Our taste for avant-garde texts, she shows us, involve fear, disgust (*dégoût*), and indigestibility.

⁵⁸ The European avant-garde, which began in the early part of the nineteenth century, made its way to artists in New York looking to counter pop culture during the rise of an American economy after World War Two, when a shifting significance on fine arts provoked response.

⁵⁹ Delville discusses the work of Stein, Beckett, Marinetti, Ponge, Warhol, Mullen, among others.

of food (poems, stories, recipes, advertisements of late modernism) is imaginatively produced through a discourse that extends from the cultivation, distribution, and consumption of American foodstuff. Yet she roots her analysis in the contemporary concerns of a global food politics, showing how stories of food have the power to transform social and ecological systems at the global level.⁶⁰ In her essay, “War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism,” she traces a transatlantic literary culture in which the politics of food influence modernist writers, and modernist aesthetics impact the language of cooking as it appears in the food writing of wartime.⁶¹ Reading Fisher, Cather, Beckett, and Niedecker, among others, Carruth exposes the “conceptual interplay of global scarcity and U.S. overproduction”; literature as a way of seeing “how industrial agriculture and countercultural food movements underpin U.S. conceptions of global power.”

A focus on food in literature opens new thinking about corporeality (gustatory taste, bodily desire, consumptive incorporation) in relation to things; it turns the lens on a self encountering the world of material presence, for as Korsmeyer notes, “taste requires the most intimate congress with the object of perception, which must enter the mouth.”⁶² Many critics have recently engaged a discussion of things (Brown, Johnson, Mao, Schwenger, Stewart)⁶³ and of the mundane (Olson, Costello, Phillips, Randall),⁶⁴ and this study draws from their work in order to position food as the predominant object, or eating as the focal

⁶⁰ *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).

⁶¹ *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 16, Number 4, November 2009, 767-795.

⁶² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (New York: Cornell UP, 2002) 3.

⁶³ Bill Brown (*A Sense of Things*), Barbara Johnson (*Persons and Things*), Douglas Mao (*Solid Objects*), Peter Schwenger (*The Tears of Things*), Susan Stewart (*On Longing*).

⁶⁴ Liesl Olson (*Modernism and the Ordinary*), Bonnie Costello (*Planets on Tables*), Siobhan Phillips (*The Poetics of the Everyday*), Bryony Randall (*Modernism, daily time and everyday life*).

routine, of study.⁶⁵ It is also informed by the work of social anthropologists (Levi-Strauss, Mintz, Douglas), who focus on the classifications and rituals of food that organize culture.⁶⁶

Beyond expanding the field of materialist cultural studies, this project intervenes in popular food discourses, not only to position gastronomic texts (such as cookbooks) as extraliterary forms of art, but to make a case for how the literature of food has a role, even if indirectly, in revolutionizing political, ethical, environmental, class-powered, and aesthetic choices around eating. It refers to essential texts in food studies (Nestle, Counihan, Belasco, Rappoport, Shapiro, Schlosser, Pollan)⁶⁷ to critically contextualize aesthetic representations of food within modern gastronomic discourses, but also to extend these studies across interlinking disciplines, to show how food is a systemic presence that summons a discussion of literature and art through a language of taste. The congruency between our culinary choices and our aesthetic choices is one that traverses time, and literature makes this meaningfully apparent.

By reading the points of contact between literary and culinary forms, this discussion circuitously takes up the work of perhaps the most important food journalist of the twenty-first century, Michael Pollan, who redirects consumers to make conscious choices, to vote with their forks, in order to salvage the physical and cultural landscapes (or foodscapes) of our time. With the assumption that “food embodies fantasies at the root of ideological positions,” or as M.F.K. Fisher said, “the table is an intrinsic part” of politics, this study examines the literature of food as a site for the rethinking of taste, a language merging ideas

⁶⁵ “Thing theory” is a research interdiscipline created by Bill Brown that focuses on the role of things, or the “material *habitus*,” in literature and culture; what Arjun Appadurai calls “methodological fetishism.” (“Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 28, No. 1, Things. Autumn 2001: 1-22.)

⁶⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*), Sidney Mintz (*Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom / Sweetness and Power*), Mary Douglas (“Deciphering a Meal”).

⁶⁷ Marion Nestle (*Food Politics*), Carole Counihan (*Food and Culture / The Anthropology of Food and Body*), Warren Belasco (*Appetite for Change / Food: The Key Concepts*), Leon Rappoport (*How We Eat*), Laura Shapiro (*Something From the Oven*), Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore’s Dilemma*).

of diet, place, and body as reciprocal texts.⁶⁸ In many ways, it can be seen that the choice of what to eat feeds not only a physical need, but communicates an aesthetic predilection, is the assertion of taste. Literature may critically turn us towards food culture, and the culinary sends us back into a more nuanced consideration of aesthetics.

With this in mind, this project arises from the unmitigated belief that food is an important scholarly subject in the humanities, not only because it newly matters, but because it is new matter with which to revisit literary modernism, and ultimately activates new ways of reading texts. If food and language are dually innovative sites, corresponding and metaphorically interchangeable (the alteration of one modifies the other), the potential for meaning to be produced and consumed at their specific temporal junction makes it a worthy topic of study. One of Julia Child's final goals was to establish gastronomy as an academic discipline, though she did not live to see the success of this (and it is still in-progress), and this project is one attempt to secure its inclusion further.⁶⁹ In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser writes, "a nation's diet can be more revealing than its art or literature." By reading a nation's art or literature – with a focus on food – we have access to an even more revealing portrait of the dietetic, thus cultural, structures of modern life that impel tastes, politics, bodies, and aesthetics. The interpenetration of these across major cultural turning-points shows us how the twentieth century transformed our understanding of literature and art as sustenance, as what could satiate the physical and imaginary palates of Americans during and after the war.

The study of food is necessarily interdisciplinary, a lived component of culture that implicates political, ethical, and aesthetic choices. Reading fluidly across time, genre, and

⁶⁸ Morton, *Cultures of Taste*, 266.

"Wherever politics are played, no matter what color, sex, or reason, the table is an intrinsic part of them ... every great event in history has been consummated over a banquet board" (*An Alphabet For Gourmets*, 701).

⁶⁹ Laura Shapiro, *Something From the Oven*, 179. Joan Reardon also discusses Child's efforts to obtain academic recognition and validation for the culinary arts (200).

form creates unforeseen juxtapositions, a method that Sianne Ngai, referring to Barbara Johnson's work, coins "disjunctive alignment," a style employed by this project.⁷⁰ Readings in the following chapters are dispersed, organized around assemblages of ideas, not neatly compartmentalized – a distinctive mirror, perhaps, to my own process of reading-as-consumption and cooking-as-writing in the contemporary moment.

V *Literary Eating*: chapters

With a focus on texts ranging from fast-food lyrics to culinary autobiography, this project shows how the language of food became a way for American writers to rethink modernity, politics, and aesthetics. By pairing modernist expats of the 30s and 40s (Gertrude Stein/Julia Child), culinary pop writers of the 50s and 60s (Frank O'Hara/Poppy Cannon), and food culture critics at the back half of the century (Harryette Mullen/Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor), we see how these writers responded to the culinary, political, and aesthetic tastes of a nation undergoing a tremendous shift — from an austere wartime sensibility of patriotic eating, to the postwar excess of culinary cosmopolitanism, and finally, to racially inflected supermarket pastorals in the second half of the century.

In the chapters that follow, I have organized my discussion loosely around chronology, as I read foods and the texts containing them as products of a specific time period across a socio-historical narrative arc. However, this is not a history of food or of the avant-garde. By looking at correspondences and dialogues among writers and visual artists, I hope not to create equivalence among their works, but to reexamine the lingual and visual experimentation that marks an avant-garde fixation on the materiality of forms (objects,

⁷⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2007).

images, words, texts), and considers the “dramas of disruption and assembly that represent the contingencies of form” within the field of action that is food.⁷¹

I approach gastronomic literature as a genre of imaginative writing within the broader literary field, what Bob Ashley refers to as “a privileged site of creativity” that emerged in the early nineteenth century to deploy specific aesthetic strategies that would generate “the growth of a culinary public whose food choices could be legitimated through discriminatory food writing.”⁷² The cookbook, an extraliterary form, has throughout time had a role in shaping not only how people think about food and eat food, but how they interact with the art form that contains food.⁷³ Alexandre Dumas once said his cookbook was “the most important of his extremely numerous literary productions.” If eating conveys a set of ideas, it is the culinary language of the cookbook that communicates the shifting ideas of food, capturing trends in taste as they culturally evolve: “As literary artifacts, cookbooks insert themselves into the world of practical life, both as advocates of things to be done and as expressions of ideas to be read and thought.”⁷⁴ As Appelbaum argues, “the literary life of cookbooks is more evident internally, in how the books come to communicate with their readers...self-consciously constructed as verbal performances, designed for public release and prepared as acts of communication, an “author” to a “reader” (85). In the cookery writing of chefs such as Child, Cannon, and Grosvenor, we are summoned as readers as much as eaters, through the act and art of communication embodied by the cookbook, an avant-garde form.

⁷¹ Bonnie Costello, *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still-Life, and the Turning World* (New York: Cornell, 2008) 448.

⁷² *Food and Cultural Studies*, 160.

⁷³ Though the conventional cookbook writer since the mid-eighteenth century produced prescriptive, authoritarian accounts of food, a style replicated in the US and UK, it was a French phenomenon to shift this aesthetics to the “descriptive and cosmopolitan,” cultivating the “gourmet-writer as opposed to the producer of cookbooks” (Joan Reardon, 5).

⁷⁴ Robert Appelbaum, 114-115

The first chapter, “Modernist Food and Art of the Ordinary,” begins with the template of M.F.K. Fisher’s *How To Cook A Wolf* (1942), one of the first major works intersecting culinary and literary experimentalism, and focuses on the transatlantic writings of Gertrude Stein and Julia Child in their relation to wartime politics. By looking at Stein’s hybrid poems as recipes of mundane things, *Tender Buttons* (1914), and Child’s modern literary cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961), two texts that break from traditional conventions and genres to create new idioms and forms, I argue for a way to rethink the relationship between necessity and the aesthetic, high and low.

In Chapter Two, “Postwar Culinary Pop,” I turn to the cookery prose of Poppy Cannon and the poetry of Frank O’Hara to consider how gastronomic writing implements literary aesthetics to convert a culture of eaters into arbiters of taste, and how poetry engages a language of food to embody the private desires of the postwar body. In Cannon’s 1964 *The Fast Gourmet Cookbook*, a text of narrative-oriented recipes, the routine of cooking is poeticized through the most commonplace objects. O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*, published the same year, reframes the instance of art as a daily need through the event of lunch. Both writers gather the urban vernacular cans, packages, bottles, signs, and words of this time, mimetically invoking the external advertised world of mundane things, fast foods, and brand names through a modern lens.

The work of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and Harryette Mullen towards the end of the twentieth century, when a politics of the local emerges in response to the disembodied eating of an industrialized foodscape, is the focus of Chapter Three, “The “Recyclable Soul” of Food.” Grosvenor’s culinary autobiography of anecdotal recipes, *Vibration Cooking* (1970), and Mullen’s collection of supermarket prose poems, *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), are associated by several overlapping aesthetic traditions, including black arts, culinary arts, women’s

movements, and the literary avant-garde. Both employ a language of food – as material and metaphor – in order to recycle and reconstruct inherited forms, opening up a space for the exchange and value of racialized objects, bodies, and texts. Their work also turns food into a site for the production, materialization, and consumption of race.

Finally, I look at contemporary crossings of food and art, from the revolutionary gastronomy of Ferran Adrià as a new visual art, to Daniel Spoerri's Eat Art and the food "happenings" of feast artists, culinary architects, eating designers, and filmmakers of the twentieth century. In doing so, I consider tensions between the local and the global, as well as the natural (Carlo Petrini's *Slow Food* Ark of Taste) in contrast to the technological (Culinary Modernism), including such phenomena as "edible architecture" and wearable food. The contemporary culinary avant-garde radically projects a future dynamic of food and art that has ramifications for our national, bodily, and imaginative sense of pleasure. This book arises from the belief that food is an imperative subject of study in the humanities because it is the unprecedented arena in which many political battles, from environmentalism to urban social justice to globalization, have been fought over the last twenty years. Food is the crux of progressive politics and a predominant topic across social media and the arts – a vital matter with which to revisit literary modernism in order to activate new ways of reading foods, texts, and the (counter)cultures from which they emerge. It is also important for the future of the humanities, for we can better understand the global effects of food on the environment if we better understand how food is in our art and how art is in our food.

These questions pose only some of the many possible approaches to the study of the literature of food. Although the linguistic ubiquity of food keeps it lithely ensconced within all aspects of our lives, it is nevertheless a source of ambivalence, and means various things

to different people. Any theorizing or aestheticizing of food must at least indirectly acknowledge that eating is foremost a necessity, and in this way, a luxury.⁷⁵ The opportunity to take on a project such as this one is, too, a privilege. As O'Hara declares in "Oranges," "I defy you! Eat on," which might be exchangeable as the imperative I borrow for this project: Read on.

⁷⁵ Denise Gigante notes that anxieties about taste began with the reign of the bourgeoisie.

One Modernist Food and Art of the Ordinary

A writing cook and a cooking writer must be bold at the desk as well as the stove.
– M.F.K. Fisher

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover.
– Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”

The eye’s plain version is a thing apart
– Wallace Stevens⁷⁶

I

Scanning a “shell-shocked” food scene while living in Europe during the interwar years, M.F.K. Fisher found that gastronomy, concurrent with the rest of the arts, was being revived. The same -isms and symbols in painting and literature, she noted, were increasing in importance gastronomically.⁷⁷ In her appraisal, 1931 marked the peak of a “new kind of eating.” Where before “hideously familiar” dishes merely nourished, now “strange tantalizing dishes” were created to startle. What may seem unlikely is that she attributed this shift not to the innovative work of chefs at that time, but to the influence of avant-garde artists, namely the Futurists, whose theory of modern art directly translated as a theory of modern food.⁷⁸ What Fisher deemed new had emerged from the culinary experimentation of the Futurists, who intended to counter the tedium of habitual eating by “excit[ing] curiosity, surprise, and the imagination.” She might just as well have been describing the effects of a new kind of

⁷⁶ “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”

⁷⁷ “Gastronomy seemed normal again, as normal as the rest of the arts...sculptors and writers used tin cans, matches, and dream sequences with symbolic seriousness. This same symbolism increased in importance gastronomically.” M.F.K. Fisher, *Serve It Forth*, in *The Art of Eating* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2004) 108.

⁷⁸ They designed the *Futurist Cookbook* (1932), proposing a new diet that would modernize Italian cuisine, culture, and art during wartime. For example, advocating alimentary self-discipline, the Futurists banned pasta because it was linked to tradition, and used food in and as art to create dissonant experiences of taste; they “endeavored to dissociate food from nourishment and shift the discourse and practice of cookbooks to art production and consumption” (Michel Delville, “Contro La Pastasciutta: Marinetti’s Futurist Lunch,” *Interval(le)s* 1,2 (2007): 15).

literature, an avant-garde modernism that by the thirties had penetrated popular culture.⁷⁹ Modeling this approach at the stove and on the page, in the spirit of Ezra Pound's directive for literary modernism, Fisher instructed her reader: "Put new names on old dishes. Be stimulating!"⁸⁰ Yet if the objective of the modernists was, in Fisher's reference to the Futurists, "the abolition of routine, daily mediocre monotony" in their quest for the new, we might wonder why they turned so vigilantly to the mundane subject of food in order to reach this end.

While high modernism is rarely put under the lens of the everyday, food was a way through which writers, paradoxically, became modern. The writing about food engages a transatlantic discourse of taste whose momentum, particularly around World War Two, acquired a burgeoning material and aesthetic power.⁸¹ To read food in modernist writing – from the raw to the cooked, from rationing to excess – reveals how the cultural forces of production and consumption in the culinary realm resonate in the literary field. In a reciprocal way, gastronomic writing adapts modernist aesthetics in an endeavor to transform eating habits and tastes. I read Gertrude Stein and Julia Child – two figures you might not expect to appear together – as coextensive artists of a culinary moment as it collides with the literary avant-gardism of the twentieth century. Though separated by more than just years, both Stein and Child produced new forms that are the result of a modernist experimentalism rooted in the materials (foods and idioms) of everyday habits, and invested in converting

⁷⁹ Fisher notes a similar intersection in the nineteenth century: "the obsession for fine eating that swept over Europe, and especially France, during the nineteenth century, had a strange and wonderful influence on the literature of that world" (*Serve It Forth*, 92).

⁸⁰ *Serve It Forth*, 110.

⁸¹ Perhaps Modernist writers and artists are more regularly immersed in food because of the notorious convivial events around which they gathered to eat and discuss art, a phenomenon that may in part explain the link between food and writing. Scenes of eating, dinner parties, and the table as a trope, are especially prevalent in Modernist writing.

them into art. Their work shows that just as the habitual act of eating is a necessity, so too is art vital to the bodily and cultural sustenance of a nation at a time of mandated rationing.

The vitality of food in early to mid-twentieth-century American life is a springboard for reengaging literary modernism, especially as it converges with culinary modernism. The national rhetoric of food politics during World War Two, emerging out of an austere wartime sensibility of rationing, altered everyday life not only at the level of the bodily, in terms of real hunger; it profoundly impacted the intellectual and imaginative experience of materiality, informing the conception of new culinary and literary forms in response. Food was a way to achieve conditions of consumption in language, to represent daily living as it was, yet also to aestheticize it. Gertrude Stein's pre-war 1914 collection of prose poems, *Tender Buttons*, in particular the section "Food," merges the language of the kitchen with the lyrical mode, defamiliarizing a high aesthetic form within a context of quotidian consumption.⁸² This text, whose esotericism has long been the subject of criticism, is produced directly out of the humdrum habits of consuming things, specifically foods, and demonstrates an already-formed belief that Stein would later express in her account of World War Two: "eating is important, and what can be more important than eating, nothing."⁸³ Julia Child's 1961 cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, enacts a similarly paradoxical interplay, transforming everyday eating into high "art," upon the premise that

⁸² In "Contro La Pastasciutta: Marinetti's Futurist Lunch," Michel Delville addresses *Tender Buttons* as the precursor text to the *Futurist Cookbook* for how it exemplifies "the aesthetic détournement of the language of cooking towards a poetics of micro-sensations and polysensory inspirations" (23).

⁸³ Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, (New York: Random, 1945) 67. Her character Mrs. Reynolds declares: "It is a queer life one leads in a modern war, every day so much can happen and every day is just the same and is mostly food, food and in spite of all that is happening every day is food, I had a friend who used to say Life dear Life, life is strife, life is a dear life in every way and life is strife in every way" (12); "there is nothing to be curious about except small things, food and the weather" (*Mrs. Reynolds* 65).

Although *Tender Buttons* predates the food shortages of the great wars, Stein would have been aware of a rhetoric of economical eating habits pervading working-class and immigrant communities in the early part of the century (Levenstein).

cooking is “a beautiful, marvelous, and creative art form – but an art form with rules.”⁸⁴ This cookbook takes its place among other late modernist texts, and is even cited alongside Pablo Picasso’s *Still Life* as a significant event of its time (Reardon). The highfalutin, abstruse French style of recipe is rendered accessible, meant to appeal to the everyday appetite, a classic form made new, yet is elevated to the status of art object.

By reading Stein and Child together, I suggest that the reciprocity between the high/low is what defines the modern, in effect exposing it as an unstable category. Rather than a finite boundary, the divide between high art and mass culture is, I propose, a dynamic space – what Andreas Huyssen calls an “opportunity” – for new forms. For as elite as Stein was, she was not impervious to popular discourses of food; what is more, Alice B. Toklas was writing a cookbook, the contents of which she would have tasted, literally, firsthand, and even influenced. And for as wed to her pots and pans as Child was, trends in literature and the arts were readily at hand. Stein’s modernism is not so exclusionary, and Child’s pop is not so mainstream.

Startling our expectations of what a poem and recipe should do, respectively, Stein and Child disrupt categories of taste by reinventing a language of food, collapsing distinctions of cultural high/low, and forcing us to taste anew. Their work enables us to rethink modernism, to move away from the dominant paradigm of the movement put forth by Terry Eagleton, who argues that:

Modernist art was born at much the same time as mass culture, and one reason for its obscurity is to resist being sucked in as easily as tabloid print.

⁸⁴ Reardon, 17.

In this chapter, I will be focusing solely on Volume I of *Mastering*. Volume II was published in 1970, and includes more complex and elaborate recipes. She explains in the Introduction that unlike Volume I, a long introduction to the old traditions of French cooking that reflects 1950s France, Volume II reflects contemporary life (xii). There are, for example, more machines used in recipes to make the process easier rather than tedious. Volume II, she writes, retains the commitment to “classic cuisine” but “conform[s] with the modern mode” (xiv).

By fragmenting its forms, thickening its textures and garbling its narratives, the modernist text hopes to escape the indignities of instant consumption.⁸⁵

But is this true? If we accept this common conception of literary modernism as a “radical separation from the culture of everyday life” (Huysen), a deliberate movement towards extraordinary subject matter and obscure forms that resist consumption, how do we account for the ways in which modernism, in its grasp for the new, turns to food (trivial, local, common, quotidian matter), inviting the consumption of forms that essentially develop out of the habitual. Although the modernist forms produced by writers such as Stein and Child may indeed resist the instantaneous ingestion to which Eagleton refers – they are complex, dense, daunting texts requiring patience and endurance – they simultaneously enfold everyday objects and habits into a highly consumable language. In writing that animates the everyday through the very experimentations with form that are meant to obfuscate, Stein and Child recover the sensations of habit by making art of the ordinary.⁸⁶

I argue, then, that reading food enables us to see how modernism and popular culture are counterparts, in the sense that literature keeps culture moving forward, and food keeps literature evolving, in a dialectical and dynamic way. Many of the forms (poems, foods, ads) that arose in the modernist period were directly associated. Artists amalgamated mass cultural forms into their work, and sectors of mass culture adopted strategies of high art.⁸⁷ What was fashionable – the newest cubist text or culinary dish – embodied a convergence of high and low in its very reliance on popular consumption and critical receptivity. A text like *Tender Buttons* and a cookbook like *Mastering* are more closely related than we might initially

⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton, “Edible *Écriture*,” in Sian Griffiths, *Consuming Passions* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 399.

⁸⁶ Victor Shklovsky addresses the role of art in this way: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (“Art as Technique” in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longmans, 1988), 16-30).

⁸⁷ Huysen refers to this phenomenon, when dichotomies are broken down, as the postmodern condition, ix.

perceive (though I do not argue for their formal similarity). And the study of food in the twentieth century may help shift notions of a “great divide” between modern literature and popular culture.

While my discussion interrogates the tensions between modern art and mass culture, I consider the aesthetic practices of Stein and Child under the rubric of the avant-garde, as an offshoot of modernism (or, proto-postmodernism), an experimental mode. I read Stein and Child as locatable and mobile along a continuum between modernism and avant-gardism in their experimentalism. As American expats, Stein and Child (and Fisher) were influenced not only by Anglo-American modernism, but also by European avant-gardism, which was less concerned with maintaining principles of high culture.⁸⁸ Though both camps privilege the experimental and new, modernism had generally been characterized in formalist terms (in its shift from realism to aestheticism, in its focus on the status of the aesthetic), while avant-gardism diverges as a kind of political radicalism rooted in disrupting the very category of art.⁸⁹ One way that it does this is by containing everyday life, therefore stabilizing the very conditions of consumption against which it works. While the rise of food culture (synonymous with the rise of consumer culture) in twentieth-century American life irrevocably impacts literary production and consumption, the rise of the avant-garde similarly shapes modes of culinary composition.⁹⁰ Just as art is vulnerable to cultural forces, the masses are influenced by artistic output. More specifically, when mundane food appears

⁸⁸ Huyssen argues that European avant-gardism, which was “aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture,” led to the more radical departure of postmodernism. (viii)

⁸⁹ Renato Poggioli refers to the avant-garde as a “cult of novelty” for how it developed experimental linguistic forms and dislodged preceding styles, turning away from conventional, prosaic, clichéd language. In Peter Burger’s theory, the avant-garde breaks with the bourgeois self-referentiality of high modernism in its radical critique of the “institution of art” (the “social status of art”). Huyssen points to how, “in most academic criticism the avant-garde has been ossified into an elite enterprise beyond politics and beyond everyday life” (4).

⁹⁰ It should be noted that there has archaeologically always been a consumer culture of aspirational consumption, though my focus is its particular development through the heightened confluences of food and art in the American twentieth century.

in literature, it is translated into imaginative fodder – the daily is transformed into an aesthetic experience – and thereby resounds in the market of popular culture.

If avant-garde writers are known for producing a new idiom, one way of considering their construction of the new is through the idiom of food which they helped shape. For F.T. Marinetti, the Italian Futurist poet, food was analogous to national vernacular. A supporter of his once declared, “our *pastasciutta* [is] like our rhetoric” – altering daily cuisine was akin to renovating language, for he believed “diet and methods of cookery must necessarily evolve at the same time as other habits and customs.”⁹¹ What made their cuisine radical is that they “applied to cooking the techniques of composition they had already used to compose their new art, music, theater, and poems at the beginning of the century.”⁹²

Marinetti’s emphasis on “form, structure, composition and movement” worked against established forms (of cooking and art) that exaggerated habitual consumption. The Futurists relied on the mundaneness of food to shock with new forms: to redefine modernism as a composite of ordinary matter, and to exalt gastronomy as a lyrical mode.⁹³ Their approach, as one example of avant-gardism that inspired Fisher, opens a way for me to juxtapose Stein and Child in an examination of how formalist concerns are transferrable between food and literature.

II

M.F.K. Fisher’s Culinary Bricolage

Any such inquiry must necessarily begin with Fisher, who set the precedent for gastronomic and modernist writers concerned with food in the twentieth century. Equal parts cook and writer, Fisher’s strides in the kitchens of both France and America, and in prose spanning

⁹¹ Elizabeth David, *Italian Food* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 66.

⁹² Cecelia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota: U. Minnesota Press, 2010) xv.

⁹³ Delville

from the Thirties to the Nineties, helped expand the modernist canon to include gastronomic writing as a recognized literary genre.⁹⁴ A culinary modernist and “poet of the appetites” (according to John Updike), Fisher fashioned a style of writing that was praised by W.H. Auden as the best prose of its time. She had the literary reputation of a celebrity.⁹⁵ But how was her approach distinct enough from the popular cookery writing of her era (*The Joy of Cooking* was published in 1931) to be categorized as literary?⁹⁶ Perhaps Fisher intervened at a time in which the nation, disheartened by the effects of war, was ready to be engaged imaginatively, at the level of story, in the hopes of diversion and inner nourishment. Fisher adroitly treated food not only as content (the familiar how-to recipe) but as form (an inventive montage). Remarking on the ambidextrous contributions of Fisher, her biographer Joan Reardon describes how she turned language into “a stew or a story,” synonymous acts that modernized the eating and reading habits of the nation (). With the belief that “almost every gastronome has some kind of literary predilection,” Fisher demonstrated a way to fuse the practical and aesthetic in language.⁹⁷ Far from the “cookery-chatter” of her time, she used her “gastronomic snobbism” to make food an intellectual as well as pragmatic force, a

⁹⁴ As Jan Morris claims in her introduction to Fisher’s 1991 memoir, *Long Ago in France*, out of her writing “a genre of art was born,” which uniquely positioned her within twentieth century letters (ix). I define gastronomic literature as a re-emergent genre in the twentieth century that includes poets alongside gastronomes, novelists alongside chefs. Fisher’s work traverses so much time that we can consider her oeuvre as a representation of the flux of American attitudes towards food.

⁹⁵ *Look* magazine featured her in a series on successful career women, and a 1942 article of her shopping included illustrated photographs of her in “Hollywood pin-up-girl style” (Joan Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites*, 149). As if the shopper could have sex appeal, images of Fisher circulated enough to make her a familiar household face by the Sixties with a cult of readers, and in 1991, she was elected to the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters.

⁹⁶ Irma S. Rombauer’s innovative *The Joy of Cooking* differed from commercial cookbooks of the era in its containment of folksy, conversational anecdotes, and in its newly designed layout of recipes that unfolded as a narrative. For example, rather than following a list of ingredients with preparation directions, recipes indicated the use of an ingredient as it was required in the process of cooking. Though its title may be read as ironic at a time when cooking was regarded as burdensome, this cookbook successfully convinced millions of Americans that cooking could indeed be enjoyable, setting the stage for Child and (numerous celebrity chefs featured on) *The Food Network*. It is still one of the most published cookbooks in the U.S.

⁹⁷ *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, in *The Art of Eating*, 640.

sensual as well as realistic matter.⁹⁸ Like the Futurists, Fisher was against the monotony of diet, and consequently asserted her control in the realm of aesthetic. What Fisher bestows to writers in her wake is that food – matter of the ordinary, domestic, bodily – may be transformed into art. Though she was modest about her own work, she revered its potential: “Central heating, French rubber goods, and cookbooks are three amazing proofs of man’s ingenuity in transforming necessity into art.”⁹⁹

For Fisher, the necessity of the quotidian was convertible as an aesthetic experience. Her work is modernist precisely because it contains this friction between the ordinary and the artful. It was the “purity” and clarity of language in the prose of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov for which she expressly strove in her writing, developing a style marked by precision that appealed to a mass readership and ultimately made her popular.¹⁰⁰ Yet her prose is imbued with a poetic quality that we might associate with the sensate storytelling of Marcel Proust or the high modernism of James Joyce, and is at times esoteric, proving that the appreciation of good language, as of good food, could be more commonly shared. It is widely acknowledged that because of Fisher, “the standard for lyrical evocations of culinary France had been set.”¹⁰¹ Identifying how she does so is imperative if we are to understand how food occurs in the work of Stein and Child.

In this lyrical clip from her interwar text, *Serve It Forth*, the ending to one of many vignettes, we experience the texture of Fisher’s dual influences:

⁹⁸ *How to Cook a Wolf*, 309. As she writes in *Serve It Forth*, “The fine art of eating was not wholly a thing of the stomach...Great minds considered it” (92). Her books belong “to the literature of power, those that, linking brain to stomach, etherealize the euphoria of feeding with the finer essence of reflection,” (Clifton Fadiman, in *The Art of Eating*, xxx).

⁹⁹ *Serve It Forth*, in *The Art of Eating*, 22.

¹⁰⁰ She also admired the writing of Brillat-Savarin, for his “masterpiece of clarity,” its “clear, pungent prose,” as well as its “companionship.” (*Serve it Forth*, in *The Art of Eating*, 93)

¹⁰¹ Laura Shapiro, *Something From the Oven* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 151.

In the long hall corruption hung faint and weakly foul on the still air. The stairs were deep, with the empty glass box like a dark ice cube, and we breathed freely once out in the courtyard.

It was filled with moonlight. The trees in the tubs were black, and through the archway the tower of the palace gleamed and glowed against the black sky.

Chexbres took my hand gently, and pointed to the roofs, coloured tiles, Burgundian, drained of their colour now, but plainly patterned. I began to cry.¹⁰²

This passage reveals the austerity of her prose, an economy of language marked by restraint, which corresponds with the enveloping rhetoric of cultural rationing at that time. Here, we enter a story about food and end up in a story about the human condition, which reads like so many of its modernist counterparts; “The diffusion of the psychological throughout the rhetorical aspects of her works produces a poetics with the density of literature.”¹⁰³ There is, too, a musicality to her prose despite it being deliberately unadorned. The fragment of descriptive verse, “hung faint and weakly foul,” alliterates, as does “gleamed and glowed.” Words are used unusually and symbolically. The overall sentiment of the piece relies on the contrast of lightness and darkness, of color and plainness, a tension inherent in both the subject’s experience with memory and in the writer’s act of representation. In a modernist move, Fisher captures an epiphanic moment in language. This is not uncommon in the body of Fisher’s work. While she achieves the linguistic precision she sought, her vocabulary is often uniquely evocative. Old words and familiar names for things get resurrected with new

¹⁰² Ibid., 74. This passage exposes the voracious fictional reading that Fisher was doing at this time. In her biography of Fisher, Reardon discusses how Fisher’s desire to write fiction conflicted with progress in her gastronomic writing. Though her success as a food columnist eventually took precedence, it could be argued that her voice, as it was shaped by reading and writing fiction, helped her to innovate within the field of culinary journalism. She infused recipes “with the fascination of a mystery novel,” as one editor described her art (*Celebrating the Pleasures of the Table*, 51). Although this selected passage pales in comparison to the beauty of Joyce’s “The Dead,” there are some resonances, and overall, the structure of her text reads like *The Dead*, a compilation of stories that connect to a whole, carrying the past into the present.

¹⁰³ Susan Derwin, “The Poetics of M.F.K. Fisher.”

Fisher was forthcoming about her approach to language as a metaphorical means for reflecting on modern life: “It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the other. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it...” (*The Gastronomical Me*, 353).

contours, and textual repetitions remind us that we are as much in a fiction as a recipe.

Although what makes Fisher's writing particularly modern happens at the level of language and form, her thematic interests, too, remain consistent with those of her literary period.¹⁰⁴

All of Fisher's books, from the earliest (*Serve it Forth*) to the later (*An Alphabet for Gourmets*) exhibit stylistic techniques of modernism. As Allison Carruth argues, Fisher "rearticulates the conceptual commitments of Anglo-American modernism," crafts an "avant-garde gastronomy whose methods recall that of the bricoleur," thereby impacting culinary literature and literary high modernism" (777-79). Her texts are collections of stories, nonlinear fragments that build a whole. In Fisher's bricolage, a mode that allows her to swing between the high and the low, she culls from as wide a range as Roman banquets and popular advertising. Her serialized chronicles of eating combine narrative and history, journalism and poetry, travelogue and ode, instruction and acrostic. Yet we are at the same time directed to a more habitual focus on food, to new modes of tasting that draw us away from the "taste-blind" patterns of mass-consumerism while still anchoring us in the material of the everyday.¹⁰⁵ We cannot, for example, enter a recipe by Fisher with any intent to accelerate or ration our contact with food and language; instead, we settle into a story composed of ingredients and anecdotes, consuming at a distinctive rate of intake, with more care. For Fisher, "Writing, like cooking, was not so much about the facts as it was about creating a certain kind of control over reality and power over the one who consumed" (Reardon 23). This is reminiscent of the literary modernists, especially Stein, who often

¹⁰⁴ For example: the impact of war, the individual's relation to the historical moment, references to ancient culture and mythologies of food, interiority (moments of heightened consciousness), textual inwardness, etcetera.

¹⁰⁵ *Serve It Forth*, 59. "France eats more consciously, more intelligently, than any other nation... Whichever France eats, she does it with a pleasure, an open eyed delight quite foreign to most people... there is a gusto, a frank sensuous realization of food... In America we eat, collectively, with a glum urge for food to fill us. We are ignorant of flavor. We are as a nation taste-blind... You would be a missionary, bringing flavor and light to the taste-blind" (*The Art of Eating*, 58-59). Fisher also echoes the question posed by Brillat-Savarin: "Why we are so ungastronomic as a nation?" (*The Art of Eating*, 320).

deliberately aimed to create difficulty, yet whose work paradoxically remained affixed to ordinary matter.

The narrating first-person voice of Fisher's stories, another modernist device, is primarily Fisher's, whose self-conscious tone blends wit, irony, and humor, often to underscore social critique. Her reader's consumer-experience is both practical (one looks to her recipes out of necessity), and aesthetic (one encounters art). Breaking with conventional, realist narratives and the cookery handbooks of her peers, Fisher creates a template for new forms of gastronomic writing, opening the way for Stein and Child, and redirecting our conceptions of food in relation to modernism in the twentieth century.

*

How to Cook a Wolf, her 1942 "period piece," is especially useful for examining how Fisher navigates food as both a material and aesthetic power.¹⁰⁶ Written in the midst of World War Two food rationing programs, her book is made of recipes that counteract a bleak foodscape regulated by slogans to cut back or do without. *How to Cook a Wolf* reads instead like a how-to for the culinary imagination, as Fisher invokes a language of food centered on adventure, experimentalism, and the obtainment of pleasure through eating well. In brief sections that begin, "How to," she scatters philosophical anecdotes, political commentary, playful instruction, and poetic reverie. There is an everyday realism and pragmatism to the content and form of this book; her concern, as she states in the introduction to the revised edition, is the materiality and aesthetic of "daily living," which is the same axis operating in Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and is the objective of Child's cuisine, though Fisher's cookbook moves well beyond the practical.¹⁰⁷ For Fisher, as for Stein and Child, the ideal of daily living is experienced in France, where cooking is a national art. She

¹⁰⁶ The text was revised in 1951 and republished in 1954.

¹⁰⁷ Stein utilizes the same term, "daily living," as a subject in *Paris, France*.

initiates a transatlantic discourse of food, which they will expand, interpreting lofty French recipes alongside lowly American grub, fashioning avant-garde methods to construct a simple how-to for the American wartime kitchen. Fisher critiques the shifting American diet from the expatriate lens, especially in contrast to the cosmopolitanism of the French food scene, in an attempt to bring American eating into a more global gastronomic dialogue.¹⁰⁸ Stein and Child pick up where she leaves off.

Drawing from a tradition of French gastrosophical thought and gourmet writing, Fisher is key in transporting and translating these gastro-philosophies into the mainstream, while reinventing the genre to fit popular American trends. This was not without the discomfiture of some, as she hijacked a male-dominated genre that linked the palate with knowledge, centralizing the mundaneness of food with its erotic flipside, giving a new voice to female desire. In her gastro-philosophy, women were not just cooks, they were consumers, they even experienced lust for food (350), and the domestic space was a site for an experimentation that lessened the drudgery of cooking, and made art (“joy”) of routine.

By focusing on trivial foodstuffs in the shadow of wartime violence and culinary deprivation, Fisher engaged eating as a mundane yet powerful act of resistance. If government could impose tastes upon a culture of eaters, she could intervene with a treatise of counter-tastes (eating practices and cooking secrets) that might restore pleasure back into the act of food, and in doing so, alter the culinary landscape of America. Her words had the power to nourish during a time of inner and cultural disquiet. Despite the government’s political agenda to dictate a stringent rapport with food, *How to Cook a Wolf* reminds her reader of the value in “grim humor,” creativity, indulgence, and “gastronomical

¹⁰⁸ Fisher believed that Americans lacked taste: “We are as a nation taste-blind,” she writes in *Serve It Forth*, whereas the French eat “more consciously, more intelligently, than any other nation...with a pleasure” (58-59). For Fisher, as for Stein and Child, the high/low divide is correspondingly French/American.

entertainment” as escape. What she admired about the Futurists – their “jeering” and “silly” style – becomes part of her own aesthetic, entangled with her politics. To write about the pleasure of eating during a time of austerity was both a political and aesthetic act for Fisher. Rather than accept the strict food regulations devised to maintain state control over the American body, she created her own “culinary rules,” and lyrically invoked the eating body as an erotic subject.¹⁰⁹ Habits, rather than compulsory, could be political, and in this way, hedonistic eating and food play could disrupt national ideologies of eating that disassociated taste from pleasure.

Fisher bases her text on a unifying metaphor: the wolf is the cohesive trope for the hunger caused by wartime shortages and rationing programs; its presence at the door in various scenes provokes laughter, insinuates conspiracy, and even sexualizes the act of cooking, converting the everyday real into fantastical story.¹¹⁰ If necessity is the wolf at the door, the need to eat, the basis of habit, Fisher accentuates its counterpart, art, which is superfluous and diverting. In the piece “How to Lure the Wolf,” she lightheartedly jests: “Let us sing the praises, willy-nilly, of the wolf in human form or otherwise who can with straight face and unwrinkled muzzle woo a tousled kitchen maid...”¹¹¹ Though she gives guidance for ways to “look your prettiest in the kitchen” in order to tempt the wolf, where is the cooking instruction? What kind of text is this, we might wonder. She does not even include recipes in this chapter, having gotten so sidetracked by her own metaphor. And at times she shifts metaphorical meanings, replacing playful language with more serious allusions to the threat of hunger. Her tone can be difficult to decipher. In “How to Keep

¹⁰⁹ See *How to Boil an Egg*, which begins, “Probably one of the most private things in the world is an egg until it is broken” (229), and then follows with an erotic imagining of the life of an unbroken egg.

¹¹⁰ Her use of a Shakespeare epigraph, that portrays the wolf as a metaphor for appetite – “Appetite, a universal wolf” – indicates the origins of this idea for her own book, and the balance she is attempting to strike between the common (universal) and the esoteric (literary).

¹¹¹ *How to Cook a Wolf*, in *The Art of Eating*, 323.

Alive,” a presumably serious topic is made funny by its juxtaposition with other how-to chapters (“How to Boil Water,” “How to Make a Pigeon Cry”). Fisher suggests that survival depends merely on borrowing money, as if money were easily procurable at that time: “the wolf has one paw wedged firmly into what looks like a widening crack in the door. Let us take it for granted that the situation, while uncomfortable, is definitely impermanent, and can be coped with.”¹¹² In this manner, Fisher reinstates the control of food back into the everyday cook, with ordinary means, an approach that Child will take in later years.

Her handling of irony and sarcasm contribute to a text that is itself wolfish – aimed at providing a how-to guide for burdened housewives, yet masked in the rhetoric of pleasure, escape, and humor, subversively undermining meanings of food enforced by military ideologies. Because of this, her work entertains during a time of crisis and hunger, and its wit resonates long beyond its context, as she continues to influence us (and certainly influenced Child) to read “vegetables as a form of gastronomical entertainment” (297), and meat as an “intellectual satisfaction of the senses” (265). In another example, Fisher encourages selfishness in appetite, pitting the real economical against the symbolically nourishing value of a splurge: “Now, when the hideous necessity of the war machine takes steel and cotton and humanity, our own private personal secret mechanism must be stronger, for selfish comfort as well as for the good of the ideals we believe we believe in” (189). In this line of reasoning, cooking generates power. This is a twenty-first century belief promoted by Michael Pollan and *Slow Food* proponents, which shows that we are in some way returning to the values of an earlier era, and that Fisher’s vision has remained important throughout the years. Moreover, eating is a habit that is as much private as social, an expression of individual predilection in tension with the general conformity of consumption habits marketed during

¹¹² 240

wartime. Fisher complicates the meaning of necessity here; not just a way of signifying food to promote a set of national or collective values that augment the image of America as a global power, it refers to the private need for the aesthetic apparatus that is literature.

In *Serve It Forth*, Fisher anticipates with astonishing foresight: “The twentieth century may yet be remembered as one of monstrous mass-feeding.”¹¹³ *How to Cook a Wolf* is her response, her intervention. Using humor to critique developments in the corporate food industry that have ruined the experience of eating, she derisively correlates the dependability of “modern canning” to that of “those other two omnipresent realities, Death and Taxes” (225), and views frozen meat as “depressing proof of our gradual mediocrization” (263).¹¹⁴ The kitchen haybox is even praised in contrast to the modernist kitchen of her time.¹¹⁵ Infuriated with the wartime propaganda of modern food advertising, with the “murk of misinformation” and the “literal bombardment of cajolery from all the media, to eat this or that”¹¹⁶ (she mocks a double-page spread that used the words *thrifty* and *thriftier* seventeen times), Fisher concludes *How to Cook a Wolf* with a reaffirmation of the sensual pleasures of the flesh and of eating that is anything but thrifty: “one of the most dignified ways we are capable of, to assert and then reassert our dignity in the face of poverty and war’s fears and pains, is to nourish ourselves with all possible skill, delicacy, and ever-increasing

¹¹³ 91

¹¹⁴ With these ideas, she is ahead of her time.

¹¹⁵ Carruth discusses the role of modernism in the kitchen: “consumer goods companies aggressively promoted the adoption of kitchen appliances in the thirties and forties, figuring them as symbols of a “highly capitalized kitchen.” When Fisher includes the haypacked box in her own model kitchen, then, she implicitly undercuts the modernist (or more aptly, futurist) ideology of technology adoption as a form of civic as well as consumer identity” (779).

¹¹⁶ From her essay, “As the Lingo Languishes,” 267-268. “In our present Western world, we face a literal bombardment of cajolery from all the media, to eat this or that. It is as if we had been born without appetite, and must be led gently into an introduction to oral satisfaction and its increasingly dubious results, the way nubile maidens in past centuries were prepared for marriage proposals and then their legitimate defloration [...]. The truth is that we are born hungry and in our own ways will die so. But modern food advertising assumes that we are by nature bewildered and listless.”

enjoyment.”¹¹⁷ Although she is set apart from standard food writers of her time who served mass tastes, her books nevertheless circulated as bestsellers, perhaps because they were composed of the everyday realities and mundane nuances of eating with which people could relate, channeled in imaginative forms.

Furthermore, amidst news of casualties and famine elsewhere, people needed to be uplifted, and food was Fisher’s tactic. In *How to Cook a Wolf*, eating is verified as the most direct route to pleasure because it suspends the body: “eating is an art worthy to rank with the other methods by which man chooses to escape from reality” (214). In the final chapter entitled “How to Practice True Economy,” Fisher insists on the enjoyment that may come in savoring the possibilities of food – via reading, if not eating – as a “respite from reality” (349), and the recipes with which she makes her argument include foods that would have been especially rationed during wartime: anchovies and shrimp, butter and cream, beef, and brandy. She also writes about drinking wine to relieve the pressures of the wolf at the door, promoting requisite luxuries for reprieve.

Food is a diversion in particular when elevated as more than necessity – as aesthetic. The reading-of-eating is yet another layer of indulgence. Fisher endorses “good escape-reading material in direct ratio to the possibility of following [recipes] in our small kitchens

¹¹⁷ 350. The mock of thriftiness occurs in “How to Catch the Wolf,” 197.

Fisher’s philosophy of eating gets complicated where class and race come up, though she rarely treads on issues of distinction where taste is concerned. Instead, she reads food pleasure as available to all: “All men are hungry. They always have been. They must eat, and when they deny themselves the pleasures of carrying out that need, they are cutting off part of their possible fullness, their natural realization of life, whether they are poor or rich” (322). She does, however, expand a class critique in “How To Be Sage Without Hemlock,” blaming the contradictions and deceptiveness of advertising: “One of the saving graces of the less-monied people of the world has always been, theoretically, that they were forced to eat more unadulterated, less dishonest food than the rich-bitches. It begins to look as if that were a lie. In our furious efforts to prove that all men are created equal we encourage our radios, our movies, above all our weekly and monthly magazines, to set up a fantastic ideal in the minds of family cooks” (191). She blames advertising for promoting meal-balancing, insisting that it is “hard not only on the wills and wishes of the great American family, but is pure hell on the pocketbook” (191).

and hurried hours” (210).¹¹⁸ In Fisher’s “Conclusion,” she appeals to virtues such as dignity to make a case for the prioritization of self-nourishment, which is reliant on the “sensual delight” and “pleasures of the flesh” that originate from food. Throughout, *How to Cook a Wolf* conveys a balance of her pragmatic and aesthetic interests – she advises that if the wolf is at the door and there isn’t much to eat, one should “savor every possible bite with one eye on its agreeable nourishment and the other on its fleeting but valuable esthetic meaning” (322). The wolf signifies the need for food, yet also the necessity for art (aesthetic meaning), in so far as each provides the nourishing components of the body, and consequently the nation. It is her handling of this dual approach to food – as material and aesthetic – that makes her work particularly useful for reading the literature, gastronomic and modernist, of Stein and Child at this moment in American culture. Through writing, Fisher honors hungers and appetites, both physical and emotional, and attempts to liberate the American imagination of anxieties around food by centralizing the sensual and crafting the metaphorical. “In time of war, when eating becomes less of a gastronomic exercise and more a part of a determined will-to-live,” when food is bound to war operations and technologies, Fisher uses gastronomy to reinstate the will-to-pleasure (307). If there is indeed a “true economy” to be practiced according to Fisher, it is one involving a particular attentiveness to the intersecting pleasures of food, the body, and words, in which necessity and aesthetics remain in continual, interlinked flux. If the wolf embodies the needfulness of wartime, Fisher’s playful style is her aesthetic resistance to the idea that necessity is always final.

¹¹⁸ This is the idea Alice B. Toklas conveys of her experience of reading recipes during the occupation: “It was then that I betook myself to the passionate reading of elaborate recipes in very large cook-books...recipes for food that there was no possibility of realizing held me fascinated – forgetful of restrictions, even occasionally of the Occupation, of the black cloud over and about one, of a possible danger one refused to face. The great French chefs and their creations were very real” (*Cookbook*, 214).

Carruth discusses Fisher’s pun on *ration* in the use of the word *ratio* here, to suggest that Fisher was making a dig with the idea that “the government’s food shortages are in fact not egalitarian and that consumers will therefore respond to gourmet cookbooks as aesthetic, rather than pragmatic, artifacts in “direct ration” to their social situation” (780).

III

Gertrude Stein's Modernist Eating

For all of Stein's aloofness, Bob Perelman reminds us that "the quotidian world is continually the target" of her work.¹¹⁹ Perhaps Stein explicitly articulates her customary aesthetic at the end of *Everybody's Autobiography* – "I had always wanted it all to be commonplace and simple anything that I am writing." Her fixation on the commonplace – even when the common is dis-, mis-, or re-placed – is especially prevalent in *Tender Buttons*, a collection of prose poems, most titular of a food or culinary reference, in which the materiality of daily foodstuffs is the subject and medium for linguistic play.

At first glance, Stein's style, like her content, seems straightforward, plain, user-friendly, similar to a cookbook (a point I'll address at length later). A poem called "Roast Potatoes," for example, reads simply: "Roast potatoes for," and "Custard" begins: "Custard is this." To ponder the purpose of making potatoes is to invite the reader to question the purpose of composing words. Fragments they may be (she repetitively compiles clauses without modifiers and refuses references), Stein's sentences are basic, direct, terse. Her lexicon is minimal. The tone is rational. Language, like food, is a rationed material. And even Stein's writing practice itself was consciously shaped by the instantaneousness of the daily; she resisted revising, privileging instead the instant of language.¹²⁰ Yet *Tender Buttons* has long been critically received as incomprehensible, the "most innovative and enigmatic" of her works.¹²¹ As Pamela Hadas argues, "Despite her claimed allegiance to the plain and simple, a great deal of Stein's *Tender Buttons* is "entangled with thickness," which makes it difficult to

¹¹⁹ Bob Perelman, *The Trouble With Genius* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994) 158.

¹²⁰ Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of "Genius"* (Edinburgh UP/Columbia UP, 2000) 83.

¹²¹ Neil Schmitz, "Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of "Tender Buttons," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 5, From Modernism to Post-Modernism (July, 1974), 1203-1218

see what choices and why choices are made” (63). In a 1919 rejection letter (for another book) from Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of the *Atlantic*, the common perception of her work – as unreadable and unintelligible – was proffered: “Your poems, I am sorry to say, would be a puzzle picture to our readers. All who have not the key must find them baffling, and -- alack! that key is known to very, very few.”¹²² Even Stein alludes to the insufficiency of words to make sense in “Breakfast”: “What language can instruct any fellow” (41). In this same poem, she reveals an awareness of her text’s convolutions: “A sudden slice changes the whole plate, it does so suddenly.” And in “Sugar,” wordplay is an actual subject: “the teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful” (45), while in “Roastbeef,” she tips the reader off: “every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is a silence there is a silence (34). Yet she also knew her limitations, and addresses the meaning (or its absence within her game-play in a 1946 interview:

...I had these two things that were working back to the compositional idea, the idea of portraiture and the idea of the recreation of the word. I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them. (“Transatlantic Interview” 18)

In defense of Stein’s readability, Peter Quartermain describes her prose as “remarkably accessible. To figure out what’s going on...the only thing you need besides a knowledge of the language (as you might have got it from learning to speak it) is to have been to a social

¹²² The publication of *Tender Buttons* by the Claire Marie Press, a small press founded by the poet Donald Evans so that he could print his own work, was “a major setback for her serious recognition in America” (Conrad 4). In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein acknowledges that it “started off columnists in the newspapers of the whole country on their long campaign of ridicule” (192).

gathering of some sort. The writing, that is to say, demands very little acculturation of its readers.”¹²³

That is perhaps the perspective Stein might have adopted about her own work, albeit elitist, according to Barbara Will’s biographical note: “In the 1920s, Gertrude Stein often adopted a stance of bafflement at the public assessment of her work as “difficult”” (133). In her prolonged correspondence with Sedgwick, and despite numerous rejections, Stein attempted to make a case for the legitimacy of her work as both canonical and popular: “My work is legitimate literature and I amuse and interest myself in words as an expression of feeling as Shakespeare or anyone else writing did. This is entirely in the spirit of all that is first class in American letters whether it’s newspapers, Walt Whitman or Henry James, or Poe.”¹²⁴ If newspapers and great authors were her analogues, Stein’s notion of validity, the “genuine literary quality” to which she referred in the same letter, was based on both her loyalty to tradition and a modernist urgency for the new, and is evidence that she positioned herself in discourses of both high modernism and mass culture.¹²⁵ In fact, much of the work that came after *Tender Buttons*, between the years of 1917-1923, was published in *Vanity Fair*, a popular magazine selling literary works as consumer products with the intent to raise the value of modernism for the reading public.¹²⁶ In “Gertrude Stein in the American Marketplace,” Bryce Conrad discusses Stein’s literary versus marketplace value, a pricetag that depends, perhaps, not on her success in one market or the other, but in straddling both markets (). It would seem that Stein was aware of her potential to operate across

boundaries, for as Will argues, “Stein always imagined her unhabitual acts of perception and

¹²³ Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 41.

¹²⁴ Donald Gallup, “Gertrude Stein and the *Atlantic*,” *The Yale University Library Gazette*, XXVIII (1954), 110-112. “Your poems, I am sorry to say, would be a puzzle picture to our readers. All who have not the key must find them baffling, and -- alack! that key is known to very, very few.” Ellery Sedgwick’s 1919 rejection letter, “To Gertrude Stein,” (25 October 1919).

¹²⁵ Will, 135

¹²⁶ Laura Behling

linguistic revitalization to be in dynamic tension with the everyday, the typical, the habitual, the “normal”” (83). I argue that it is precisely this dynamism that she cultivates in *Tender Buttons* and other texts. Yet Will vacillates in her consideration of the “problem” of Stein’s dichotomous proclivities. Her definition of modernism fits with generally accepted ideas of its oppositional strategy – not as a dynamic tension between the ordinary and the new, but as an exclusionary movement which defied the everyday: “creative works of art could be produced which would in turn wrest a deadened populace from their habits and stupor. Only through turning away from the clichés and commonplaces of subjective and social experience could the genius affect “the shock of the new” (Will 6). Will extends this idea to point out that, “Ironically, this self-distancing from the “ordinary” can itself become a form of public distinction...Stein courts linguistic “obscurity” as a form of “self-advertisement.””¹²⁷ In a similar line of thought, Perelman suggests that Stein adopted the genius label to free herself “from ordinary occupation...from ordinary senses of size...from ordinary sequence” (150). I propose that avant-garde modernists like Stein alternatively turned *towards* commonplaces in order to create the new. The content of *Tender Buttons* verifies that Stein had no need to free herself from the ordinary, and instead accentuated it in her work as a conduit for making (and in turn “advertising”) new forms, even if ironically.

If there is further irony here, it is that Stein was a genius, at the level of high culture, but also a celebrity, at the level of popular culture (and despite her social withdrawal). She was both a highbrow experimenter and a lowbrow consumer. As Ann Douglas argues in *Terrible Honesty*, Stein actually represented the average American consumer (despite her French pretensions and high modernist egoism), and her work contains this ethos: “Stein was on friendly terms with the new American technology of mass culture”; she “loved the

¹²⁷ Here, Will references recent work by Susan Schultz, 80.

effortlessness and abundance created by the new technology of consumer-oriented mass production and saw her own art as its ally and analogue”; “immediate gratification was at the root of Stein’s persona and art.”¹²⁸ In a letter to Leo Stein in 1934, art collector Alfred Barnes referred to the negative reception of Stein’s work using the rhetoric of consumption: Stein “is meat for the newspapers here.”¹²⁹ Stein might have taken this culinary analogy as a compliment, but that would have depended on what cut of meat Barnes meant. (And just the comparison alone raised her value, for meat was a precious commodity at the time.)

Perhaps the interface between the commonplace and contemporary was her conundrum. In “Composition as Explanation” (1926), Stein argued that the war “forced...everyone [to be]...contemporary in act...contemporary in thought...in self-consciousness” (Douglas). Being contemporary had as much to do with the impact of war as it did with being American, even though she spent most of her life being American while living in France: “To be American, Stein’s logic went, is to be modern, irrespective of dates; the more American, the more modern” (Douglas 118). Leaving America was a prerequisite, geographically and imaginatively. As Will argues, “the nation – and specifically, America – was precisely what needed to be transcended” for Stein to create genius works of art. Stein explains this herself in *Paris, France*, “and so there is the Paris France from 1900 to 1939, where everybody had to be to be free” (37). The modern metropolis of France was, for Stein, a dynamic space for freedom, experimentation, individualism, difference, and creativity. She was surrounded with a vibrant community of writers and artists. Equally important, she learned the fine distinction of French cuisine and developed a fastidious palate. In fact, despite several warnings to flee Nazi-occupied France in 1940, she refused on the basis of

¹²⁸ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty* (New York: FSG, 1996) 121/127.

¹²⁹ Unpublished correspondence, (2 November 1934), Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

food: “They all said, ‘Leave,’ and I said to Alice Toklas, ‘Well, I don’t know – it would be awfully uncomfortable and I am fussy about my food. Let’s not leave.’...I was going to cut box hedges and forget the war.”¹³⁰ It would be through food, not necessarily words, that Stein assimilated. Moreover, the enigmatic quality of Stein’s writing effectively captures her expatriate experience as a struggle with language and narrative, as “the mark of unassimilated selfhood,” and as the tension of retaining and rejecting her own Americanness abroad.¹³¹

Stein’s definition of gastronomy as she came to know it in France may reveal exactly this tension within her aesthetic: “Cooking like everything else in France is logic and fashion.”¹³² If we read “logic” to imply that which is informed by tradition, the opposing counterpart to fashion, we may also consider the reference to writing, and Stein’s endeavor to make space in *Tender Buttons* for this friction. France was certainly the place that stirred such meditations for Stein. As Alice B. Toklas writes in the forward to her cookbook, living in France compelled a certain consciousness about food, a “taste for food,” and an understanding of food as national matter:

I took to pondering on the differences in eating habits and general attitude to food and the kitchen in the United States and here. I fell to considering how every nation, for the matter of that, has its idiosyncrasies in food and drink conditioned by climate, soil and temperament. And I thought about wars and conquests and how invading or occupying troops carry their habits with them and so in time perhaps modify the national kitchen or table.

Stein’s habits, transmitted through the impersonal speaker of the poems in *Tender Buttons* produced a portrait, even if vague, of the idiosyncrasies of the French way in the early part of the century. Far from the “ungastronomic,” “taste-blind” America that Fisher lamented, France enabled Stein’s procurement of a new mode of taste, for food as well as language. As

¹³⁰ “The Winner Loses,” 623. During a trip to the U.S. in 1934-1935, Alice B. Toklas recalls Stein’s expressed anxiety about the food: “Would it be to her taste?” (*The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, 23).

¹³¹ Will discusses this in terms of *The Making of Americans*, in *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of “Genius,”* 109.

¹³² *Paris, France*, 46-9

Toklas observes during their residence in France, “food [is] a fine art,” and taste is a fashionable asset (5). And it was American food – “strange indeed – tinned vegetable cocktails and tinned fruit salads” – which she identified as “foreign” (123). Stein and Toklas were hardly conventional Americans, having assimilated at the French table. Yet what this particular discussion opens, in light of a reading of *Tender Buttons*, is the interlace of life in France, as presented through a language of food, in Stein’s poems, which were a precursor to the recipes of Toklas’ cookbook.

The overlaps signify the mutually influential forces of food and art across the first half of the century, and the provocative junction of popular culture and literary modernism. Toklas deciphers this link between cooking and art, a perspective that would most likely have been shared by Stein: “When treasures are recipes they are less clearly, less distinctly remembered than when they are tangible objects. They evoke however quite as vivid a feeling – that is, to some of us who, considered cooking an art, feel that a way of cooking can produce something that approaches an aesthetic emotion” (100). Food does have aesthetic resonance for Stein, and by investigating the line between recipe and object, her text embodies how it does, as it does.

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As a self-aggrandizing “genius” of the new, Stein was invested in producing texts that had never before been experienced. Like her modernist counterparts, she was drawn to the extraordinary, amused by complexity and abstraction. *Tender Buttons*, deceptively simple like many of her works, exhibits a “masterly use of words.”¹³³ The tone is neutral yet remains elusive. The language is basic yet illusory and unreliable – puns, obsessive repetitions, metrical and melodic refrains, circular illogic, riddling, and convoluted patterns of thought

¹³³ Perelman referring to *Mrs. Reynolds*, 55

imbue the prose, which sustains a certain movement (words have mobility) even with continual stops and starts. Grammar and syntax, often unfamiliar to the reader, disorient. *Tender Buttons* departs from conventional referentiality and linear time to capture consciousness through verbal cubism. The prose is absent of narrative logic and causal sequencing such that what coheres the text is the animation of a single perception. The fragmentary style turns inward and outward to mirror the mind and modern life, the result of which is a mishmash of nursery rhymes, common speech, clichés, and popular jingles. The genre is ambiguous, as Stein versifies her prose with line-breaks and poetically plays with spatiality on the page, yet also instructs in the manner of a cookbook.

The text is organized into three sections, “Objects,” “Food,” “Rooms.” For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on “Food,” though gastronomic references appear throughout the entirety of *Tender Buttons*.¹³⁴ This is the first study that singularly addresses “Food” – and food – specifically in relation to culinary modernism. I approach *Tender Buttons* as a whole for what it says about consumption; objects, foods, words are the interchangeable materials that are prepared (sliced), served, tasted, masticated, and ultimately ingested within the text. Food is being done, performed, like language; foods are rinsed, cut, assembled, stewed. And words, like foods, occur over various states of change, sharing a vocabulary that extends from the raw to the cooked, as they simultaneously embody perceptions of change. This seems to be a major interest of Stein’s – tracking the evolving object of a word (like a food) over time, attending to the differences (if not relations) between things, and savoring the pleasures to be had in their movement and variation. Eating in *Tender Buttons* is a form of apprehending experience; putting food into words, or writing as it parallels cooking, tells us – or asks – something about living. In “Orange In,” for example, “pain soup” may be read as

¹³⁴ In “Objects,” there are poems entitled “A piece of coffee,” “A plate,” “A Seltzer bottle,” “A cutlet,” “A time to eat,” and in “Rooms” there are references to tasting, eating, and cooking.

a gastronomic descriptor for what it means to live; the soup of life (and its inherent pain) gets “excreate[d]” – both created and excreted – through the eating and writing of experience. And at the same time, words are unreliable in the text because their meaning is constantly, even in a single breath, evolving beyond our reach. Stein allows the textures of language (like the sensations of taste experienced in eating food) to play out, uses writing (like cooking) as play, and in doing so destabilizes language. *Tender Buttons* as an inquiry into the nature of language, and a meditation on the nature of things in time and space, is made effective because it uses – or performs – food to do so, converging the acts of eating and reading, cooking and writing, which are necessary and imaginative. As Lisa Ruddick argues in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis*, Stein is a writer who “enjoys her orality, or bites her words.” And in doing so she creates neologisms that make familiar things of domestic life unordinary and new.

There are fifty-one prose-poems in “Food,” each signaling in title a specific food item, or a culinary activity, though the titular simplicity does not match the opacity of text that follows. Some foods repeat – for example, there are double entries for milk, potatoes, cream, salad dressing, and there are multiple renditions of chicken and orange(s). There are also appearances of apple, plum, steak, clam, onions, corn, rhubarb, salmon, sausage, butter, celery, soup, and cake, among other foodstuffs. As the only section with a table of contents, albeit incomplete, “Food” reads like its own distinct text, one that loosely resembles – in a text that is otherwise about “not resembling” (9) – a cookbook in format. The table of contents serves the text as a menu foretells a meal. Pairing ordinary objects of daily living with non-normative poetics, polysemous words, and extraordinary grammar, Stein creates a radical aesthetic form based on a classic popular template.

In a compelling comparison of *Tender Buttons* to cookbooks from 1890-1912, Margueritte S. Murphy reads Stein's text as a "counter-discourse" to the prose of traditional domestic guidebooks that cover topics of food, housekeeping, fashion, and etiquette from that period: Stein "does not renounce or trivialize that world but uses its authority to value, explain, and stabilize her own domestic sphere"; she subverts conventional discourses, adding "aesthetic value to her world by describing its visual tensions."¹³⁵ Stein also eroticizes the ordinary discourse of domesticity, subverting a conventionally feminine model of language as well as dominant prose styles of her time.¹³⁶ The kitchen milieu as a culinary and linguistic space is almost unrecognizable. In "Food," Stein attends to "things which nourish us" (William Gass): foods and words. The foodstuffs that appear may indeed be associated with nourishment (roastbeef, eggs, chicken, salmon), but their presence in the text is defamiliarized and obscured with language, removed from any specific culinary context. If this is a portrait of domestic life, it is one that does not feel occupied by human realism; a space in which linguistic fodder is the primary necessity and subject of consumption, and the reader's possibility for nourishment is especially aesthetic. Or as this line instructs, in a way that seems to articulate the aim of the text: "Wake a question. Eat an instant, answer" (52).

Stein would have been familiar with the cookbook genre in the zealous interest in food she shared with Toklas.¹³⁷ Like a cookbook, *Tender Buttons*, particularly the section

¹³⁵ Margueritte S. Murphy, "Familiar Strangers": The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons" *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 383-402.

¹³⁶ Hadas reads the repetition of *Alas* in "Cooking" as a reference to Alice, and points to a more pervasive homoerotic thread in the text. And Addressing Stein's title, *Tender Buttons*, Elizabeth Ammons argues that it indicates a text invested in eroticizing the ordinary: "the words identify women's world, the world of nurturance and domesticity, as erotic. They force us to ask: What are the tender buttons, the delicious firm things, the highly sensitive-t-the-touch triggers, that Stein intends as the controlling metaphor...? Nipples? Clitorises? Should we read "tender" as soft and tasty? Certainly the word evokes eating, chewing, sucking. OR does it mean painful? Or maybe we should read tender as tend/her?" (*Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn Into the Twentieth Century*, 99).

¹³⁷ Toklas wouldn't publish her first cookbook until after World War II, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954), and then *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present* (1958), which she co-authored with Poppy Cannon, though this credit (her precise role in this project) is questionable. It is important to note that the writing of *Tender Buttons*,

“Food,” is stylized with an impersonal and elusive prose, void of the first person point-of-view. The tone may be lively, and even discriminating, but it seems to lack human interiority, or perhaps this is the effect of its exclusive game. The shorthand, paratactic style mimics yet parodies conventional cookery prose; the writer is in this way performing the role of the cook, who presents her prose like a recipe, a step-by-step of menial tasks, yet infuses it with repetitive melodies and precise wordplay, and in doing so assigns aesthetic value to domestic life. However, imperatives abound in the text:

Suspect a single buttered flower, suspect it certainly, suspect it and then glide, does that not alter a counting.
...Take no remedy lightly, take no urging intently, take no separation leniently, beware of no lake and no larder.
Burden the cracked wet soaking sack heavily, burden it so that it is an institution in fright and in climate and in the best plan that there can be.
 (“Breakfast” 43)

...

Count the chain, cut the grass, silence the moon and murder flies. See the basting undip the chart, see the way the kinds are best seen from the rest, from that and untidy.
Cut the whole space into twenty-four spaces and then and then is there a yellow color, there is but it is smelled, it is then put where it is and nothing stolen. (“Cranberries” 46)

And earlier in the text, she advises with more specific culinary reference, “Practice measurement” (18). But it is in “Mutton” where she describes the work of language in the text most directly: “Lecture, lecture and repeat instruction” (41).

Even if the poems in “Food” may be read as recipe forms, they do not merely instruct, or they do so atypically. Though they initially appear to conform to tradition – at times they tell us what and even how to cook – we are more urgently enlisted to be conscious of what and how we read. Consider the opening of “Orange In”:

Go lack go lack use to her.
Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.

from 1910-1913, occurs just after Leo left and Alice arrived at Rue de Fleurus, during a major shift in her domestic arrangement.

Whist bottom whist close, whist clothes, woodling.
Cocoa and clear soup and oranges and oat-meal.

Like recipe imperatives, the speaker instructs the reader to *go*, *use*, and *whist* (sounds like *whisk* when read as a verb, though it refers to an English card game played in the 18th and 19th centuries). The insertion of *lack*, though it reads as a transitive verb, is descriptive of an implied pattern; between states of *going* and *lacking*, what is of *use* is somehow in question. There is a repetition of obvious ingredients, though their culinary connection (thus *usefulness*) is unclear. This may be a recipe in appearance, but for what we are not sure.¹³⁸ If *whist* is not heard as *whisk*, then it suggests a game is at hand, and Stein is the one dealing the cards to the reader. Although there is an orange in the title, it does not reappear within the prose, and may be read instead as a slur of sounds when paired with *in* to produce the word and concept, *origin*. If Stein is attempting to reach the origin of something, it is perhaps language, itself a game. In typical wordplay, the next stanza goes: “Pain soup, suppose it is question, suppose it is butter, real is, real is only, only excreate, only excreate a no since.” It is difficult to know if the *pain* is linked to *lack*, and even the speaker is querying the state of things in her reiteration of *suppose it is*. Stein invents the word *excreate*, a verb that seems referent to what is *real*, and whose meaning suggests the unmaking or dismantling of something as a form of creation. Yet this word also unmistakably puns on *excretion*, and may be heard as such in a poem about food. Action is relocated in the bodily, and language itself becomes material play; it is performed. The remainder of the poem is linguistic continuum of *no since*. Perhaps this is a temporal reference emphasizing the adverbial idea of a *then*, which doesn’t exist, as opposed to a *now*. If we read *no since* as a pun on *nuisance*, the nuisance

¹³⁸ If Stein were a judge on the popular cooking show “Chopped,” this would be the surprise basket given to amateur chefs who must compose dishes from an assortment of mismatched items. “Chopped,” one of the more popular shows on *The Food Network*, involves the timed, spontaneous cooking of three courses from a basket comprising random, unrelated ingredients selected by judges who taste the final results. The last cook standing wins a monetary award.

may be the *lack*, the *pain*, or, considering this text as a recipe, the labor of cooking. If we read *no since* as a pun on nonsense, we are left wondering what is real; where is Stein situating realness in contrast to the unreal. Perhaps in embodied experience, in the physical encounter with food as a medium for communication. Reading, in this sense, becomes its own act of creating, as well as consuming.

“Sugar” exemplifies another “likeness” in the prose of both recipe and poem forms:

One, two and one, two, nine, second and five and that.
A blaze, a search in between, a cow, only any wet place, only this tune.
...
A white bird, a colored mine, a mixed orange, a dog.

Stein swings between recipe measurements and metrical counts, although her ingredients are a stew of objects, not all edible. Earlier in this same poem, the speaker instructs: “Put it in the stew, put it to shame.” And there are other directives to the reader to *cut* and *pierce in between*, so that it seems a *piece* of meat – also *tender*, a *delicacy* – is being butchered, in much the same way Stein is cutting and slicing the properties and meanings of words themselves. By the end, sugar seems to have nothing to do with the matter of this poem. The teasing seems aware of its own happening in prose, that *[t]he line* makes a *puzzle* rather than a *likeness* in the poem. And in “Potatoes,” the second of three potato poems, preparation is declared – “In the preparation of cheese, in the preparation of crackers, in the preparation of butter, in it” – yet denied; we are not advised of how to do any actual preparing of potatoes.

The sing-songy poem “Custard” misleads the reader to think there is a direct correlation between the food object and its corresponding prose, as it begins with such affirmative certainty. Yet just as the reader of “Potatoes” conjectures what precisely is *in it*, here the reader is left to wonder, what is *this*, though Stein clearly delineates what it is from what it is not:

Custard is this. It has aches, aches when. Not to be. Not to be

narrowly. This makes a whole little hill.

It is better than a little thing that has mellow real mellow. It is better than lakes whole lakes, it is better than seeding.

Stein's poem is made of switchbacks, revised assertions, contradictions, and denials, in much the same way the making of a recipe goes. An ingredient, or word, is a piece that *makes a whole*. The language of the poem, like food, is living substance, metamorphosing between forms; it is one thing, and then it is not; a thing has identity, then nonidentity. In one sense, Stein's prose in "Custard" does what few poems do in the text – it resembles the object to which it refers. Her verbal play embodies or embeds the gastronomic event of making custard, a delicate process of combining milk or cream and egg yolks to create a substance with accurate viscosity and texture; so much depends upon temperature, technique, time, and the ability to respond to shifting variables (it is *cunning*, as described in the poem "Eggs"). Custard rises (makes a *hill*) and falls (makes a *lake*), and we hear the play on its color *yellow* in *mellow*. Language is a similar experience for the reader of this poem, as Stein uses the recipe to create a poem that alters the act of reading as consumption. Murphy, whose essay "Familiar Strangers" considers the household words in *Tender Buttons*, points to the subversive overtones within "Custard," and to Stein's "hidden polemic with cookbook prose and with conventional mores," arguing that Stein's investment in the redesignation of "simple, familiar words" for foods erotically "redefines what's really cooking between women" (397). The *aches*, when heard as *eggs*, may hold privately coded puns of the feminine, perhaps implying sexual desire; when desire is *not to be*, there are aches (Murphy). Another reading is that the unnarrowness (*Not to be narrowly*) is Stein's self-description, or her requirement of the reader of her poem to make *a whole* meaning from the witty kitchenspeak. One is reminded or referred back to the poem "Milk," which begins with "A white egg," and whose *holes* resemble the *lakes* of "Custard." In "Milk," Stein offers a definition of cooking:

“Cooking, cooking is the recognition between sudden and nearly sudden very little and all large holes.” Just as custard *is* something definitive, even if unnamed, cooking *is*, too; it is a recognition, which is to say a particular form of reading, of nuanced deciphering between *sudden* and *nearly sudden*, between *very little* and *all large*, even if Stein’s reader is baffled by what is being consumed. Here again, as in other poems in “Food,” Stein plays at the edge between food/language and recipe/poem, and in disrupting genre, her text challenges the discourse of necessity in relation to aesthetics.

A similar play on the idea of cooking as writing, or reading as consuming, occurs in the final poem of “Food,” entitled “A Centre in a Table.” In this poem, food is substituted for a folder on the table, presumably in a restaurant (there is a waiter), and Stein inserts herself more conspicuously into the scene, using the pronoun *me*, then instructs the reader in the final line: “Read her with her for less.” *Read her* may even be heard as *reader*, but also invites the unidentified *her* to be read. Perhaps the text itself is the feminine subject that is to be read, in which case Stein advises the reader to not over-read, but instead to read *for less*, shifting the reader’s insistence on meaning in a text that otherwise moves beyond the necessity for signification. Moreover, to read (when heard via the play on *reed*) is *to be*. The *centre* is being, is reading; reading is being inside, is perception. The cod liver oil is supposed to be a *secret* – a supplement that would have been used during Stein’s time to aid the body in growth, strength, endurance, and vitality, and was regarded as necessary for building strong armies – yet our attention is shifted in the end from the oil to the folder. The poem seems to also transfer to secret to the folder, so that the reader must wonder what is the *some sum* contained in the *centre*. The habits of eating that might take place at this table are replaced or converted into the process of writing, and subsequently, reading, for as Neil Schmitz argues, “Having broken through the constraints of representation, the restrictions imposed on

conception by formal discourse, she turns to the narrative itself...The body of her own experience is here in the body of this text” (). The purpose of composing food, like that of composing words, is to nourish the body, which makes the *sum*.

Stein’s fascination with the body is perhaps most elaborately captured in the first and longest poem of “Food,” “Roastbeef,” which reads like an extensive section for meat found in a cookbook. The poem is full of the contraries (or what she calls “opposition to consideration”) that might be subject to both bodily experience and culinary experiment: inside/outside, feeling/meaning, part/whole, tenderness/hardness, silence/singing, thinness/thickness, use/aesthetic, surface/center, dirty/clean, likeness/difference, raw/roasted, kindness/violence. Although she writes “there is no use” in taste, she also offers a definition of taste: “the principal taste is when there is a whole chance to be reasonable.” The irony is that nothing about “Roastbeef” – as a recipe or poem – feels very *reasonable*.

According to Murphy, “Roastbeef” is one of the “clearest sexual pleas” in *Tender Buttons*, as in this line: “Please be the beef, please beef, pleasure is not wailing. Please beef, please be carved clear, please be a case of consideration” (37).¹³⁹ Beef and pleasure correspond through many double-entendres, including “kindcuts,” “tender turn,” “the pure result is juice” (39). Yet Stein collapses bodily desire and gratification, the kind fulfilled through food consumption and sexual contact, with writerly self-consciousness by asking her reader, “Why is the perfect reestablishment practiced and prized, why is it composed.” Here, she could be referring to the recipe or the poem as a *reestablishment*, something restored, made new. The cooking of beef is turned into a narrative that one might expect from a cookbook entry, yet with an “extraculinary story or drama” (Murphy) that makes it feel unfeasible to

¹³⁹ Murphy

actually cook. The opening line traces the evolving process, from *sleeping* to *reddening* to *meaning* to *feeling*. And then even *feeling* is broken down into separate variations (from *resting* to *mounting* to *resignation*, *recognition*, *recurrence*, and finally *pinching*). Stein is marking the “discrimination” and also the “circling” that occurs within the food object and language, about which she lightheartedly states, having made her point, “Very well” (which may also be read as a pun on the *well*-doneness of beef). Later in the poem, “a transfer” changes into *a large* transfer, then *a little* transfer, then *some* transfer; in these differences, we witness language as both the transfer and as what transfers meaning. This creates what Schmitz refers to as the text’s “lyrical hymn to mutability” ().

There are several moments of directive recipe-language in “Roastbeef.” For example, Stein guides the reader through the quandary of multiple options (“the time when there are four choices”) by instructing: “The kindly way to feel separating is to have a space between.” Later in the poem, she delivers a torrent of directions: “Please spice, please no name, place a whole weight, sink into a standard rising, raise a circle, choose a right around, make the resonance accounted and gather green any collar.” Then she instructs how “to bury a slender chicken” in the paragraph that follows. And as if she is beside her reader in the kitchen, she offers help in cooking the beef:

The sooner there is jerking, the sooner freshness is tender, the sooner the round it is not round the sooner it is withdrawn in cutting, the sooner the measure means service, the sooner there is chinking, the sooner there is sadder than salad, the sooner there is none do her, the sooner there is no choice, the sooner there is a gloom freer, the same sooner and more sooner, this is no error in hurry and in pressure and in opposition to consideration.

In one reading of this description, though it lacks culinary precision, Stein details how to assess when beef is done, or tender, through touch (“there is jerking”), sight (the round “is not round”), and cutting (“it is withdrawn”). Suddenly the reader is transported from the kitchen to the table for the rituals of dining: service, a toast (the “chinking” of glasses), the

salad course. Yet the passage takes a turn in meaning, from physical action to more complex emotions (*sadness, gloom, no choice*), leaving the reader excluded from tabletalk and human interactions that may be a source of tension inherent in the idea of *error*.

By the end, there is a result – the beef is cooked and carved: “The result the pure result is juice and size and baking and exhibition and nonchalance and sacrifice and volume and a section in division and the surrounding recognition and horticulture and no murmur. This is a result.” Once again, what at first appears as a description of the presentation of the featured dish, roastbeef, as the result, is also transferrable to language. By making the composition of the poem self-reflexive, Stein also gets us to consider its consumption – how we read – drawing attention to the difference between ordinary and encoded meanings: “The change the dirt, not to change dirt means that there is no beefsteak and not to have that is no obstruction, it is so easy to exchange meaning, it is so easy to see the difference. The difference is that a plain resource is not entangled with thickness and it does not mean that thickness shows such cutting” (33). The poem continuously exchanges meaning (and does so to our idea of the cookbook) and sees differences, yet there is nothing either easy or plain about the act of reading, which is conversely a dense entangling; that it can be *so easy* to exchange meaning and perceive difference is certainly not an easy explanation for a poem that thrives in muddling meaning.

In the final line, though there is *a result* to be reckoned with, there is also absence: “there is no delight and no mathematics.” The transformation of matter (literally of beef from flesh to food, and of words into poem) is complete, therefore pleasure (*delight*) is done and math is no longer necessary now that there is a *result*. Throughout the poem, meaning itself is shown to be changeable, and the pleasure (in repetition, rhyme, echo, syntax, yet also in cooking and carving and consuming the beef) highlights this process. Words are

simultaneously *surface* and *exception* and *division* and *suggestion* (33). Yet just as Stein reminds the reader of what there is not, she also leaves space for what there is: “the rest and remainder.” The process of composing the poem, as the beef, is over, but the *recognition* is in the poem, a visual not aural remainder, even if “the whole thing is not understood” (34). The superimposed vocabularies of cooking and writing allude to the *sacrifice* inherent to both acts. “Roastbeef” seems self-reflexive about its necessity and art in way that perfectly describes Stein’s approach to the text: “Claiming nothing, not claiming anything, not a claim in everything, collecting claiming, all this makes a harmony, it even makes a succession” (37). While conjunctions are non-affirming, “not always, not particular” (34), they illogically cohere, as if the components of the text are precisely the meal she has intended for us to consume, even if the result is indigestion. While it has been argued that her prose embodies the pulses of breathing (Flore Chevaillier), here it does so with the cadences of chewing, tasting, digesting, and other sensations of eating. Stein deliberately toys with the line between food and art, for as one poem goes “Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot. This makes it art...” (“Asparagus” 51)

IV

Julia Child’s Art of the Ordinary

Although *Mastering* comes onto the scene in the post-war – many decades and two wars after *Tender Buttons* – when the country was shifting from a mindset of rationing to one of abundance, both texts developed out of a similar ethos. Both revolve around Americans in the French kitchen, or offer translations of taste – culinary and aesthetic – that were cultivated in France. Working in different genres, occupying disparate milieus, and presumably never crossing paths in person, Stein and Child may only have shared the

common denominator of a love of food.¹⁴⁰ It seems unlikely that Stein would have invited Child to Rue de Fleurus, unless to cook a meal, though Paul Child did participate in the salons of Stein and Toklas in earlier years. Child's social circles consisted of as many literati as chefs because of Paul. We know from her memoir that she was aware of and engaged in newly established literary genres and trends of her time, particularly the avant-garde. She even read Stein, though with mixed opinion – she describes her as clever but lacking discipline “like playing the piano and missing the tempo.” She attended a production of Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* in Connecticut because she was interested in avant-garde art and loved the theatre. She ran into Toklas at many events in Paris after Stein's death, but held a negative view of her cookbook; could not take it seriously from a culinary perspective, while Fisher, in contrast, wrote a politic forward, referring to it as a text that “would feed [her] soul abundantly” in a time of need.

Even with these interconnections, it may seem far-fetched to read Child in the context of literary avant-gardism (or Stein in the frame of popular culture). Here are a few passageways. Child's “Dedication” announces that it is for and about ordinary people, concerned with ordinary matter: “TO *La Belle France* whose peasants, fishermen, housewives, and princes – not to mention her chefs – through generations of inventive and loving concentration have created one of the world's great arts” (v). This highlights people of everyday life and tropes of mythological France; simplicity and idealism, past and present. Cooking is labor and it is art. And she dedicates this book to France, not to America, though it is written for an American audience. Just as the foodstuffs of Stein's kitchen in *Tender Buttons* capture daily living, though the reader of her poems is unlikely middlebrow, Child's recipes are intended for a spectrum of home-cooks, though their complexity in language may

¹⁴⁰ They also shared a home state away from France – California.

be too artful; nevertheless, both texts use the mundane as a medium for the new. And despite difficult subject matter, both employ a simple American idiom. The speaker of Stein's poems is not unlike the presence of Child's character (the performed personality) in her cookbook; impersonal yet playful, instructional yet non-authoritative. I argue for their point of contact in the twentieth-century, not only to revisit Stein's modernism (via food), but also to look closely at Child's gastronomy (via art) – just as Stein borrowed from culinary culture, Child adopted literary methods. Both of them invest in a language of the ordinary but also in a radical aesthetics in order to produce new forms, inverting our ideas of the high/low, and compelling a broader discourse of consumption.

Perhaps the title of Child's cookbook is an apposite starting point for a close reading of the dialectic of the ordinary and avant-garde (of necessity and aesthetics) that suffuses her text. In the Forward to *Mastering*, Child makes a case for the ordinariness of her cooking by referring to what had been her original title, "French Cooking from the American Supermarket" (xxiii). Before we even arrive at the recipes, Child is assuring us that this is a book about "basic materials," or what Stein names "plain resource[s]." She conjures the American supermarket to appeal to the mainstream. However, the actual title, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," is a bold reminder that mastery and art, linked to the French, remain integral to food. The difference in these titles reflects a tension inherent in Child's approach: cooking is simple and cooking is artful. This would seem to be a hard idea to sell, but the success of her cookbook may prove otherwise. Her proselytizing of the ordinary in French food – a cuisine otherwise assumed to be daunting and complex – during a time of increasing mechanization of the American kitchen, was precisely the antidote for demystifying the "high" art of cooking for the everyday home cook. Child converted commonplace ingredients into fashionable recipes – beef bourguignon was incorporated into

the American home alongside the frozen TV-dinner. As Krishnendu Ray notes, “Cuisine happens when food enters the fashion cycle” (58). Child made cuisine happen. Yet the trendiness of her cookbook did not mean it had compromised formal artisanal techniques over technological shortcuts; for all of its attention to ordinariness, we cannot pick up *Mastering* with a can-opener. It demands from us another type of encounter, dispelling our anxieties about esoteric food into a simple form, yet, like Stein’s dense text, it alters our mode of consumption by requiring time and patience.

The prewar and wartime France that Stein experienced was obviously not the one Child discovered upon her arrival just after the war’s end, though we know from her memoir, *My Life in France*, that she would regularly encounter its material and psychological relics, for it was “still in a state of post-war shock” (91). She gained the impression that war was the reason for the nation’s food fervor: “I wondered if the nation’s gastronomical lust had its roots not in the sunshine of art but in the deep dark deprivations France had suffered” (71).¹⁴¹ Like Stein, Child was directly involved in the war effort. She did espionage work for the OSS (while Stein, in opposition, was translating the speeches of Petain, head of the collaborationist Vichy regime), wanting “to do something to aid my country in a time of crisis” (84). Eventually this aid would be channeled through food (Will). Yet Child’s patriotism was unusual – to bring French food to the American table, to be a liaison, meant bolstering the American palate by Europeanizing cooking. In fact, she once wrote, “I was not at all interested in anything but French cooking” (*My Life* 240). France was, for Child as for Stein, a place for experimentation, otherness, and freedom, and its cooking signified this. It was Frenchness, as she and Stein learned through enculturation, which could be obtained via eating French food, an essence Child would translate into a desired consumable for the

¹⁴¹ She was critical of Fisher’s idyllic “pre-war eyes”

American public. While the objective of her cookbook was to give practical cooking instruction, its authorial intentions were greater in terms of the politics of her aesthetics; Child writes about this undertaking, “I could see clearly that our challenge was to bridge the cultural divide between France and America” (231). This was just one of many divides she would tackle in the making of *Mastering*, for as committed as she was to reinstating ordinary habits – the familiar – she was invested in the aesthetic experimentalism of alternative forms – the foreign – across geographic, gastronomic, and literary realms.

As with Stein, it is hard to disentangle Child’s aesthetics from her politics, although many critics (including Child herself) have argued that no political agenda drove her (Shapiro xv). Perhaps it is sufficient to account for Child’s politics simply in her aim to modify eating habits and culinary culture. By moving food “to the center of American life,” Child made real changes (Shapiro 73). And these occurred at various levels. For example, by augmenting the U.S. market, Child “participated in (even provided for) a postwar economic transformation.”¹⁴² Kennan Ferguson considers Child’s politics as derivative of the sensory quality of her work. Drawing from French philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s notion of politics as the “distribution of the sensible,” he reconsiders the political potential of the cookbook: “To look at the openings and promises of sensation is to analyze political potentiality and possibility, as well as to note their limits and constraints. Such affective dynamics have material (and materialized) traces, and a cookbook provides a printed, textualized locale of taste and identity” (). More than a transmission of affect, the cookbook is also an act of communication. Robert Appelbaum discusses the political merits of the cookbook by considering the very divide that I have identified in Child’s text, between the practical and political, between the everyday and aesthetic; cookbooks “insert themselves into the world

¹⁴² Kennan Ferguson, “Mastering the Art of the Sensible” Julia Child, Nationalist.” Project MUSE, Volume 12, Issue 2, 2009

of practical life, both as advocates of things to be done and as expressions of ideas to be read and thought” (114).

If Child was political, it was accidental. That’s at least how her gender politics have been described. She didn’t overtly confront misogyny in the kitchen, rather, she made herself an example, thus a symbol, of what women could create – in food, language, and performance. “The French Chef” aired in 1963, the same year that Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which regarded domestic work such as cooking as oppressive. While Friedan advocated for women to exit the kitchen, and women increasingly recoiled from the duties of cooking, Child liberated them from within the kitchen, emphasizing the pleasures rather than confines of cooking, even “de-domesticizing” and professionalizing culinary work. She literally turned her home kitchen into an art studio for her experimentation and television performance. Yet Child renounced feminism, insisting throughout her career that, despite her emergence as a woman chef during the feminist movement, she was not a feminist.¹⁴³ She did, however, speak out against discrimination in the profession – “Part of my problem as a practical American was the deeply ingrained chauvinism and dogmatism in France, where cooking was considered a major art” – though she also urged men, whom she considered better cooks, into the kitchen to prevent the “Dullsville” created by women.¹⁴⁴

On the other hand, Child’s class politics were muted. Like Stein, she was a snob, especially in matters of food. It is known that French food has always been at the top of the hierarchy of cuisines: a symbol of high taste, an indicator of status. After World War Two,

¹⁴³ Shapiro, 134. As Ray points out, Julia’s position regarding feminism may have been a “function of her generational location” – Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan graduated from Smith College about twenty years after Julia; “Julia’s world preceded the second wave of feminism” (53).

¹⁴⁴ My Life, 145 / Shapiro, 141 / Reardon, Pleasures / She even once expressed that women were responsible for changing how they cooked: “But if you’re going to have a stupid mother who just doesn’t want to do anything but dump some sort of awful frozen dinner on them, I think that’s the family’s fault” (from an interview with Sharon Hudgins, “A Conversation with Julia Julia, Spring 1984,” *Gastronomica* 5 (2005): no. 3, 104–108. Ray, 53.

this was especially so, as “instruction for French cooking appeared in tandem with the emergence of American middle-class culture” (Ferguson). Child cooked and wrote for the middle-class. And cooking French depended on access to supermarkets, high-quality products, and souped-up kitchens. Even the list of kitchen equipment in *Mastering* – items like copper pots and a drum sieve – are only “everyday” for the prosperous middle-class. As Andrew F. Smith argues, “By 1962, French cookery had become trendy, but it was still out of reach for most Americans” (240). Internationalism was vogue (France was the burgeoning middle-class destination), French restaurants were the in-thing, the Kennedys had a French chef – everybody caught the wave and wanted a taste. But where was the American working-class in this context? Did Child’s style of French cooking rise to popularity at the exclusion of those of lower economic status? How did her cookbook bridge the gap between necessity and aesthetic superfluity, between the familiar and the foreign? By aestheticizing the habitual, by treating food as an object of entertainment and indulgence, wasn’t Child dismissing the realities of the social class system and the divisive stratifications of taste at that time? Although Ray credits Child with using the TV, a democratic medium, for educating and appealing to the masses, he extends this critique of the aestheticization of eating: “in the context of scarcity, necessity, and inequality, the moral critique of waste, opulence, and mere show can be leveled at both medieval banquets and postmodern television shows” (57). Herein is the complicated subject – up against a rhetoric of convenience, Child was attempting to make French food as ordinary as fast food, to bring the high of French culture to the lower echelons of American life, but her definition of ordinary was not so common, and her cooking hinged on the guarantee of plenty.

That was the shifting trend in the country – towards excess. *Mastering* was an answer; but one at odds with its time. Child wrote about this clash in *My Life*: “American

supermarkets were also full of products labeled “gourmet” that were not: instant cake mixes, TV dinners, frozen vegetables, canned mushrooms, fish sticks, Jell-O salads, marshmallows, spray-can whipped cream, and other horrible glop. This gave me pause. Would there be a place in the USA for a book like ours? Were we hopelessly out of step with the times?” (225).¹⁴⁵ It isn’t as if Child’s cookbook was not a product of its time. In the Introduction to *Mastering*, she writes: “You will note this indulgence here” (xv). And everything within its pages is geared towards an object-oriented consumer culture – Child compels a fetishization of all things culinary: cookware, ingredients, spices, implements, kitchens. Rather than Jell-O salads and fish sticks – the “nasty, tasteless, depressing A&P garboozova” – we are treated to foreign dishes and their manifold variations, sauces, and sides, with as much profusion. Child’s cookbook, though she makes a disclaimer about its omissions, is nearly encyclopedic, an epic “opus” as she called it. But efficiency was of particular value in the post-war, and for this Child felt at odds with American tastes. In a letter to an editor at Houghton Mifflin, she acknowledged her disappointment with resolve, “We well realize that the continuing trend in this country is toward speed and the elimination of work, and that our treatise...furthers neither aspect of this American dream.” Had she been foolish to think that the American dream could be defined by French standards, by simply translating another culture’s cuisine into everyday terms? Like Stein, Child had to endure several rejections. While even Stein could get published in popular magazines, Child was up against contenders of can-opener cookery: “our recipes did not appeal to the TV-dinner-and-cake-mix set. We had discovered this fact, with a bit of a shock, when we attempted to place our work in a few of the mass-circulation magazines. Not one of them was interested in anything we’d done. The editors

¹⁴⁵ At another point she wonders, “Was our book ten years too late? Did the American public really want nothing but speed and magic in the kitchen? Apparently so.” (My Life, 239). Child loathed Jell-O (to her it was “beyond redemption”) and frozen fruit salad, coincidentally the same foods encountered (and disliked) by Toklas and Stein during their trip to the US.

seemed to consider the French preoccupation with detail a waste of time, if not a form of insanity” (*My Life* 227).

Though she didn’t want “to be in any way associated with commercialism” or “cuisine express,” Child was fascinated by supermarket modernism and American consumerism. She even names *Gourmet* magazine and *Joy of Cooking* as her guides.¹⁴⁶ Her egalitarian approach opposed the purism and elitism spreading in American food culture; she warned, “If fear of food continues, it will be the death of gastronomy in the United States.”¹⁴⁷ While Child may have been correct in thinking that “*Mastering* was published at the right psychological moment,” it is also true that she transformed the psychology of eating with *Mastering* (*My Life* 253). It would go on to be the highest-selling cookbook of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁸ Yet she also popularized the chatter of food, what Stein referred to as the “talk about talking about food.”¹⁴⁹

Mastering would incite a talk about talking about food, a talk different than what was happening in the nation in the rhetoric of thrift, convenience, and speed. Child’s answer to processed American foods was *cuisine bourgeoise* – classic, simple, traditional, middle-class home cooking; what she referred to as “expert French home-style cooking”: the “basics,” the “fundamentals.”¹⁵⁰ In her report to Knopf, Judith Jones called Child’s “revolutionary” recipes the “backbone” of classic cuisine, capturing the dichotomy within the cookbook, a

¹⁴⁶ Introduction to *Mastering*, viii. She was also influenced by the seminal book for the French home cook, *Le Vivre de Cuisine* de Mm. E. Saint-Ange.

¹⁴⁷ Shapiro, 116 / Reardon, 141. She even “set out to develop [her] own ways of using labor-saving gadgets” and reconstitute frozen vegetables into traditional French forms, but realized, “It is just no fun to eat that stuff, no matter how many French touches and methods you put to it. It ain’t French, it ain’t good, and the hell with it” (letter to Avis De Voto, 1953) (*My Life*, 275, Shapiro, 71)

¹⁴⁸ The “most comprehensive, laudable, and monumental work on the subject” wrote food critic and NYT editor Craig Claiborne. “It surpassed every other American book on French cooking already in print” (Reardon, 147). “Within three years, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* had sold 100,000 copies, making it the most successful cookbook in the United States” (Kennan Ferguson)

¹⁴⁹ *Mrs. Reynolds*. This was an influence of Paul, who had become conversant in matters of food during his time spent among artists in 1920s Paris (*Appetite for Life*, Noel Riley Fitch).

¹⁵⁰ *Mastering, Volume II*, vii

juggling of the standard and the avant-garde. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson offers a definition of the cuisine Child brought to America: “with its emphasis on economy, simplicity, and health,” *cuisine bourgeoise* retains “ideological and culinary opposition to aristocratic culinary extravagance, excess, and refinement” (42). Child emphasized the plain over the elaborate, the artisanal over the mechanized. This was, according to her, “less formal cooking” (66), and her renditions of timeless recipes removed the obscure and foreign in favor of the accessible and ordinary, in this way domesticating cuisine. In her section on “Entrées,” Child spells out this reimagining: “quenelles and mousses take literally minutes and have stepped out of the never-never land of ultra fancy food into the everyday life of the average home cook” (185). Being a pragmatist and “the authority on American habits and ingredients,” Child devised a language for appealing to a wide audience, even including options for canned and frozen products (*My Life* 277). In her section “Ingredients,” she addresses her prioritization of foodstuffs “available in the average American grocery store” – a promise of familiarity, though her ingredients are rarely used in average ways.

If there is pragmatism to be found in her recipes, there is also art. What is “average” is arrived at through experimentation. What is classical is converted as new. What is elite becomes common. What is habitual (necessity) is channeled through the imaginative (aesthetic) possibility of food. As chef-author Betty Fussell recalls, “We didn’t want to be professional chefs. We wanted to be artists, and Julia was there to show us how cooking could be elevated to art.”¹⁵¹ Yet as Child reminds us, hers is an “art form with rules” – “I viewed our recipes as a sacred trust, a set of rules about the right way and wrong way to approach food, and I felt a duty to pass this knowledge on” (*My Life* 332). For someone so

¹⁵¹ Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History*, 241

committed to the spontaneity of experiment, there was also a matter-of-fact practicality in her approach, and this comes out in the content, language, and form of *Mastering*.

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Before we even get to the recipes, Child gives us nearly fifty pages of rudimentary guidance: the “right” tools; measurement equivalents; temperature conversions; translations in the form of tables, formulas, and charts; illustrations of how to cut, slice, dice, and mince. Although she dedicates the cookbook to France, she makes clear in her Introduction that she is writing for “for the servantless American cook who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules, children’s meals, the parent-chauffeur-den-mother syndrome, or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat” (xiii). This is her nod to the anxieties of the era, a time in which convenience cooking was the mode. Child intervenes to shift the importance onto taste. She forthrightly states her intent: “All of the techniques employed in French cooking are aimed at one goal: how does it taste” (xxiv). In a letter to Simca (Simone Beck, her co-writer), she makes clear that this emphasis on taste is the key to making a new kind of book: “There are loads and loads and loads of books and articles on how to do things quickly, and very very very few on how to make things taste good.” Ironically, she would have to go against the grain of modern life (the quick) in order to create a newly modern direction (the discerning). And good taste was a derivative of “good basic materials” (not “unusual combinations or surprise presentation”). Child was not interested in “romantic interludes” (which she associated with Fisher’s writing) – instead, her focus was on what she called “the Here.”¹⁵² By rescuing French cooking from a “never-never land” and bringing it into the “Here” of the American home, sourcing it from the American supermarket, it became ordinary; it was

¹⁵² “We have purposely omitted cobwebbed bottles, the patron in his white cap bustling among his sauces, anecdotes about charming little restaurants with gleaming napery, and so forth” (xxiii).

“available to everybody.” Just as the foods in Stein’s *Tender Buttons* seem to refer to the tastebuds of a general consumer-reader, *Mastering* is a book about the way “Anyone can cook in the French manner anywhere” (xxiii).¹⁵³

Formally, the cookbook is set up in a straightforward manner. There are chapters on common topics such as soups, sauces, eggs, meats, vegetables. Child begins each section with introductory comments. This classic arrangement is at first visually inviting to the average cook for whom French cooking may seem like an esoteric code. Yet *Mastering* is an epic tome, constituting 525 recipes, 734 pages, and two volumes.¹⁵⁴ Child assures her reader early in the introduction that looks can be deceiving: “quite simple recipes look long” (xv). Despite a sense of the simple that she hoped to convey by using objective, practical, clear, factual, exacting language, and regardless of her continuous reiterations of trademark vocabulary (ordinary, daily, habit, basic), Child’s precision with words – a mirror of her diligence with food – makes for density and complexity, if only to the eye. In her Forward, Child insists on this “precision in small details,” her excuse for such lengthy recipes: “Recipe language is always a sort of shorthand in which a lot of information is packed” (xxvi). In quite the same way that Stein writes in simple sentences with ordinary words, Child treats the language of food, yet both of them had to defend the unapproachable quality of their work, and were bewildered by some of their feedback (and rejection letters) criticizing the difficulty. The original draft of *Mastering*, an 800-page manuscript, was rejected as unpublishable by Houghton Mifflin because it was thought to be too intimidating to housewives. Like Stein, Child held a “snobbish insistence” on her methods, and reveled in “esoterica.”¹⁵⁵ Yet

¹⁵³ She was featured in *Time* magazine in an article entitled “Everyone’s in the Kitchen,” for the fanatical interest in cooking she stirred in America, a sentiment that brings to my mind Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*, as it draws a line between the author, anybody, and everybody.

¹⁵⁴ The first draft was an 800-page manuscript on French sauces and French poultry alone (*Mastering, Volume II*).

¹⁵⁵ *Introduction to Volume II*, vii.

housewives were specifically Child's audience (just as Stein aligned her writing with popular periodicals).

If anything, as Child highlights in her section "Definitions," she would demystify cooking angst through intentional language: "We have tried, in this book, to use ordinary American cooking terms familiar to anyone who has been around a kitchen" (11). The rejection had, as she writes, made her take a "more rational and realistic approach."¹⁵⁶ To even include this section, Child hoped to placate the fear of French cooking. Part of this was due to the process of translation – culinary, linguistic, and cultural. In her chapter on "Meat," she writes that "cross-cultural comparisons are a maze of complications" (288). How to bridge these systems – regarding cuts of meat, Centigrade and Fahrenheit, cooking terms, or sensibilities – was her great task.¹⁵⁷ Some of the words she defines are more common than others (*beat, blend, boil*), while others are obscure or appear in French (*gratiné, purée, nap*); even the simplest terms have nuanced meanings when applied to cookery. And Child takes the occasion to create definitions that are at once practical and playful. For example, the term *Poach* "can also be used poetically" (13), and a *Toss* "is often less bruising than a turn" (14). Throughout the cookbook's recipes, when you *Beat*, you add to the mixture in various poetically expressed ways: "by driblets" (42), in "a thin stream of droplets" (45). Shellfish have "glamour" (53). While plainness imbues Child's language, there are instances of poetic zeal for food like the type found in Fisher's writing, which she purposely hoped to avoid but instead, at times, replicated. They were not so different, even though they saw themselves in this way. In one of Fisher's letters to Child, she praises this feature: "you write in a simple

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, converting classical French restaurant techniques for the modern American home kitchen meant that something would get lost in translation.

unaffected honest way, without any affectation or deliberate attempt to be “literary.”¹⁵⁸

Although Child’s main concern was getting the food right, she was meticulous with her words. In a letter to her editor, she wrote: “Do you like our vocabulary? Do you *care* about such a book?” – it was through language that Child hoped to generate interest (*My Life* 151). But writing, unlike cooking, was a challenge for her: “Writing is hard work. It did not always come easily for me, but once I got going on a subject, it flowed...writing has to be lively, especially for things as technical and potentially dullsville as recipes. I tried to keep my style amusing and non-pedantic, but also clear and correct” (*My Life* 195).

So how does Child – whose aim was to keep her writing simple and clear – achieve this liveliness? How do recipes that often span ten or more pages maintain our attention? How do we commit, for example, to *cassoulet*, which is “easiest” if made over 2-3 days? Or to onion soup, for which the onions “need a long, slow cooking in butter and oil, then a long, slow simmering in stock” (47); three hours later, plus overnight for deepened flavors, you have soup. To get Child’s cooking right, the long and slow is preferred to the quick and fast, the latter style being the fashion of post-war cooking. The cook within her pages becomes a “real craftsman.”¹⁵⁹ Yet she infuses the long and slow with an element of levity. In *My Life*, she articulates the tone she was striving for in the cookbook: “We’d write in an informal and humane tone that would make cooking approachable and fun” (150). This tone comes through in numerous moments, but is often subtle, a humor you could miss among all the finicky details. In her chapter on “Poultry,” she writes: “a chicken should taste like chicken” (234). When providing instruction for *Hollandaise*, the “most dreaded” sauce, she includes a variation with an electric blender (inferior to one made by hand, she notes): “the technology is well within the capabilities of an eight-year-old child” (81). If the American public wanted

¹⁵⁸ 102?

¹⁵⁹ Russell Morash’s description of Child.

speed and ease, she could bring her recipe to an elementary level, though she jabbed, “You may need to protect yourself with a towel during this operation.” She referred to the whisking of *mayonnaise* as a “crisis” and offered “anti-curdling insurance” (88), described how to murder a lobster in her chapter on “Fish,” and how to master the egg yolk, a predominant theme throughout. At times, *Mastering* produces amusement, but we are generally surprised when it does because of the sheer volume of details that we must navigate.¹⁶⁰ Child also includes some anecdotes and food lore to enhance the tone. She sets up her recipe for *soupe au piston* with overheard voices of French women at the market: “*Mesdames, faites le bon pisto, faites le piston!*” (45). Garlic soup is presented as being “good indeed for the liver, blood circulation, general physical tone, and spiritual health” (47). These interjections remind us that Child is our connection not only to cooking, and to France, but also to the imaginative possibility of food as story, as language, as a form of art.

In a letter to her sister regarding *Mastering*, Child divulged: “The form, we think, is new” (*My Life* 173). In another letter, this one to her publisher, she wrote: “This is a new type of cookbook.”¹⁶¹ So what made it new? For one, her format was original. Rather than visually presenting her recipe in the usual vertical layout (ingredients followed separately by instructions), Child positioned her ingredients alongside her procedures – a column on the left corresponding with a column on the right – creating an entirely different rhythm and

¹⁶⁰ Perhaps the entertainment quality of the cookbook comes in part from our familiarity with Child on TV, in *The French Chef*, where the kitchen became a stage for her performances in cooking and eating, turning food into a theatrical subject for purposes of play and humor as well as educating. The success of this show sent people directly back to her book, and “established the link between the cook and the book in action” (Reardon, 149). Her personality emerges even in this technical lengthy treatise on cooking. *Time Magazine* and *TV Guide* embellished the entertainment quality of her cooking, with descriptions of her “muddleheaded nonchalance,” “blunders,” “grunts,” “mutter,” and her general informality and humor, which created what felt to many like “kitchen vaudeville” (Shapiro, 120). Julia’s live-cooking integrated anecdotes with actions, food histories with comedy.

¹⁶¹ She described *Mastering* as a “modern primer of classical cooking” (*My Life*, 228), “a major work” for how it reduced “the seemingly complex rules of French cooking to their logical sequences, something never before attempted either in English or in French” (*My Life*, 150). She also wrote, “The enthusiasts around here are absolutely convinced that this book is revolutionary, and we intend to prove it and to make it a classic” (Reardon, 142).

flow to the recipe. This new format is in effect more intuitive. She reinvents and facilitates our experience of both reading and executing the common recipe. Child explains this design in the Forward, under “A Note on the Recipes,” referring to the “one sweep of the eye” effect (xxv). Here, she also gives a glossary of her signs, including (*). Master recipes (even their connotation is intimidating) are divided into related groups, sections, sub-recipes, variations, modifications, and often come with other remarks, suggestions, warnings, or remedies – all of these pieces, much like a modernist text, forming the whole. In addition, Child supplements with precisely detailed illustrations; not the generic type found in other cookbooks of her time, but rather, artful representations of techniques and food objects. Most of the images are line drawings by Sidonie Coryn based on Paul Child's photographs of her hands.¹⁶² They break up the profuse amount of print in the text, serving almost as a reprieve. Another attribute of the cookbook's new form is its stylistic patterns and repetitions. As in Stein's *Tender Buttons*, a pattern in the cookbook turns up again and again, such that we become familiar with this pattern and can apply it to any context; it is what Stein refers to as “repeat instruction” (41). This was Child's explicit hope: “Although you will perform with different ingredients for different dishes, the same general processes are repeated over and over again. As you enlarge your repertoire, you will find that the seemingly endless babble of recipes begins to fall rather neatly into groups of theme and variations.”¹⁶³ Later, in the section “Some Words of Advice,” she recommends (rather, urges): “compare the recipe mentally to others you are familiar with, and note where one recipe or technique fits into the larger picture of theme and variations” (xxvi). The same processes, phrases, technical aspects, types, and images repeat, and though they may come to us in fragmented pieces, they construct a totality. Following the pattern of Child's narrative of food is not

¹⁶² Paul also contributed 36 drawings to the text. Volume II of *Mastering* contains a total of 458 drawings.

¹⁶³ Forward to *Mastering*, xxiv

unlike our engagement with Stein's text – both texts invite us, even require us, to be active consumers in a new way.

If the form of *Mastering* is new, so are the contents, perhaps because they are attentive to formalist concerns. Child knew her recipes were “real innovations,” “intellectual property,” “revolutionary.”¹⁶⁴ And they were so because of how they move in two (and many more) directions: they look back to an idyllic time in the past (classic, traditional) and forward to a new imaginative language for food (extraordinary, modern). Thus is the cookbook elevated to the status of literary art. Like Fisher, Child centers her art on pleasure – “pleasures of the table, and of life” (*My Life* 333). Her experimentation derives from dailiness. She insists that food should be fun. In her memoir, she recalls the process of making *Mastering*, the endless hours she spent on details, trialing in the kitchen, sometimes testing a recipe multiple times for several days until it was foolproof; the balance struck between routine and spontaneity, practice and art, the ordinary and avant-garde. She writes in *My Life*: “I was experimenting at home, and became a bit of a Mad Scientist. I did hours of research” (89); “Each recipe took so long, so long to research, test, and write that I could see no end in sight. Nor could I see any other method of working. *Ach!*” (213). Child was consumed by the “mysteries of couscous,” “analyzing the different types of American chickens versus French chickens” and their methods (roasted, poached, sautéed, fricasseed, grilled) (*My Life* 213). Her research of the beans and meats for *cassoulet* produced “a sheaf of papers on the subject at least two inches thick” (*My Life* 247). And an intense phase with eggplant made her wonder if her skin “might be taking on a purplish hue” (*My Life* 298). She did “on-the-ground research” in the US as well, in supermarket expeditions. Her cookbook reflects her perfectionism, her concern with nomenclature, taste, authenticity, methods,

¹⁶⁴ This is perhaps why she referred to them as “top secret – like a war plan”

measurements, themes, variations, “the pitfalls, the remedies, the keeping, the serving, etc” (*My Life* 150). This perfection, she alluded, was the tenet of classical French cooking. So how could the expectations for exactness and fun occur in the same recipe? Chickens are a long affair: deboned, filled, sewn back together. Braises take hours, sometimes days. Vegetables are stripped and fluted and refreshed. Though Child assured us that difficulty was not equated with the “luxury of details,” how could such thorough, laborious, lengthy recipes on the subject of obscure French cooking be made easy for the common cook, in a language and form we can digest?¹⁶⁵ Here are some examples:

Soup

Child begins the soup chapter by differentiating her cooking from mainstream cooking: “homemade soup in these days of the can opener” is unique (36), she writes. With Campbell’s “fast soup” dominating food advertising, how could Child’s “long, slow” soup, with its multistep design, stand a chance?¹⁶⁶ Onion soup, she informs, takes 2 ½ hours at least from start to finish (43), as opposed to Campbell’s slogan: “Just add hot water and serve.” Yet Child insisted that homemade soups were “uncomplicated” to make. The first recipe of the entire cookbook is *Potage Parmentier* [Leek and Potato Soup] – a “simplicity” but also an important foundational base from which to “use your imagination to the full” and “experiment on your own” (40). Cooks hoping for a distilled recipe that direct their every move find instead that they are responsible for being inventive with proportions and variations, which may feel daunting in the vicinity of a can opener. The recipe for *Bouillabaisse* seems to capture the tension within Child’s cookbook in general, between the simple and the artistic, the typical and the modern: “you can make as dramatic a production

¹⁶⁵ *Mastering*, 303, recipe for *Filet De Boeuf Braisé Prince Albert* (Filet of Beef)

¹⁶⁶ Campbell’s refers to its soup as “fast soup” in an ad from that time.

as you want out of Bouillabaisse, but remember it originated as a simple, Mediterranean fisherman's soup, made from the day's catch or its unsalable leftovers, and flavored with the typical condiments of the region" (52). Nevertheless, six varieties and 8 pounds of fresh fish are ideal, and not just any fish: "Some of the fish should be firm-fleshed and gelatinous like halibut, eel, and winter flounder, and some tender and flaky like hake, baby cod, small Pollack, and lemon sole" (53); essentially, an entire sea. The broth is made of fish heads, bones, and trimmings, and Child even uncritically suggests intensifying the flavor with bottled clam juice (a recourse fitting for her era). What begins as a simple, daily soup made of common fish, comes to acquire a refined involvedness – the fish are added one at a time, in a particular order according to the feel of their flesh; a rapid boil is created for the broth, then this step is repeated three more times with each installment of fish. The method of eating is just as detailed – fish are lifted out and arranged on a platter, soup is poured into a tureen over French bread, and the dish is served with a special *rouille* (sauce). One only needs instructions for how to put all the pieces together, but doesn't quite get it. The soup chapter is brief compared to other chapters in the cookbook, but its recipes require some endurance, which in the writing Child had to find as well: "We had gone over the first draft of the soup chapter at least twenty times by now, and I felt as though I were drowning in soup. Taking a break from the text, we decided to spend some time on the reality of soup" (*My Life* 195).

Sauces

Child begins chapter two in much the same way as she does the first chapter, with a reassuring voice, pitting expectations about the notorious difficulty of French sauces against their actual simplicity. Though sauces are "the splendor and glory of French cooking," she opens, "there is nothing secret or mysterious about making them" (54). Nothing? The recipe

for *Béchamel*, the most basic white sauce, takes only 5 minutes, yet there are “Remarks” (If sauce is lumpy, If sauce is too thick, If sauce is too thin), and “Enrichments” (butter, cream, egg yolk), and derivations (cheese, tomato, herb, curry, onion) – when we reach the end, 8 pages later, we may as well have detected some secret and mysterious code. As if we need extra encouragement in this section, she promises: “While their roster is stupendous to look at, it is not mind-boggling when you begin to realize that their multitude divides itself into a half-dozen very definite groups, and that each sauce in a particular group is made in the same general way” (54). We’re inching closer to the actual recipes in this chapter, but there are several more ways in which Child will attempt to assuage our apprehensions. Yet she describes the goal of French sauces in highly poetic and perfectionist terms: to “render them smooth, shining, and luscious.” This string of adjectives seems to take the basic out of the base upon which they’re made. Such “basic formulas” for the White or Brown base, she insists, call for identical technique, but include multiple changes in ingredients and trimmings to create new forms with new names. Once again, the imagination is put to work, even though there is a hard-edged pragmatism to her recipes – the basics make you “equipped to command the whole towering edifice” (54). It’s hard not to think of that concept in literary, particularly modernist, terms; that the composition of a text, like a recipe, demands a certain experimental authority, a reassemblage or bricolage of the parts into a whole, yet not without an understanding of fundamentals. In order to create something new, in other words, in order to transform the old, you need to have a sense of it.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Sherwood Anderson employs similar imagery of architecture when discussing Stein’s work in the introduction to her 1922 text, *Geography and Plays*: “There is a city of English and American words and it has been a neglected city...For me the work of Gertrude Stein consists in a rebuilding, an entire new recasting of life, in the city of words” (7-8).

While Child has already omitted true-time simmering (several hours) “for practical purposes of this book” (56), she doesn’t skip over the intricacies of sauce-making. The sauce, rather than “a disguise or a mask,” she insists, has a crucial role in making all of the other elements function as a whole – “to prolong, or to complement the taste of the food it accompanies, or to contrast with it, or to give variety to its mode of presentation” (55). Could language be the literary equivalent to a sauce? In a letter to Avis DeVoto about *Beurre Blanc*, the ubiquitous, “signature” white butter sauce, Child complains of people “making a damned mystery out of perfectly simple things” (96). In *Mastering* she offers two methods for *beurre blanc*, the classic and the “fast-boil,” the latter an assent to the demands of popular cooking culture. Yet she delicately skirts around “the trick” (mystery) in making it by using a cool tone and matter-of-fact language when discussing how to prevent the butter from turning (every cook’s worry): “it must retain its warm, thick, creamy consistence,” she writes, and if this isn’t reason for stress, she continues, “A chemical process takes place once the base is boiled down and the acids are well concentrated so that the milk solids remain in suspension rather than sinking to the bottom of the pan” (97). After this account, there is everything mysterious about this process. In fact, within the recipe, these nuances are not understated, regarding the right succession, proportions, and heat level, plus additional seasonings, and the absolutely correct texture, color, and consistency for which one must strive.

No sauce quite compares to the complexity of what Child calls “The Hollandaise Family,” which spans 7 pages, includes two methods (by hand and by electric blender), “points to remember,” several remedies (for example, If the sauce is too thick, If the sauce refuses to thicken, If the sauce curdles or separates), optional stirred-in trimmings, additional

purées and minces, and various other “members of the family.”¹⁶⁸ Yet in the opening to this temperamental recipe, she promises, “It is extremely easy and almost foolproof” (79). As with all sauces, Child reiterates the importance of a certain intimacy with the yolk – “familiarity with the vagaries of egg yolks under all conditions,” “general mastery of the egg yolk” – in order to achieve this lyrical state: “forcing egg yolks to absorb butter and hold it in creamy suspension” (79). For the average American home cook aiming for speed and expediency, the idea of developing a relationship with a yolk, or understanding the poetic terms of Child’s recipe (that a yolk could hold butter in suspension), may have seemed disconcerting. In practical instruction, she is initiating a new rapport with food, yet in making an art of cooking, she is also transforming the cookbook into a literary product – Child’s recipes, in this way, hold us in suspension.

Eggs

The sense of suspense continues with the omelet, perhaps one of the dishes that most made Child famous, particularly in her performance on *The French Chef*. The TV rendition sends us back into the cookbook, to a recipe that extends 13 pages long, and contains as much linguistic liveliness in text as embodied on screen. The length of this recipe and the intricacy of its steps indicate that although the omelet may be simple (just a few eggs, a pinch of salt and pepper), it is difficult to write. According to Child, there are two methods: the simpler scrambled omelet and, “the most fun of any method” but more difficult, rolled omelet. The quantity of details, though clarifying, and the transparency of Child’s effort to demonstrate via language, creates an almost comic event with eggs. There are subsections on garnishings, fillings, and suggestions. Ten illustrations attempt to capture

¹⁶⁸ This chapter also includes The Mayonnaise Family, which is described as “far from difficult.”

the “trick” of the omelet: how to hold, slide, stir, tilt, lift, pour, beat, grasp, and give short, sharp blows. We are inundated with actions. This is a recipe about manual skill. For the novice cook, there are angles of varying degree to be found, and movements of different speed to intuit. Time is told in strokes: “30 to 40 vigorous strokes” is a typical gauge of something’s doneness.

And after all of this, as if knowing we might be overwhelmed, Child reminds us that the omelet is “entirely a matter of practice” before you “develop the art” (127). She even suggests a training regimen: “A simple-minded but perfect way to master the movement is to practice outdoors with half a cupful of dried beans. As soon as you are able to make them flip over themselves in a group, you have the right feeling; but the actual omelette-making gesture is sharper and rougher” (133). Throughout the recipe’s text and pictures, she emphasizes the physicality and sensation required – “You must have the courage to be rough” with the eggs (134). At various points throughout *Mastering*, eggs become a sort of character that must be manipulated, beaten, and mastered. This is where Child’s figurative language most emerges, as well as her humor. If we take her seriously, we must consider what it means to roughhouse an egg. If we don’t take her seriously, we won’t achieve the perfection she so precisely – and somewhat erotically – describes: a “smooth, gently swelling, golden oval that is tender and creamy inside” (126). This is one instance that seems to hark back to Fisher’s writing, particularly her chapter on the egg, which she describes in sensually-charged language – beyond the “impassive beautiful curvings of its shell,” she writes, it has an inner privacy.¹⁶⁹ Like Fisher, Child captures the practical and aesthetic in her revolutionizing of

¹⁶⁹ “How Not to Boil an Egg,” *How To Cook a Wolf*, 231. Fisher’s recipe for the French omelet, which acknowledges the many theories but two main schools of thought, is also detailed, in practical and metaphorical terms. She writes “By now I know, fatalistically, that if I am using a pan I know, and if I have properly rolled the precise amount of sweet butter around that pan, and if the stars, winds, and general emotional climates are

taste. What begins as an egg – simple, ordinary, everyday – gets transformed into a thing of art. What begins as a simple recipe – “it takes less than half a minute to make” an omelet – turns into a dramatic production, a convoluted sequence. If the omelet were a genre, it would fall somewhere between action story and love story. It is in recipes like this one where we realize that Child’s rhetorical handle on language is what modernizes the cookbook.

Fish

If eggs take courage in the context of a Child recipe, lobster takes even more. Before we’re even privy to recipes for the “two famous lobster dishes” – thermidor and *à l’américaine* – Child writes “A Note on Dealing With Live Lobsters” to ease our qualms:

If you object to steaming or splitting a live lobster, it may be killed almost instantly just before cooking if you plunge the point of a knife into the head between the eyes, or sever the spinal cord by making a small incision in the back of the shell at the juncture of the chest and the tail. (220)

In one drawn-out sentence, the high drama of lobster execution is performed. Child’s language mirrors the instant of action. The humor in this passage comes when we realize that these two ways of killing a lobster – knifing it between the eyes or severing its spinal cord – are supposed to be kinder alternatives to steaming. Child is precise about how this should be done, but in an exaggerated way, which is where the theatrics to her writing emerges: she details plunging the point of the knife, and she pinpoints the exact juncture of the chest with an almost pleasurable penchant for the gruesome. It is as if she is performing this act in language, on the page, and in doing so startles our imagination. This is no ordinary lobster death. Child begins her “especially attractive recipe” for lobster thermidor with the phrase “So many steps are involved,” but also includes her typical disclaimer – that it is not

in both conjunction and harmony, I can make a perfect omelet without ever touching a spatula to it. Such occasions are historical, as well as accidental” (233).

difficult. Cooking is twofold here as elsewhere in *Mastering* – pragmatic and entertaining, mundane and aestheticized.

Poultry

In an *Epicurious* list of the ten most difficult recipes to make, *Coq Au Vin* is near the top. One of the most popular French dishes, Child’s version has 12 steps, with many distinct steps within steps. It’s no wonder she was critical of popularized versions that took shortcuts, and describes one such example: “The entire recipe for coq au vin in one popular cookbook, now in its third printing, read: “Cut up two broilers. Brown them in butter with bacon, sliced onions, and sliced mushrooms. Cover with red wine and bake for two hours.” Hm.”¹⁷⁰ Her “hm” says it all. In contrast, Child’s recipe details over thirty individual, fussy steps, including more than five separate instances of simmering, and several moments of multitasking. What Child wants to master in the kitchen and on the page, as we see in this recipe, is a balance between ordinariness (this is a well-known chicken dish), and artfulness (the process as imaginative experience), between the familiar and the new, language and performance.

Meat

Considered the French “Joy of Cooking,” Ginette Mathiot’s *Je Sais Cuisiner* (I Know How to Cook), published in 1932, was the preeminent cookbook for French housewives, showcasing the daily reality of food. Her recipe for *Boeuf Bourguignon* is straightforwardly reduced to 11 ingredients, 5 steps, and an estimated time of about 3 hours. Likewise, Alice B. Toklas’ recipe for the same dish is delivered in a compressed paragraph with a handful of directives. Child’s recipe, conversely, contains 18 ingredients, 10 phases within which there

¹⁷⁰ *My Life*, 240

are too many individually detailed procedures to count, and necessarily exceeds 3 hours. This is supposed to be an entry-level recipe, designed so that anybody (and everybody) can make it. Yet it must be, in Child's words, "carefully done" and "perfectly flavored" (315). Toklas knew this to be true as well; although her recipe is much simpler, she introduces it with this statement: "To cook as the French do one must respect the quality and flavour of the ingredients. Exaggeration is not admissible. Flavours are not all amalgamative. These qualities are not purchasable but may be cultivated. The *haute cuisine* has arrived at the enviable state of reacting instinctively to these known principles."¹⁷¹ Child convinces her reader that taste is something that can be learned through practice (hence, the meticulousness of detail), but she also makes space for the figurative realm of taste, for the aesthetic experience of food, and *Mastering*, as both a cookbook and art object, comprehensively gathers these concurrent modes of taste into one form. Even a recipe as highfalutin as *boeuf bourguignon* is brought into everyday cooking, and even its most simplistic rendering, is elevated to art.

*Vegetables*¹⁷²

In the first line of her introduction to vegetables, Child points to their nostalgic association with pleasure. Rather than "purely nutrient objects," she argues that they are valuable for the enjoyment they bring, particularly as attached to memory (421), and uses anecdotes and hearsay to make her case. Here is the chapter in which Child makes clear that French and American methods differ radically. Before even getting to recipes, she discusses blanching, a technique that is "the great secret" and success for all vegetables (422). This is the second largest chapter in the cookbook, spanning over 100 pages of recipes. There is as

¹⁷¹ *Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, 5

¹⁷² The vegetables in Volume II are "originals" rather than classics. (Introduction to *Mastering*, Volume II, ix)

much action packed in the language of vegetables as there is in narratives of tying up chickens and killing lobsters – vegetables are the subject of manipulation, and the compilation of verbs in this chapter shows you how: carved, stripped, whittled, peeled, tied, blanched, etcetera. Though it appears in Volume II, the eggplant, whether broiled, sautéed, creamed, souffléed, or stuffed, is described as “beauty as a vegetable object.”¹⁷³ The instruction for preparing asparagus is exacting in a way that feels excessive:

Hold an asparagus spear with its butt end up. Peel off the outer skin with a sharp, small knife, going as deep as 1/16 of an inch at the butt in order to expose the tender, moist flesh. Gradually make the cut shallower until you come up to the tender green portion near the tip. Shave off any scales which cling to the spear below the tip. Wash the peeled asparagus spears in a large basin of cold water. Drain.

Line up the tips evenly and tie the asparagus in bundles about 3 ½ inches in diameter, one string near the tip, one near the butt. Leave one spear loose to be used as a cooking test later. Cut a bit off the butts if necessary, to make the spears all the same length.

We are not, at this point, even within a recipe for asparagus – this is only preparation – yet we have already performed so many different directions. If Child is simplifying the French method and trying to portray it as pleasurable, the obsessive language of technique is onerous to the average home cook whose goal is haste in the kitchen; not to mention, there are numerous warnings in the recipes about the risk of “limp,” “droopy,” and colorless asparagus. Yet in the same way, throughout this chapter, she rescues the mundane vegetable from daily life and brings it freshly and brightly to center stage.

*

Child recalls the influential words of Curnonsky during an important point in her career: “If the art of eating is the only art you are capable of appreciating, and the literary art means nothing to you, then I suggest you go home!” (*My Life* 154) The literary art was a vital part of Child’s success in transforming American eating habits; she was explicitly aware of

¹⁷³ Introduction to *Mastering*, Volume II

the power of language in the kitchen, and had interlocutors like Fisher in the literary realm. In Volume II of *Mastering*, she discusses the value of layout and typography: “Words and pictures must be arranged carefully on a page if they are to communicate all that they intend” (xiii). If the cookbook is indeed an act of communication, Child’s language – what she calls her “cooking vocabulary” – must be made accountable.¹⁷⁴ Not only does she deconstruct the form of the recipe as we know it, fragmenting its parts into subparts, the master recipe breaking into many other variations, she does this to the cookbook as a whole. Yet she also performs a similar act at the level of words. She wants her cook to make connections from recipe to recipe – to “begin to relate the sauce[s]” and recognize the guises – just as we move backward and forward across the field of language in Stein’s text. In a sense, we read Child’s cookbook as we read literature. Child states the goal of one of her chapters, which may as well be the goal of *Mastering*: it is “designed to engender the flow of your creativities.”¹⁷⁵ We shouldn’t forget that this is, after all, an endeavor of art comparable to other arts, and therefore both a practice and an aesthetics to be mastered: “mastering any art is a continuing process.”¹⁷⁶ For example, her recipe for French bread (in Volume II) took 2 years to create, used 284 lbs of flour, is supplemented with 34 drawings, and spans 20 pages. It is “logical” and “special,” a reiteration of Stein’s description of French cooking as “logic and fashion” – traditional and innovative.

Child’s art, like Stein’s, is avant-garde because it contains the instructive and the imaginative, the popular and poetic, the familiar and foreign, the everyday and luxury.¹⁷⁷ She even writes about how she has succeeded in taking “everyday staples in France [which] were once considered luxury items” and made them available for the home cook. Her recipes can

¹⁷⁴ Introduction to Volume II, viii

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, ix. Here she is referring to the chapter on vegetables.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, vii

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, ix. Re: breads/pastries

become family meals or centerpieces of entertaining. They are classic and modern in a single form. In a recipe that calls for “ordinary pieces of chicken” poached in white wine with vegetables, Child remarks on this potential to not only transform food, but to alter how we think about the high and low within culinary and literary terms: “nothing could be simpler, yet you can take this same chicken out of the peasant kitchen, as it were, and serve it at the chateau.”¹⁷⁸ Both Child and Stein were aware of themselves as arbiters of taste (Fisher once called Child “the culinary arbiter” of the twentieth century, and Stein considered herself the same within literary circles). Both were bridges of so many cultural divides in a particularly divisive moment of their era – they normalized the extraordinary and modernized the mundane.

V

High art and popular culture have always in some way been embroiled. Even in ancient Greece, when the art of eating became a trendy literary subject. Fisher discusses the example of Athenaeus’ *Banquet of the Learned*, in which his recipes

are more literary than practical – or even appealing. Few of us save the most precious would enjoy his voluptuous dish of bird brains, eggs, wine, and spices, pounded with very fragrant roses and cooked in oil. When the cover was lifted from this dish, its sweet excessive perfume, diffused throughout the supper-room, made all the guests drop their eyelids with pleasure. And one of them quoted poetry.¹⁷⁹

This sounds almost exactly like the culinary-literary experiments of the Futurists. By looking at food in modernist literature and by attending to aesthetics in gastronomy, we can begin to see the value of this dynamic for a broader discourse of taste in the twentieth century. As Victor Shklovsky suggests, art recovers the sensations of habit and makes them matter;

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, viii

¹⁷⁹ *Serve It Forth*, 15

which is to say, makes them material *and* relevant. Through food, we have a new way to experience modernism, and through modernist aesthetics, a new way to experience food.

I consider food to be a contact zone where modernist ideas regarding the relation between content and form play out, and where the high/low divide is disrupted, and subsequently redefined. The presence of food in literature indicates a performed reflexivity within the text – though showcased eating habits tell us a great amount about modern life, they also signify patterns of literary production and consumption, and the text often embodies, in form, the experience of these conditions. Furthermore, the aesthetics of taste, emergent in the twentieth century in a new way, leads to the renovation of artistic forms, and opens the way for theorizing new “discursive modalit[ies] for cuisine.”¹⁸⁰

By looking at the cooking – and eating – that occurs in the work of Fisher, Stein, and Child, we see that art is as vital to our lives as food. Though taste is an aesthetic feature, it is actually part of the experience of literal eating; we have evolved our senses of taste to facilitate our need to eat. Likewise, art, though it may designate the excess of diversion, is real everyday sustenance. One of the focal concerns of Fisher’s work, which is taken up in Stein’s text, is the modernist question of how we live in time, and its relation to writing.¹⁸¹ The tension in these texts becomes as much about how we (re)construe (and read) history on the page as it is about how we fulfill “A time to eat” at the table, which is “a pleasant simple habitual” act (Stein). In exploring the disjunctions among events, language, and interiority in their work – through the material routine of food – we are propelled as consumers to see food’s critical connection to the discipline of reading.

¹⁸⁰ Allen S. Weiss argues that the “aesthetics of intoxication from Baudelaire through Nietzsche covertly transformed aesthetic standards and artistic forms, inaugurating a new discursive modality for cuisine that is yet to be fully theorized,” *Feast And Folly: Cuisine, Intoxication, and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 37.

¹⁸¹ See Virginia Woolf’s “Time Passes” section in *To the Lighthouse*, too.

The etymology of *digest* presents an interesting point at which the dual meanings of food and word conjoin. A digest is a “collection of writing” (late 14thc.). In a literary context, it is a “digested thing.” To digest is to “assimilate food.” As readers, we assimilate and thereby consume words. The modernist text – Stein’s prose-poem, Child’s recipe – whether it is digestible or causes dyspepsia, shifts modes of digestion in forcing our encounter with forms that are made of both the ordinary and the obscure. What we confront, perhaps, is what Wallace Stevens refers to as “a daily sense, / Not the predicate of bright origin.” It is this daily sense *and* this notion of bright origin with which I approach food in the next chapter, focusing on the post-war Fifties and Sixties, where a rapidly evolving eating culture informs the production and consumption of a new set of artistic forms that further “rupture [the] boundaries of taste” (Novero).

Two Postwar Culinary Pop

Sometimes she called it her Jell-O chicken mousse and sometimes she called it her chicken mousse Jell-O. This was one of a thousand convenient things about Jell-O. The word went anywhere, front or back or in the middle. It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed.
– Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Pop art is about liking things.
– Andy Warhol

I

In a 1951 Kraft ad for Cheese Spreads, a mother stands bewildered in a kitchen apron with her arms in the air while her son, clad in cowboy regalia, points two pistols at her, under a caption that reads: “Fork over some grub...pronto!”¹⁸² This is one ad of many by the food industry that captures the necessity – and directive – placed on speed in matters of food after World War Two. In a survey of such ads, *fast* is one of the most common words and concepts to appear.¹⁸³ What was happening in food – its resurgence as something to be made and eaten quickly, hence the birth of *fast food* – offers a more general picture of a postwar consumer culture in which speed had great value.¹⁸⁴ And it provides an aperture to the ways in which art, like food, adapted a new pace in its radical use of the everyday, and in effect influenced the aesthetics of cuisine.

Food was an essential material with which late capitalism shaped modern life; one aspect forming the global image of American power was an emphasis on the production of

¹⁸² Here, the mother is depicted as a hard-working homesteader (whose challenges are romanticized), and the child’s lack of civility is mapped over the cowboy’s wild-west ways. The ad implies American fast-food kitchens as wild west adventure, with the encroaching presence of immigrant culture (the inclusion of Italian language).

¹⁸³ Other examples include: “quick stunts with Hunts” (*Hunts*, 1956), “speedy tricks” (*Minute Rice*, 1951), “as fast as you can (*Jell O*, 1956), “in 5 minutes” (*Chef Boy Ar Dee*, 1957), “quick tricks” (*Borden*, 1951), “quick, easy” (*Ritz*, 1954), “so quick” (*Campbell’s*, 1954), “easy...fast” (*River Brand Rice*, 1959).

¹⁸⁴ Although it did not take off until the Fifties, the fast food industry got its start in 1921 when White Castle opened its first restaurant in Wichita, KS, creating a model for McDonald’s (the first restaurant to have an assembly line food process) in 1948, and later Burger King and Taco Bell Burger in the Fifties. Drive-throughs existed in the Thirties, but it wasn’t until the Fifties that they became popular as well.

things that were convenient, efficient, reproducible, and easy. When food became big business, processed foods were seen as “icons of democratic and national ‘American’ eating.”¹⁸⁵ Yet cuisine was not impervious to the exclusivity signified by other tasteful objects in American culture at this time, especially across identity lines; to be modern, to have status, was to buy into the belief that speed defined progress. *Good* taste was a taste for (and means of acquiring) commodities that ensured ease. As both a physical and social category, taste generated a discourse entailing the low and the high; from domestic objects to elite artworks, the central tenets of fast culture dominated a range of consumables. It is then critical for an inquiry of material culture in the Sixties to look at points of contact between culinary and textual objects; to how food becomes a language with which to construct meaning. This chapter considers how a recipe for boiled beef and a poem about New York City are produced out of a similar ethos. Cannon’s action recipes and O’Hara’s action poems shift our focus to immediate methods (what Harold Rosenberg refers to as “process art”) of making new forms to mirror the fleet-footed tempo of popular urban life.¹⁸⁶ Reading the cookery prose of Poppy Cannon alongside the poetry of Frank O’Hara, I examine how speed transforms ideas about food and literature at their dynamic junction in postwar American life.

It would be a challenge to find two more disparate contemporary personalities than Cannon and O’Hara, whose work initially appears to be motivated by divergent aesthetic proclivities and consumer values. Where Cannon’s recipes direct the everyday housewife in the use of a can-opener, O’Hara’s poems wittily name drop within an elite New York

¹⁸⁵ Donna Gabaccia *qtd in* Warren Belasco, *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 175.

¹⁸⁶ Referring to abstract expressionism as the “Modern Art” of the postwar era for how it “represent[ed] a revolution of taste” in its break from conventional forms, Rosenberg points to the materiality in medium and subject distinguishing this new art; a materiality linked to the rise of consumer culture and to the emergence of pop art which would irrevocably influence the making of the poem, like the recipe.

coterie.¹⁸⁷ What essentially relates the food writing of Cannon and the poetry of O’Hara, however, is that the work emerges out of a similar necessity to produce forms of art attuned to speed and ease. Cannon’s recipes and O’Hara’s poems contain a similar fast-ness, and by reading them together, we see how gastronomy, as it implements literary aesthetics, and poetry, as it engages a rhetoric of fast food, represent broader conditions of production and consumption in the modern world.

Though we may on the surface dismiss Cannon for recipes that cater to lowbrow tastes, I argue that her work is in fact more complex as it is linked to a Modernist network. In her 1964 *The Fast Gourmet Cookbook*, a collection of narrative-oriented recipes to be made swiftly, the dailiness of cooking is showcased through her treatment of food as artistic and poetic matter. Her recipes embody the action-oriented spontaneous processes of abstract expressionism, as well as the campy thingness of pop art, both of which defined the New York arts scene at the time. Aware that she was doing something new, Cannon described her work as a compilation of “traditional recipes adapted to the swift New York tempo” (49).¹⁸⁸ She reincarnates common recipes with modern materials (ready-made products) to translate *gourmet*, a highfalutin genre of cuisine, into an accessible culinary language, borrowing from the cultural rhetoric of instantaneity to do so. In this way, she attempts to remove the burden of routine by privileging an art of cooking that is based on an art of not-cooking; one that seeks to reap the status of Julia Child’s cuisine yet which contrasts with its elitist demands through shortcutting and simplifying.

Frank O’Hara inversely strives to reinstate routine in the composition of language, favoring everyday materials and local objects in his rendering of the high lyric. Though we

¹⁸⁷ In a mode of *personism*, which “puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person,” O’Hara situates the poem in the daily as an intimate communication.

¹⁸⁸ I will from hereon refer to this text as *Fast Gourmet*.

praise his poems for how they fit the aesthetic parameters of intellectual discourse in academic circles, and of high-art principles of the abstract expressionists, his work is fundamentally rooted in the everyday stuff of mass culture; he is as attracted to parallel principles of ease, ordinariness, and imitation in the making of a new form of lyric – a lyric that reads like a recipe. In his collection *Lunch Poems*, published the same year as Cannon’s cookbook, art is reframed as a daily need through the mundane event of lunch. O’Hara adapts Modernist (and Romantic) lyrics to the same idiosyncratic tempo to which Cannon refers, producing the world of the poem as a mirror to the gritty hunger of urban consumer culture, in both content and form. His writing, which happens during the lunch break stroll, is a process similar to cooking, which Cannon presents as fluid with (not a burden to or interruption of) daily living. The effect is a new type of poem, one that redirects the reader’s taste for the lyrical within an everyday context, or rather, initiates the reader’s taste of the everyday within a lyrical form.

In a review of Lawrence Alloway’s “Six Painters and the Object” exhibit at the Guggenheim in 1963, Barbara Rose denounced Roy Lichtenstein’s depictions of food: “I find his images offensive; I am annoyed to have to see in a gallery what I’m forced to look at in the supermarket. I go to the gallery to get away from the supermarket, not to repeat the experience.”¹⁸⁹ In Rose’s measure of taste, art was art precisely because it couldn’t be found in a supermarket; food had no legitimate place in a gallery. This was the sentiment of many critics of pop art at the time who were incensed by the use of commodity images for purposes of aesthetic diversion, but such was the cultural climate that these distinctions were radically collapsing, and the very category of art, like the category of food, was breaking open. *Time* magazine had acknowledged the year before that “a group of painters ha[d] come to the

¹⁸⁹ She may as well have been referring to Andy Warhol, whose “200 Campbell’s Soup Cans” (1962) was also part of this exhibit.

common conclusion that the most banal and even vulgar trappings of modern civilization can, when transposed literally to canvas, become Art.”¹⁹⁰ Likewise, in kitchens across America, frozen, canned, and instant products were converting standards of taste, turning into the new culinary aesthetic indicative of one’s modern standing. What Rose’s reaction demonstrates, in effect, is the ostensible shock-value of pop as it critically reconfigures objects of mass consumption in a space otherwise reserved for high art, engaging the precarious fault line between popular culture and the art world.

Despite the similarities between Cannon’s recipes and O’Hara’s poems, readers usually consume their work with polarizing approaches. I argue for a more complex methodology. Do Cannon’s recipes have less distinction, despite their avant-garde qualities, because they are composed of commonplace, manufactured ingredients associated with fast culture? Should the value of O’Hara’s poems remain unchallenged because they are canonized, part of a recognized, elite, high-art movement, despite their everyday matter and rapid accretion of local sound bites? How does a work of art come to have status, and how is taste a catalyst for this very question? Their work jointly raises the issue of representation and reproducibility in postwar culture. Can traditional recipes be simply and hurriedly reproduced with cans in such a way that their replica fulfills the taste preferences of the original? Do modernist lyrics composed of the quotidian and resembling popular forms (the poem *as* recipe) merit more aesthetic importance according to some irrefutable standard of high taste? How are new forms produced out of a communication between the ordinary (necessity) and the artful (aesthetic), where food is what Roland Barthes identifies as a “system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and

¹⁹⁰ “The Slice-of-Cake School,” *Time*, 1962.

behavior.”¹⁹¹ I read Cannon and O’Hara as they negotiate between a politics of necessity and a nourishing aesthetics to create recipes and poems that simulate an encounter with an increasingly uniform consumer world. Their work illuminates the ways in which art makes habit matter (food is aesthetic) and habit makes aesthetics matter (art is necessary).

II

Andy Warhol’s Taste for Things

In an old text I have just read...occurs a naming of foods: milk, buttered bread, cream cheese, preserves, Maltese oranges, sugared strawberries. Is this another pleasure of pure representation (experienced therefore solely by the greedy reader)? But I have no fondness for milk or so many sweets and I do not project much of myself into the detail of these dishes. Something else occurs, doubtless having to do with another meaning of the word ‘representation’”
– Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*¹⁹²

In his discussion of Andy Warhol’s brand image artworks, Anthony E. Grudin points out the ways in which the category of taste was being reformulated from physical to social terms:

The Annual Report described the transition from exchange and use value to sign exchange value as being driven by class aspirations. Good taste (the taste of the soda) became ‘good taste’ (high-status taste) when consumers were encouraged to value Coke less for how it tasted or made them feel, and more for what it represented – what it was ‘a sign of’ – and how its purchase was seen to improve their social status.¹⁹³

Campaigns by the food industry to homogenize citizen consumers turned food into a predominantly figurative presence. As Carola Lentz argues in *Changing Food Habits*, the “shift to semiotic codes and the increasing meaning of signs is one of the most important changes in consumption during the 1950s” (255). Warhol’s art simultaneously instigates and mocks the representational quality of fast food, in this case the Coke logo, and its promise of status.

¹⁹¹ Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan (New York: Routledge, 1997) 29. Barthes’ description alludes to how commodity production infiltrates the literary/art realm in the modern era.

¹⁹² Here, Barthes considers the analogous acts of eating and reading; though he may not have an appetite for the named foods, he finds their linguistic representation to enable an appetizing occurrence.

¹⁹³ The Coca-Cola Company was deliberately engaging in aspirational marketing language.

When one thinks of the meeting of food and art in the Sixties, an obvious figure to come to mind is Warhol, a commercial illustrator-turned-artist credited with bringing the style of pop into the American arts scene.¹⁹⁴ Warhol's work offers a visual template for understanding how the recipes of Cannon and the poems of O'Hara attempt to transform the ordinariness of fast culture into aesthetic experience, for he was controversially "the standard-bearer for perhaps the most crucial event of twentieth-century culture: closing the unbridgeable gulf between high and low, refined and commercial" (Scherman and Dalton xv). Although O'Hara expressed distaste for pop art and kept himself far from associations with Warhol as an artist, there are many thematic and structural similarities to be drawn between their work, in relation to Cannon's cooking as well. All three, based in New York City, were indebted to vernacular culture (the humdrum of Americana) yet held to ideas of good (high) taste. Their work analogously captures this modern duality: a fascination for commonplace, utilitarian, consumer objects and a propensity for fine objects of art. Warhol razed the divide, bringing mass culture into spaces of high art, and bringing art into everyday experience, even as it imitated commodity: "Warhol's private tastes may have been those of an unreconstructed fifties aesthete...but he poeticized, *negated* their everydayness" (Scherman and Dalton 78). By conveying the iconography of the supermarket, Warhol's art draws a new lens on culinary culture, on food as sign, while instigating a rethinking of the role of the art object. He exposes how food and art are counterpart necessities in their potential to nourish. His use of the culinary is at least imaginatively a way to prod the structures of production and consumption so foundational to modern life.

¹⁹⁴ See also the work of Wayne Thiebaud, whose nostalgic paintings are the visual memories of food from his boyhood during the Depression, primarily cakes, pies, and candy. Influenced by the meeting of theater and advertising, and aesthetically by 50s abstract expressionism and still-life and pop art, Thiebaud's paintings of everyday consumer goods are produced with a similar appeal to repetition, seriality, multiplicity, the colloquial, the plaintive.

Many critics were averse to the role of pop as an intermediary between daily life (commercialism) and fine art (aesthetics), troubled by how “pop art ma[de] capital visible” (Staniszewski 159-160). At a symposium on pop art in 1962, Hilton Kramer identified and rejected its strategic consequences, attempting to restore the barrier that kept art separate from commerce: “Its social effect is simply to reconcile us to a world of commodities, banalities, and vulgarities – which is to say an effect indistinguishable from advertising art. This is a reconciliation that must – now more than ever – be refused, if art – and life itself – is to be defended against the dishonesties of contrived public symbols and pretentious commerce” (Selz 38-9). Although the other critique of pop was that it was “lightweight” or “mindless,” Tony Scherman and David Dalton, praising the genius of Warhol, propose pop as a “knottily complex” genre that “shocked the shockers” by rejecting the high-culture approach of concurrent art movements such as Abstract Expressionism (xv). It could be said that pop was yet another variation of the avant-garde vanguard that emerged during Modernism. Rather than opposing either mainstream or high culture, pop synthesized elements of each, and in this way had much to tell us about taste as a daily encounter with the modern market, as an experience of aesthetic pleasure, and as an indicator of status.

Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* are the all-too-obvious reference here for understanding the stylistic effects of pop on the work of his contemporaries in gastronomy and literature.¹⁹⁵ As art historian Kirk Varnedoe writes, the cans are “a visual sound bite for

¹⁹⁵ Warhol’s *32 Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962) literally involved, from its making to its curatorial presentation to its cultural influence, as a merging of the real and art. The origin of Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* is itself such a popular a topic that it fuses daily life and art. One story records that he borrowed the idea from a friend who suggested he paint “the most common, everyday, instantly recognizable thing”; rumor has it he paid Muriel Latow fifty dollars for the idea, and went to the supermarket to buy several cans of soup (*Pop*). Another story points to Warhol’s nostalgia for the canned soup of his childhood and lunch routine: “I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing over and over again.” The habit of lunch was for Warhol, as for O’Hara, an occasion for art. A third explanation draws from Warhol’s interest in nothingness or randomness, influenced by Dadaist concepts: “I wanted to paint nothing. I was looking for something that was the essence of nothing, and that was it” (Warholsters). Exhibited at Irving Blum’s Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles,

all Pop art, if not for a whole post-1960 attitude of hip irony.” We can certainly read this “hip irony” in Cannon and O’Hara, whose pop forms also develop as a reproduction of and response to the banality of commodities in a way that is, more often than not, uncritical of consumer culture. Warhol made it clear that he genuinely liked products of modernity, especially Campbell’s soup, a staple of the American kitchen. The privacy of consumption, which had become a social enterprise by this point, is what his work unsettles. While his interest in soup cans was not purely aesthetic, the defining elements of his style – seriality, repetition, imperfection – showcase a postwar sensibility that is traceable in the work of Cannon and O’Hara, who craft recipes and poems with a similar obsessive patterning.

Warhol did not privilege the original, rather he called attention to the beauty in its permutations, to the “distinct and irreducible imperfections” that suspended it as aesthetic (Grudin). This is quite similar to the ways in which Cannon reproduced recipes, always allowing space for experiment and error, with the idea that it is a prototype that may be multiplied but never perfectly reproduced. O’Hara likewise repeats his habit poem-making lunch, with variations. As Delville argues, “the principle of repetition-with-variation that characterizes Warhol’s serigraph foregrounds the consumer’s compulsive attraction to fast food, while converting the package itself into a reassuring fetish and a form of potential entertainment.”¹⁹⁶ Consider Betty Crocker’s packaged cake mixes, to which her famous tagline refers: “I guarantee a perfect cake, every time you bake – cake after cake after cake!” If the longing for regularity, similitude, and ease could make peers of Crocker and Warhol,

it is told that a supermarket nearby displayed real soup cans, advertising them as “the real thing for only 29 cents a can” (Delville?). In 1964, the Product Marketing Manager for the Campbell’s Soup Company sent him a few cases of tomato soup (Delville?). A year later, Campbell’s commissioned a canvas.

¹⁹⁶ Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption*, 68. Delville describes this as what Jean-Francois would call the power of commodity capitalism, to “derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or modkery” (14). As poet John Yau said of Warhol’s repetitions: “It is not Coca-Cola and Campbell’s soup cans that we have in common; it is that we are all stuck in time.

why do we accept his work yet sneer at hers, especially given that he liked her; were they not innovating similar trends?

*

Yum, Yum, Yum

Warhol's late text, *YUM, YUM, YUM* (1996), an assemblage of lithographs from the Fifties and Sixties pairing images of food and printed words, is perhaps the most parallel text to Cannon's *Fast Gourmet* and O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* for how it represents popular ideas of speed and convenience. It is, too, a diminutive pocket-sized book, which could be mistaken for any everyday object, plain and seemingly inconsequential. Its playfulness is conveyed by its size and implied in the slang title, borrowed from Fifties' Jell-O ads, a repetition of "yum" three times.¹⁹⁷ The "Y" at the helm of these food epigrams seems to represent the disembodied eating body in the Sixties, overwhelmed by a foodscape of visual and textual signs.

Warhol merges the components of food, image, and word in ways that don't always correspond, creating an unfamiliar relationship between the reader and the text in the process of virtual ingestion. Nursery rhymes (in the style of Gertrude Stein) join the rhetoric of advertising, personal confessions combine with fictional fragments, and proverbs are juxtaposed with jingles. The images in general – picnic spreads, ice cream cones, fruit displays, cakes, a standing lobster – are whimsical, random, raw, robust with colors, and more animated than still-life in a way that captures the transient tempo of modern consumer culture. Often the pictures of food are postmodern in appearance (disincarnated, decontextualized, depthless), and in that way inconsumable, yet they are drawn from the still-life aesthetic of pure object forms whose simplicity creates an expectation of familiarity or

¹⁹⁷ Many of the Jell-O ads in 1950 contain the jingle, "yum! yum! yum!"

nostalgia. Yet at closer look, even something as common as an ice cream cone is distorted in shape and color, and in one case is studded with diamonds, revealing the imaginative (and imperfect) process of remembering. There are many embellishments of mundane objects throughout the text; for example, a tall cake is topped with a butterfly, and bowls, vases, and towers holding fruit are excessively ornamental, a contrast to the overall minimalism of line and text. Everyday objects in their elevated aesthetic states often become abstractions; the ordinary is thereby reproduced in new, exotic ways. The decorative quality of the commonplace produces an impression of abundance, of food as play and pleasure, and although Warhol's images represent the American palate, they work against the uniformity of nationally produced symbols of eating. That these are lithographs – copies of original drawings – further emphasizes this idea in terms of art and food. If foods are merely signs, what is Warhol hoping to evoke through such quirky pictures, and how does he impact our thinking about the iconography and language of food by bringing up the tensions inherent to tasting?¹⁹⁸

In *YUM, YUM, YUM*, the image is always paired in close association with the writing, even if their relation seems accidental.¹⁹⁹ Words, too, are placed with special visual attention on the page: spread out, enlarged by font, inconsistently spaced, stacked in catalogue form so that we might consume them more quickly. This play with print contributes to the playful quality of the text, giving it the feel of an experience somewhere between a recipe, a children's book, and a postmodern poem. The first epigram of the book conveys sentiment of the era:

No matter
what changes

¹⁹⁸ These are so far from his standardized images of Coke bottles and soup cans.

¹⁹⁹ It is unclear from critical discussions of this text (perhaps because they don't exist) if these images and epigrams were randomly or intentionally paired.

or how fast,
the one thing
we all always need is
real good
food
so we can know what the changes are
and how fast they're coming.

The emphasis here is on necessity, especially during a moment of change marked by speed. Food is the universal need. It is the constant across time. It is information. Yet for all of the specificity implicit in food during uncertain times, Warhol does not tell us much about food, except – in larger font – that it must be *real* and *good*. What is real (and is it opposed to false?) and by whose standards of taste are we to understand what is valued as good? How does art, like cuisine, buffer the imminent effects of fast culture? These are the questions that circulate the text and compel my inquiry of the work of Cannon and O'Hara.

With fast food comes Warhol's *extravagance*, in extra-sized font, in another segment. He unabashedly refers to his indulgence in food: "I really spoil myself in the food area, so my leftovers are often grand"; "I just planted myself in front of it and ate and ate and ate." Consumption is excessive and bodily and spontaneous, a need but also pleasure. The words that get highlighted in scale include: *exotic*, *rich*, *nice*, *progress*, *lots*, *grand*, and *good* – words that appear in advertising rhetoric at the time and are indicators of a specific Sixties' sensibility. Warhol even mimics ad talk to comment on food and class: "Tab is Tab and no matter how rich you are, you can't get a better one." At another point he mocks social status in its link to high taste: "My favorite simultaneous action is talking while eating. I think it's a sign of class." He distinguishes between foods that are "exotic" (guava, shellfish) and "junk food" (sugar); between excess ("eighteen different desserts," giant strawberries, "lots of fruit") and minimalism. It seems as though he, too, is trying to determine "whether food is everything...or nothing," yet in making a book about food, he settles this debate; or does

he? He undermines the significance of food, in a way that both Cannon and O'Hara do, by making food silly and funny rather than serious: "My only regret was that I didn't have an ice-cream scoop in my pocket"; "It's always my turn to talk just when I've filled my mouth." At one point he writes, "Progress is very important and exciting in everything except food," a comment that is ironic and teasing, especially at a time when food was being touted as the material upon which progress depended (for individuals and the nation); even the words *progress* and *food* are represented in larger font, signifying their relationship, though the nature of their influence is being poked at in a tone that sets the precedent for Cannon's cuisine and O'Hara's poetry. Warhol dispels anxieties around food by making it playful across image, word, and body. Food is diversion, art is diversion, yet both are understood as fundamental needs, and, he reminds us, indicators of status. Incorporating various visual and linguistic signs across a range of media, Warhol brings the high and low into a single space, and in this way his work is useful for reading the overlaps of avant-garde gastronomy and literature in the postwar Sixties.

III *Poppy Cannon's Art of High Speed Cuisine*

We may find in the long run that tinned food is a deadlier weapon than the machine gun
– George Orwell²⁰⁰

According to eminent American chef and food writer James Beard, Cannon was detrimental to culinary progress: she symbolized "everything that was wrong with American cooking in the postwar era" precisely because her intent was to speed up the cooking and eating of food (Shapiro 5). "The shortcut is king," she writes with culinary authority (12). Yet in another

²⁰⁰ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937.

context she insists, “Artfulness is required.”²⁰¹ These two allegiances – to art and convenience – within a single vision of modern cuisine make Cannon a pivotal figure for a discussion of the junction of food and literature in postwar America.

A self-designated artist and Everywoman, the “modern epicure” of the midcentury, Cannon found a way to showcase the paradoxical nature of food. She lived by dual and dueling beliefs: that food was practical (a matter of necessity), yet theatrical (a matter of aesthetics), at a time when taste had become a widely fraught category, despite or perhaps because of its incorrigibility. As culinary historian Laura Shapiro writes, Cannon’s “whole approach contradicted itself and she knew it, but she was determined to make it the foundation of a great, twentieth-century cuisine” (86). By challenging the terms of good taste, Cannon proved that food could be both fast and fine, instant and gourmet, commercial and artful, routine and elegant, copy and original. Like Warhol, Cannon nuanced the interface of the high and the low, and in doing so roused anxiety about the object (food) and audience (a culture of eaters), with the endeavor of converting tastes on a mass scale.

A proponent of the food industry, she maintained a “stubborn allegiance to food technology,” working as a consultant for General Foods and H.J. Heinz, and as a copy editor for an advertising agency, and staying loyal to engineered and commercialized foods (Shapiro 90). Her column in *Mademoiselle*, entitled “Eat and Run,” captured the cultural emphasis being placed on speed in home kitchens across America, as families were being tempted to buy convenience. One way Cannon renovated culinary traditions was by introducing home cooks to new modern products in her bestselling cookbook, *The Can-Opener Cookbook*, published in 1951, a book of recipes entirely devoted to dishes made from cans.²⁰² In her

²⁰¹ *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*, xix. I will hereon refer to this text as *Aromas*.

²⁰² Revised in 1968 and re-titled *The New New Can-Opener Cookbook*. This will be the text from which all citations are made in reference to *The Can-Opener Cookbook*, and will be referred to as *The New New*.

repertoire, the can-opener was a “magic wand,” the electric blender was a “magic-worker,” and the pressure cooker was a “wondrous tool.” She presents herself as a culinary modernist in the first line of her revision to this cookbook, “Something new has been added to the age-old saga of good eating,” yet links herself to tradition: “Now we are becoming classicists, and are analyzing the complicated, work-consuming recipes of olden days with a “new-style” gourmet approach of can-opener” (2); “Obviously, the old rules need some modernizing” (17). The revolutionizing of the recipe involved the use of modern conveniences, ready-made rather than fresh products, and tools to replace the work of hands; the translation of traditional recipes (like those of Child) into “ultrafast” versions so that Americans could “eat and run.” Yet the *new new* for Cannon, in terms of the production and writing of cuisine, though it shortcut tradition, was its artfulness: “For me it has always been the highest accolade to achieve imaginative originality...”²⁰³

Her recipes at times read like suspense narratives in which she is the central protagonist, “the madcap heroine” leading her reader to happy endings (Shapiro 98). It is no surprise that her cookbooks amplify culinary plots that resemble fiction – she fictionalized herself on the page and in public life. Her self-constructed image as a white middle-class all-American housewife hostess made her a credible force in American culinary culture, though she was actually born Lillian Gruskin in Capetown, South Africa to working-class Lithuanian-Jewish parents. In her role as “Poppy Cannon,” she was a peer and mentor to women in social rituals and household styles; she revitalized traditional domestic images in positive ways. She conveyed an understanding of the demands of working women, encouraging them to assert lead roles in the kitchen by doing less. As Shapiro argues, “Her story sums up that anxiety-filled moment in American culinary history when it first became

²⁰³ *The Electric Epicure's Cookbook* (1961), xvii. I will hereon refer to this text as *EE*.

possible for ordinary women, not just the rich, to decide whether or not to cook for their families” (89). In defense of not making her own foods (stock, butter, bread) from scratch, Cannon praised her devotion to the civil rights of women, “charging off to free all women drudges with a can opener” (12).²⁰⁴ She also empowered women to use food as romance (an approach she modeled in her own romantic affairs in the public eye); food could seduce and master. She stirred one of the most controversial scandals in race relations at this time (interracial marriage was still illegal in many states) with her dramatic affair and subsequent marriage (after four previous marriages) to NAACP secretary Walter White, who was the subject and addressee of many of her romantic, poetic recipes.

Moreover, in tension with her Everywoman appearance was a hidden reality; although Cannon ardently supported convenience food, she traveled in prominent social circles, entertaining presidents’ wives, authors, and diplomats at her house, and traveling the world in search of fancy restaurants. On the jacket to her book cover, which she obviously authored, she is described as having “circled the globe three times in search of special recipes.” She was also accepted as a member of pretentious, high-exclusive French food societies. Cannon skillfully crafted her persona of the everyday housewife while she pursued privileged culinary adventures abroad. Despite her focus on all-American, classic, homey dishes, her chapter on beef includes more stories of patronizing elite restaurants than it does instructions for cooking. Though her aim is to simplify cooking by creating easy working-class recipes, there is an underlying snobbery to her accounts of food; her recipe for “Chateaubriand en Papillote” contains this contradiction, as it follows the French technique of a “luxurious” restaurant in New York, a “haunt of the Greats” (of which she sees herself

²⁰⁴ She presents an alternative to the time-consuming tradition of bread-making in a section called “Old-Fashioned Cooking – New Way,” providing recipes for “blender-made butter” and bread from a hot roll mix.

included), yet uses a sauce “contrived from a can of beef gravy” (27).²⁰⁵ She makes sure to name-drop (like O’Hara), refers to old French chefs, celebrity destinations, excessive consumption at fine restaurants, and global travel narratives, departing from what is supposed to be a guide for domestic cookery.²⁰⁶ We go from the Colony Restaurant to the Hotel Regency to Quo Vadis to the Tower Suite, all in a matter of pages, which brings into question her audience (cook and reader) in terms of class – would these names matter to the average American housewife? In her recipe for “Sirloin Marchand Du Vin,” she begins:

In the midst of a phantasmagoria of lights and luxury you dine at the Tower Suite on the forty-eighth floor of New York’s Time and Life Building as if you were a pampered guest in your rich uncle’s penthouse with your own Edwardian waitress and butler hovering over your table. No a la carte ordering. Course after course appears in an elegant procession.

For whom, we might wonder. And how does this fit with the idea of “instant elegance” which she has been selling us all along? Is she attempting to make her reader feel part of the in-crowd? Often her recipes seem self-promoting of her own – not her food’s – “elegance.”

In second-person point-of-view, Cannon seems to be rubbing elbows at this table with her reader, who most likely does not share the privilege of such an experience, yet she equalizes herself through the charade of canned goods. Similarly, her recipe for “Steak and Mushroom Pie” does not begin with any mention of food; instead, we are acquainted in the opening two paragraphs with a description of a celebrity-friend and her apartment:

Geraldine Fitzgerald is a lady of many lives – a renowned and serious actress, a star, and a writer for television and the movies. But the role she plays with the greatest zest is that of mother to her grown-up son and 12-year-old daughter and wife to Stuart Scheftel, a prominent real estate man and television producer with more than a passing interest in high-level politics.

Their apartment on Park Avenue has the air of a country house that might be found in County Wicklow, where Geraldine Fitzgerald was born

²⁰⁵ *Fast Gourmet*, 27. It would be interesting to compare this same recipe made of a can with the classic French versions from M.F.K. Fisher, Alice B. Toklas, and Julia Child.

²⁰⁶ One parenthetical for a recipe for Boeuf A La Broche from the Ivory Coast boasts of herself as a world-traveler: “As hotel openings go (and we have gone to quite a few in various parts of the world)” 24.

and raised. The floors are of white vinyl. In the dining room, which opens off the drawing room, there are English chintzes of green and yellow on a white background; chair covers of white Irish linen piped in green.²⁰⁷

Only after this lengthy, tangential – and somewhat arbitrary – description, which reads like a nineteenth-century English novel, and is more attentive to the elegance of décor than to food, do we finally get to the ordinary pie, cooked “in 5 minutes instead of 5 hours” (49). The recipe takes up half the space of the above passage leading to it. Cannon seems to suggest that her reader can somehow access the life of this lady by making the quick pie. Moreover, Cannon’s lowbrow substitutes and methods contrast a pull towards stories of food sourced from privilege, mobility, and fine taste.

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The “Artist-Cook”

Originality, for Cannon, came from style. “It’s all out of tins – but with verve, my dear, with dash,” she wrote in her column. The *verve* and *dash* underlie her apparently simplistic, unfussy, effortless cooking, her *art* of can-opener cuisine (Shapiro 96). In fact, her distinctive style integrated art trends of the time, in such a way that her recipes seem composed like the action paintings and poems of The New York School, while also rendering branded objects in the mode of Warholian pop art. She attributed the link between cooking and art to M.F.K. Fisher, whose *Art of Eating* was her favorite cookbook, and to Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas (her culinary idol), and the extended Modernist avant-garde scene in Paris in the early part of the century:

When all the world became aware through Gertrude Stein that a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, this was the culmination of a many-sided artistic revolution that began in Paris more than fifty years ago...The cooking was in

²⁰⁷ *Fast Gourmet*, 49.

its way as important and significant as all the other artistic activities that flourished in that burgeoning atmosphere (*Aromas* vii).²⁰⁸

She believed in herself as an artist in their lineage: “Armed with a can opener, I become the artist-cook, the master, the creative chef” (*Aromas* 1).

Writing about Toklas in the introduction to their collaborative cookbook, *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present* (1997), Cannon praises the role of the mind and intellect in Toklas’ cooking as the venerable representation of “an extraordinary innovation – that is typically twentieth century,” despite Toklas being “steeped in the traditions of classic French cuisine” (vii).²⁰⁹ By associating with Toklas, Cannon leveraged her own fame so that she would be taken seriously for both her cooking and her writing, both of which she wanted to present as American and worldly. What makes Toklas modern, according to Cannon, is how her work attends to both food and language: “At the same time an intellectual, an epicure and a practical cook, she can cook at the same high level of perfection as she talks and writes about food. This is a new development in the gastronomic world” (vii). Here, Cannon seems to be highlighting hope for her own contribution in carrying on a dual commitment to cooking and writing with a Modernist allegiance. Yet she is intent on removing the

²⁰⁸ Cannon admired the intellectualism with which Toklas approached cooking and writing about food, and aspired to be an intellectual cook herself.

²⁰⁹ The irony here is that Toklas did not wish to be associated with this cookbook; Cannon used (misappropriated) her name in order to draw specific attention to her work among elite circles, and also to secure the sort of literary merit which would raise her status as a modern, transatlantic artist.

Cannon herself notes in the intro to this cookbook that Toklas had disagreed with her “about almost everything and particularly with [her] basic belief that it is possible to be...an epicure-cook, in a hurry. Between speed and ease and excellence there could be, she felt, no possible connection. All processed or prepared foods, canned, packaged or (horror of horrors!) frozen, were to be regarded not only with suspicion but disdain” (*Aromas*, xiii). Cannon recounts that Toklas, with her classical French attitude, dismissed her idea of “creative cooking.” To clarify the authorship of the cookbook, Cannon insists that their contrasting attitudes are represented; though she is merely helping with the editing, she says that she adopted many of Toklas’ ideas: “The recipes in this book have not been changed, edited or adapted in any way. They appear just as Miss Toklas wrote them. But there are, set apart in different type, a few addenda that will, I hope, make them easier to understand and to use in the United States...substitutions have been suggested. And there are a few thoughts on ways in which these dishes can be used to enhance the meals of Now and Here” (xxiii). As a reader, it is difficult to trace consistency between Toklas’ first cookbook and *Aromas* due to Cannon’s interpretative (and often imposing) voice of translation.

seriousness and snobbery of food, shaping the experience of taste as a highly pleasurable, playful, and even funny endeavor, and her writing captures this spirit.

Cannon presented her “unorthodox” cookbooks (she wrote five books between 1956 and 1961), as an “introduction to the art of cooking,” in which many of the dishes are “like many great works of art” or “like sonnets or odes, [which] cannot be brought into being without obeisance to classic rules and restrictions.”²¹⁰ Rules aside (she made up the rules as she went along), “fantasy and imagination play a large part” in her view of cooking, and perhaps are required in the consumption of her mishmash cuisine (*Fast Gourmet* 175). For as wedded to the classics as she seemed to be in her wildly invented variations, injunctions to veer away from their schema abound in her recipes: “Use your creative imagination,” she commanded; “Do not be bound to tradition” (*The New New* 8). When describing the steps to make a salad, her focus was as much on the practicality as on the artful: “So much for the mundane requirements of a good salad. The rest is art” (*The New New* 175). In many moments throughout her cookbooks, she appeals to her reader to remain imaginatively open to the possibilities of cans: “Consider a can of beef gravy. No one in his right mind would wax lyrical over it, but it makes a sound and honest beginning or foundation for a dozen excellent sauces”; “Jars as well as tins from the ordinary corner store hold gourmet treasure”; “Consider the canned fruits and their infinite divertissements” (*The New New* 2-3). Even though she relied on conventional products from mainstream culture, her cooking fits discussions of avant-garde art in postwar America.

“Avant-garde” is the term she uses to refer to her style of food as well as writing, aligning her work with other modernists. She described culinary genius as the ability to take “plain, ordinary, get-them-anywhere ingredients and [turn] them into distinguished dishes”

²¹⁰ *The New New*, 3, 72; *Aromas*, xviii.

(*Fast Gourmet* 139). In her art, gourmet was the outcome of products that were uniformly tasteless and imitative of the real: “our new way of achieving gourmet food can happen only here – in the land of the mix, the jar, the frozen-food package, and the ubiquitous can opener” (*The New New* 1); “Every recipe includes a short cut – a canned or quick-frozen food, a mix or a new and simplified way” (3). The recipes in *Fast Gourmet* inspire, as she puts it, “*haute cuisine* through the sophisticated use of processed foods – canned, frozen, dehydrated, brown n’ serve” (12). Perhaps only in the postwar consumer era, when taste was based on imitation and convenience, and the “highest terms of praise for any recipe was “easy,”” could someone like Cannon, who actually did not even know how to cook, rise to fame (Shapiro 50). In fact, Cannon sells her cookbook by its promise of masterpiece dishes made “without any actual cooking” (*EE* 2). She proves that with the package, the freezer and the can, food [could] be beautiful – and swift and easy” (*The New New* 155). For example, “Steak and Mushroom Pie” is made “in 5 minutes instead of 5 hours” (49). As Shapiro points out, for Cannon, “shortcut cooking was a branch of great traditional cuisine, not a departure from it” (100). And this new cuisine was founded on “instant elegance,” the culinary principle she sought to popularize with the aphoristic promise that “Ease is not always the sworn enemy of elegance; sometimes it is its handmaiden” (14).

Though her recipes are fast, simple, and composed of ordinary ingredients, her writing is often animated with surprise, which explains her association with literary modernists. Her prose stands out among cookery writers of the Fifties who approached recipe instruction with a more straightforward, often lackluster writing style, and embodies the conditions of consumption at this particular moment in time – the fast intake, the

instantaneity of experience.²¹¹ In a quick-paced catalogue of actions, Cannon’s lively language creates a culinary voice unlike that of standard kitchen manuals; she calls for “a plotch of wine, a fleck of spice or a flutter of herbs,” “a drift of caraway seeds,” “a flurry of fresh coconut,” “a great swish of sour cream,” “a generous flutter of chopped chives,” “a fleck of allspice for the *touch unusual*.” Movement, mirroring the urban tempo, imbues her culinary language. She goes back and forth between poetry (invented words such as “salad-flinging”) and a vocabulary reminiscent of advertising. In one recipe, she suggests, “when up a tree for a quick dessert, you can rattle a lemon pie in a jiff. Haven’t you heard of the new wonderstuff...?” In much the same way that she spontaneously creates her recipes, she makes up new words in the moment of writing with the impulse of a poet’s ear.²¹²

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Recipes for a Postwar Palate

In her introduction to *Fast Gourmet*, entitled “How Fast Can A Gourmet Be?”, Cannon pokes holes in her own culinary theories, anticipating the “fair questions” of readers and food critics which underscore her contradictory approach: “What do you mean

²¹¹ One of the other notable cookbooks of the Sixties to take a similar approach was Peg Bracken’s humorous *The I Hate to Cook Book* (1960) – the title says it all. She takes home-cooks a step further into hands-off, “easy, fast, and fun” cooking, distinguishing her untested recipes from those (like Cannon’s) that magically build Escoffier creations in five or ten minutes” (4), yet they share a “hands-across-the-pantry feeling coming right through the ink.”

²¹² At times she even integrates actual poems. Cannon was equally devoted to being a poet as she was a cook, though she had no success publishing her manuscript of poems. Her initial idea for *The Bride’s Cookbook* (1954) was a collection of love poems with supplemental recipes, yet it became a more conventionally organized cookbook of recipes scattered with sentimental poems such as “Domestic Villanella,” a poem articulating her love for Walter White through “ordinary” and “common” things such as food (loaves, pies, apples, spice), (Shapiro 104).

In her introductory description of finger bowls, she transforms an obsolete and quite mundane object into something lyrically charged: “*Never* a slice of lemon in the bowl, for this belongs to the commercial fish house. Float a delicate leaf – as of mint, lemon-verbena, borage or burnet – a rose petal, a tiny flower. Or you can drop in interesting small shells, or bits of obsidian, agate, or amber. Droplets in the water of such fragrance as you might use on the towels – not heavy or musky, but spicy, fresh – are fit companions for food” (*Fast Gourmet* 13). This is reminiscent of a prose-poem we might find in Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, an imperative to the reader with melodic and often alliterative appositions. In a paragraph about a salad bowl, she breaks into poetic prose once again: “wooden by the decree of some nameless, sticky from bygone oils, redolent of garlic long deceased. It is in the nature of an outrage to submit fresh greens of spring, virgin oil and delicate vinegar to so rancid a trough” (14).

fast...what do you mean gourmet?" She proceeds to define *gourmet* according to what it is not, dispelling myths and putting the genre back into her own terms: it is not "esoteric," "foreign," or pretentious (11). Much the opposite, it is, simply put, "casual" and informal, and centered on knowing "the pleasures of eating" (11). Meals should be "served for joy and socialability – and not just nourishment," she writes. It is this emphasis on pleasure with which Cannon hoped to bring humor and fun back into cooking. As we learn in the Foreword, her cooking was the antidote to the "cult of too-much of a muchness."²¹³

"Without any fussing whatsoever" is the most consistent tagline of *Fast Gourmet*, and the promise of many food ads of its time appealing to sell new products according to their ease factor. In 1951, *Jell O* guarantees "none of the fuss," and the jingle of a *Premium Saltine Crackers* ad reads: "feast 'em...without fuss."²¹⁴ Cannon borrows this voice in her persuasively easy recipes. All of her dishes are *fast* because they promise to take only thirty minutes to cook; they are "half-hour triumphs" (*Fast Gourmet* 12).²¹⁵ She reiterates her no-fuss approach in her chapter on veal with many revisions to classic recipes that have traditionally required significant time commitment. Noting that veal, for example, is the most popular meat in Europe but the rarest in the United States, Cannon attempts to assimilate it into the everyday menus of "the hurried cook" by repeating many of the quick habits of preparation from previous recipes for meat. A recipe for "Blanquette Under Pressure," a French veal ragout, almost exactly replicates that of the aforementioned boiled beef, at least the beginning of the instructions: "have 3 pounds of veal cut into inch cubes. Place in a

²¹³ Robert J. Misch qtd by Camille Bourgeois in *Fast Gourmet*, 10.

²¹⁴ Many other ads carry the message of ease: "no extra time" (*Ovaltine*, 1951), "makes cooking so easy" (*Oxo*, 1950), "light, easy to handle" (*Pure-Pak Milk*, 1957), "sweet and simple" (*Jell O*, 1951), "make exciting meals easily" (*La Choy*, 1953).

²¹⁵ Rachel Ray has created somewhat of a revival of this type of cooking, with her popular *Food Network* show and cookbook of the same name, *30-Minute Meals*. And Los Angeles chef Nancy Silverton published a similar cookbook, *A Twist of the Wrist: Quick Flavorful Meals with Ingredients from Jars, Cans, Bags, and Boxes* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

pressure cooker with enough hot water or chicken stock to cover the bottom of the pan about one inch deep. Add 1 onion stuffed with 2 cloves, 1 small carrot, sliced, 1 small piece celery. Cook according to manufacturer's instructions under pressure 12 minutes." Although other canned ingredients are added to this, it is neither complicated nor detail-oriented (note that Cannon does not distinguish between water or stock for seasoning, leaving this up to the cook's discretion). If the home-cook remembers, she can merely repeat familiar actions of dinners past, or simply read the package.

"So good, so quick," Cannon describes her "little treasure for the gourmet who cooks in a hurry" for veal saltimbocca (162). Throughout her cookbook, these terms – good and quick – are counterparts; that which is quick has the guarantee of good taste. In defense of shortcuts in this same chapter, she writes, "Now the restaurant cook has access to and uses even more ready and half-ready foods than the average housewife. Even in the most luxurious chef recipes (in practice if not in print) fresh, quick-frozen, dried and canned ingredients have become interchangeable" (154). She is persuasive that luxury foods may be created with instant methods by pointing to the approaches of the professional chef. In her chapter on "Main Dishes" in *The New New*, Cannon assures that "Each one of these dishes makes use of some short cut – a prepared sauce, a canned product, a quick-cooking rice, a new quick-cooking cereal" (72). This sentiment is repeated in the following chapter on "Fine Fish Dishes Via Can and Freezer": "Each one of these dishes is achieved with a minimum of effort in the fewest possible minutes" (89). And in "Double-Quick Meats," in which canned meats, quick-frozen meats, and bottled gravy darkeners are primary ingredients, her promise is clear: "may we reiterate that many of the recipes included in this group are economical and need no last-minute fussing" (108).

In the longest chapter of *Fast Gourmet*, Cannon's focus is beef, the meat that "when time is important...comes first to mind," for which she has 24 flashy-named recipes such as "Blazing Steak On A Plank," "Minute Ragout Frontenac," "Quick Carbonnade of Beef, and "Five Minute Goulash From Lima." The names of dishes, many of which combine traditional French words with American catch-phrases from advertising, clue us in to the action and creativity required in their making. In the introduction to this section, Cannon expounds the methods of "speed cooking" according to what she calls "classical tenets," a contradiction of terms in itself, by defending the use of a meat tenderizer, a modern invention. Resorting to tenderizers transforms meat, she writes, with "instantaneous" action (21), and she lists many benefits to her "new lightning fast techniques," such as reduced time, less shrinkage, and more nutritive values. In a recipe for "Viennese Boiled Beef Under Pressure," which can typically take up to five hours, Cannon confesses that the "secret weapons were a pressure cooker, some canned consommé and a package of gelatin" (57), as if to cook were to arm oneself for combat in the kitchen against a disbelieving purist. She serves it with "temerity," anticipating the backlash. The recipe is completed in a handful of lines: "place a 2-pound pot roast or brisket of beef into a pressure cooker along with an onion stuck with 2 cloves, 4 peppercorns, 2 stalks of celery. Cover with 2 cans of condensed consommé. Add 2 soup cans water, 1 package unflavored gelatin. Cook under pressure according to manufacturer's directions 20 minutes."

She shifts from Europe to middle-America throughout her cookbook, in one instance to share the "miracle" of a "Michigan Secret Pot Roast": it "takes only 3 minutes' time and attention" (40). The only detailed instruction is for how to fold the aluminum foil into a "snug package" around the roast, to which is added only a package of onion soup mix. Her experiment leads her to realize that a frozen pot roast could be put in the oven before

the work day so that women would return to find it “lusciously brown and tender, deliciously seasoned and moist...a concentrated glory!” (40). It is an experiment in a style that we might call absentee cooking, but its ease is irrefutably convincing.

While Child was detailing the manifold steps for making a homemade stock in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, which she referred to as a rarity in “the can-opener era,” Cannon was introducing the pressure cooker with its “acquired new status” for gourmets (152). Her fast stock, in contrast to Child’s long, slow stock, was the answer for women looking to spend minimal time in the kitchen. She explains that although many agree that “the basis of all fine cooking lies in a rich stock, the stock pot is long gone from the back of the range. There are, of course, excellent canned consommés, bouillons and broths, as well as cubes and dehydrated mixes that produce passable substitutes” (167).²¹⁶ Likewise, Child’s thirteen-page recipe with ten illustrations to achieve the art of the omelet cannot be compared with Cannon’s single paragraph on this same egg dish, which she refers to as “the fastest of all gourmet specialties” (182), “the original choice of the original ‘hurried epicure’” (*The New New*, 58). Cannon is less concerned with the proper motion, describing only a few very simple directives for moving the pan while stirring the eggs:

break 3 eggs into a bowl, add 1 tablespoon cold water, ¼ teaspoon salt, a dash of Tabasco...Beat until light and foamy. Heat omelet pan until a few drops of water dropped on the pan will dance about and disappear almost instantly. Add 1 tablespoon butter. Swirl it about. Pour in eggs. Move pan back and forth with your left hand while, with a fork in your right hand, you

²¹⁶ In her section on “Soups” in *The New New*, Cannon’s voice simulates an advertisement: “Today, canned soups are probably the most popular and among the finest of ready-to-serve foods...After years of sampling canned soups in all price ranges, it is a joy to be able to report that the most readily available popular-priced brands are usually the best soups. Since they are intended to appeal to millions of people, they cannot be distinctively seasoned. But this allows plenty of leeway for your imagination” (*The New New* 37). Compared to Child’s meticulously thorough, drawn-out soup directions, Cannon’s recipes include a *You Will Need* section (of mostly canned ingredients), followed by a few lines of cooking and *At Serving Time* instruction, all condensed in a matter of abbreviated time and space. (This is the basic template for all recipes in *The New New*.)

keep stirring with a circular motion, holding the flat part of the fork on the flat part of the pan. (183)

It is almost too mundane to cite, except perhaps for the part about drops of water dancing about in the pan, a poetic interjection that relieves the recipe from commonplace language.

Child's culinary purism completely clashed with Cannon's can-opener cooking (a comparison of the sheer size of their cookbooks reveals their polarizing approaches to food in the Sixties), though they may have been striving for similar end-goals: a language of food that could speak to the modern housewife; an art, as it were, of cooking. When Beard saw Cannon's NBC *Home* show cooking segment on vichyssoise, he was appalled that she assembled it with "frozen mashed potatoes, one leek sautéed in butter, and a cream of chicken soup from Campbell's"²¹⁷ Elsewhere, Child was laboriously peeling and slicing potatoes and leeks, making homemade stock, putting it all through a sieve, whipping cream, and decorating the finished product with chives. However, Cannon arrived on the scene at a time when her style of cooking was just as much needed as Child's, as an alternative that might fit the hurriedness and frenzy of a new Sixties lifestyle marked by redefined gender roles, family dynamics, and societal pressures.

Cannon proclaimed to be as indebted to and representational of classic cuisine as Child. Her "new way" of cooking was indeed derived of a "classical French" template. Addressing her target audience of Americans, Cannon begins her recipe for "Lamb Chops Villeroi" by assuming a shared appreciation for France: "To many Americans – like us – there is in Paris a feeling of 'coming home'" (119). Yet for all of the nostalgia and attention to French dishes, the shortcuts produce dishes that stray far from their French versions. She simply replaces homemade Bechamel sauce (a labor for Child) with a can of mushroom soup. She tweaks Toklas' "old and classic" French recipe for "Rack of Lamb Madeira" by adding

²¹⁷ Beard quoted in Shapiro, 4.

instant coffee and cinnamon. Inexpensive cuts of lamb get the aid of a meat tenderizer for a “modernized” “Half-Hour Ragout of Lamb,” which is accompanied with “an ultrafast version of a very old Southern delicacy – Peach Leather Strips,” a dish that typically takes a week to make, which she produces in just minutes (127). By highlighting her timesaving “wiles,” Cannon makes a case for the revision of old classics into new forms, though her recipes do not carefully guide, and taste is risked for being “ever on the lookout for ease and speed combined with elegance” (138), for “fast-as-fast” versions of classic dishes (171).

Her recipes in *The New New* are described (on the book-jacket) as the result of Cannon’s “life work of snooping amongst the dishes of great chefs all over the world,” and translating their secrets into “quick-to-do” can-opener recipes. Cannon must have snooped through Child’s dishes, yet their ideas of art diverge. For example, Child’s *objet d’art*, her French bread recipe, for which she used 284 lbs of flour, was composed over two whole years, and takes up twenty pages (including thirty-four drawings) in Volume II of *Mastering*. Cannon uses a mix. While Child presents sauces, “the splendor and glory of French cooking,” as having “nothing secret or mysterious” about them, her methods and variations are extensive in detail compared with Cannon’s “Sauces for a Gourmet In a Hurry,” which steer away from “long and demanding” recipes to artfully recreate them “as fast as Aladdin could rub a lamp.” Compare her recipe for “Mock Hollandaise Sauce” with Child’s. In *Mastering*, Child has an entire section devoted to “The Hollandaise Family,” spanning seven pages. Speed has no part in her detailed subsections on methods, remedies, and options for achieving “general mastery of the egg yolk” (79). Cannon’s version mocks “the lordly Hollandaise,” using prepared mayonnaise which “tastes and looks very good, but...is less expensive and far less hazardous” (147); there is hardly any instruction. Child’s soups are dramatic affairs compared to Cannon’s approach: “in a small and inexpensive can of

condensed soup it is possible to find almost the same concentration of flavor, the same blending of ingredients – all done for you!” (139). Where Child’s section on cooking equipment is comprehensive (for her, electrical appliances are worthy of suspicion and the mortar-and-pestle is indispensable), Cannon offers illustrations and descriptions of only one item, the can-opener, in her section “Parade of Openers” (290). She even throws “Can-Opener Parties.” It is the can-opener with which she envision a repertoire of recipes that appeal to terms of speed circulating a postwar rhetoric of consumption, across food and art.

A recipe for *pot au feu* is Cannon’s example of how “tradition has undergone a revolutionary change lately” because of the pressure cooker (207). Child’s recipe requires 5 hours, and includes four types of meat, four varieties of vegetables, a starch, two or three sauces, and homemade stock. Excess fat must be trimmed, each piece of meat must be tied, and her three-page recipe covers multiple steps.²¹⁸ How does the average housewife choose between this version of *pot au feu*, which Child is intending to simplify and make accessible, with Cannon’s adaptation, which takes a mere thirty minutes and only requires throwing six ingredients plus a can of consommé into a pressure cooker? As Pierre Bourdieu writes, consumption is “a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (2). Consumption legitimizes social differences, the social structures embodied in taste, proving that taste is the primary “practical affirmation” of inevitable difference (56). Do our standards of taste favor Child’s French style of cooking because it offers the most direct indication of high status, even though Cannon’s art of American canned food is as innovative? Who gets to define what makes good taste or bad taste, and is taste something with which to quarrel?

²¹⁸ *Mastering*, 306

Like Child in her TV cooking episodes, Cannon exhibited a cuisine of spectacle in her recipes, a sort of “screwball comedy” in which food was dramatic material. She insisted, “In the menu there should be a climax and a culmination.”²¹⁹ These theatrical elements were characteristic of her recipes, and added an element of play and pleasure. All have “flavor, drama, and enticement,” she writes.²²⁰ Yet often in the fast pace of action, her imitations of fine gourmet cuisine seem inattentive to good taste, and her dishes reflect the disasters of shortcut cooking, a tasteless hodgepodge made from not-cooking by mixing precooked, packaged, frozen, bottled, and canned ingredients. In a section on soups in *The New New*, her tempo reflects her belief that canned soup should be “served dramatically.” The drama comes through with drops of red coloring (for appearance), or the addition of various liqueurs (for “distinction”). Her recipe for “Flaming Onion Soup” is introduced as “one of the most dramatic first courses you can serve”; she instructs that “It should be served with theater” (51). Sometimes she fits three recipes on a single page so that they begin to resemble the products with which she works: condensed and packaged, easy and imperfect. Steak, “a dinner in the great American tradition with all-American accompaniments” (23), is also a spectacle, a patriotic dish given fireworks; for example, “Blazing Steak On A Plank”:

Highly dramatic is a steak on a plank! Even more stupendous when the board is borne in a blaze of bourbon into a dusk-dim dining room. In spite of its theatrical appearance and noble taste, a plank steak is no more difficult to prepare than just plain everyday broiled.²²¹

The piling alliteration of *b* and *d* augment the drama and read like verse. When Cannon refers to “theatrical appearance and noble taste” in the midst of plainness, this seems to be not only about the food but also about her writing (her art), and in this way, her image of herself.

²¹⁹ *Aromas*, xxvi.

²²⁰ *The New*, 268.

²²¹ *Fast Gourmet*, 23.

The home-cook must have as much dramatic flair as improvisational skill. The opening of her chapter on poultry, “Birds of Paradise To Eat,” is comical, if not troublesome:

Chicken poses a problem when you put a half-hour limit on cooking time. On first thought, a turkey or a duck seems impossible. But, as you will see from the following pages, The Fast Gourmet is not easily fazed. When all else fails, she turns with aplomb to the rotisserie and the corner delicatessen or the highway grill, where the barbecues keep turning. (61)²²²

We are reassured that buying pre-cooked poultry makes no difference to the dish; it’s all in the accompaniment.²²³ “No one need know of your time-saving ruses,” she writes; the store-bought is as real as the real (235). In a recipe for Chicken With Black Cherries, the chicken is picked up at a delicatessen, “aided, of course, by a can of black cherries, beef gravy, a jar of Hollandaise and some frozen cream puffs” (66). This recipe is made even more interesting by its opening fictional anecdote: “At four o’clock on a Monday afternoon, a certain young woman picked up the phone in her boss’s office. It was her husband.” Story-telling is the hook with which Cannon captures the attention of women looking for their own life-stories in food.

Narrative is used as a lure again in her recipe for “Flutterby” Shrimp:

Tall, blonde, brightly sophisticated designer Marti – more formally Mrs. Bruce Huber – is the mother of three. On any number of topics she bubbles with ideas. Her great specialty is at-home clothes for mothers and daughters.

Her recipes, like her clothes, are amazingly simple, serviceable, workable; yet all have more than a touch of glamour.

To serve when she wears her famous “Flutterby” gown or any of the new long cotton sheaths, she suggests this “Flutterby” menu...²²⁴

²²² Individual titles for recipes in this chapter are just as witty: “Arroz Volcano,” “Cornish on the Coals,” “Loyalist House Pot Pye.”

²²³ She makes a similar claim in the chapter, “The Many-Splendored Pig” in which she encourages store-bought pork items due to constraints of time: “Although fresh pork poses a problem, ready-cooked or canned hams, ham steaks or slices, sausages and bacon are a joy and a refuge” (131).

²²⁴ 100

In making this recipe, the home-cook may access the fantasy of becoming Marti. The direct correlation between food and fashion is obvious here, but Cannon seems also to point to her own work – cooking and writing – as “amazingly simple, serviceable, workable” and imbued with “glamour”; seeped in tradition yet modern, familiar yet trendy, ordinary while also artful. The recipe that follows is, by contrast, quite brief; while we learn that Marti is “tall” and “blonde,” and that her starter dish of “Piping Cheesies” is “especially appealing to men,” the shrimp recipe is minimal: “To serve 6, place 2 pounds of fresh or frozen shrimp in enough water to cover. Add 1 cup beer or a little more and cook for 3 minutes. Chill and serve with hot sauce (like *Tabasco*) or hot ketchup and lemon” (101). With this odd proportion of narrative and recipe, Cannon’s instruction is secondary to story.

The chapter on lamb, “Lambs’ Gambols,” almost reads like a collection of short stories. To gambol is to frolic, to leap playfully, and that describes Cannon’s approach to lamb. Here are the opening lines to a few of the recipes: “Vivid as a flamingo in her Balmain tweeds, pixie Paris columnist Naomi Barry flitted recently through the most-fun parties in New York (“Athenian Lamb Chops”); “The First Lady of the Ivory Coast is young, beautiful, slender and elegant” (“Foutout With Lamb”); “In the flare-lit garden of a friend who comes from Iran we recently had a supper that might have been served from gleaming salvers to ladies like Semiramis and noblemen with flashing scimitars” (“Persian Lamb”); “Warriors of old, so they tell us, impaled collops of meat on their swords and cooked them over their bivouac fires” (“Greek Lamb on Skewers”). Perhaps the most unusual recipe is the one for “Lady Latour’s Lamb Sauté,” which begins with a fairytale:

On Portland Point, a rocky finger of land that juts into the gray Atlantic, archeologists are digging to learn more about one of Canada’s heroines, Lady Latour. She was a tiny, blonde and beautiful French actress married to one of the First European Acadians – the dashing Lord Charles Latour who could

dance a noble minuet and as nimbly negotiate a treaty with the Indians or the courtiers of France and England! (116)

She goes on to tell the suspenseful story of her control of the fortress and her death from a broken heart, concluding that “her beauty, charm and courage are still remembered,” as are her recipes (117). Through the device of romantic storytelling, Cannon breaks the monotony of conventional recipe instruction and thus of everyday cooking for the typical housewife; in food is the hope for adventure. However, it is problematic that so many of Cannon’s recipes begin with female characters whose bodily traits are emphasized more than their recipes. Although she incites working-class women to imaginatively rethink their relationship to cooking, which is arguably feminist, she keeps them bound to traditional romance narratives.²²⁵

IV

Frank O’Hara’s Fast Food Love Lyrics

What is meant by food?

Popular reply: Food is everything that nourishes.

Scientific reply: Food is all those substances which, submitted to the action of the stomach, can be assimilated or changed into life by digestion, and can thus repair the losses which the human body suffers through the act of living.

– Brillat Savarin

Food is as much materialized emotion as love lyric, though both can also be a substitute for the genuine article.

– Terry Eagleton

Frank O’Hara’s claim to originality, like Cannon’s, was his poetics of the quick and the quotidian, with which he created a new form of modernist love lyric – the “lunch poem.”

The shift in how products and bodies were being propagated in mass culture is of particular

²²⁵ The illusion of working-class women attaining middle-class or even aristocratic status through cooking is one that Roland Barthes analyzes in *Mythologies*.

aesthetic concern in his poetry. In “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” O’Hara considers the range of the poem:

It’s so
original, hydrogenic, anthropomorphic, fiscal, post-anti-esthetic,
bland, unpicturesque and WilliamCarlosWilliamsian!
it’s definitely not 19th Century, it’s not even Partisan Review, it’s
new, it must be vanguard!

Although he mocks the pretentiousness of vanguardism, there is a self-conscious understanding of his own place within the avant-garde, where concepts of *original* and *new* remain interdependent. We can almost hear this as an echo of Cannon, who wrote that her greatest honor was “to achieve imaginative *originality*...to do everything a *new* way” (*Aromas* xviii, my italics).

“Today,” one of his many self-reflexive poems about poetry, directly addresses everyday “stuff” as the essential material subject and structure of a poem:

Oh! Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
the stuff they’ve always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They’re strong as rocks.

Daily things, and the words that embody them (words *as* things), “do have meaning,” O’Hara affirms, though they are ephemeral. O’Hara’s poem, which reads like a recipe, is made of them, contains them, and in doing so, surprises. Commonplace objects, according to O’Hara, are “beautiful” and “strong,” and their placement in a poem reveals their aesthetic value, even though language may only be, in the Warholian sense, a copy of the real. While O’Hara is aware of “the rhetorical function of the poetic image,” as John Lowney argues in “The ‘Post-Anti-Esthetic’ Poetics of Frank O’Hara,” here words, like the objects

they signify, seem to belong to the realm of the literal, physical everyday of fast culture. As O'Hara said about poetry: "It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial" (Allen). This relationship is at the center of his work.

This same element of surprise as a requisite of poetry is acknowledged in another poem, entitled "Poetry":

The only way to be quiet
is to be quick, so I scare
you clumsily, or surprise
you with a stab.

Like Cannon's cooking, O'Hara's poetry is fast-paced, instantaneous, and dramatic. Desire is caught up in the shock-value of speed: "All this I desire. To / deepen you by my quickness." The quick poem is new, a "product of [his] own time." Throughout O'Hara's poetry, we can trace how everyday stuff, which materializes in the instant of the poet's encounter of it with real-time quickness and spontaneity, "makes a poem a surprise"; the poet's surprise is the reader's. And this shock, which Peter Burger and Susan Buck-Morss have discussed as a central tactic of the avant-garde, is what enlivens the imagination, as well as the state of poetry. O'Hara's "occasional poems" tend to arise out of "ordinary incidents" and private intimacies rather than public events or "the important utterance" (Perloff 147). His conversational style of "I do this I do that poems" keeps us closely invested in the dramatic unfolding of the fast-paced, local present, and even emulates the instructive form of recipe with lyrical immediacy. His cavalier, hurried movement, contained in the poem as a clutter of commodities encountered, is embodied by his long yet fast lines. The page, like the canvases and kitchens of the era was for O'Hara what Rosenberg called an "arena in which to act"; an arena in which to taste.

*

Painterly Poetics

Though O'Hara is known for being at the center of The New York School, the broader heading for abstract expressionists and other vanguards working across the arts in the midcentury, I consider his poetry within the simultaneous context of pop art, even if he would have protested this affiliation; his work falls somewhere in the middle of these movements. It is perhaps important to at least cursorily clarify their differences. While both genres break from stylistic and thematic conventions, the abstract expressionists practiced automatism, an intentional form of creativity welling from the unconscious, an approach emphasizing process over product (the *objet d'art*). Their "action" paintings could be described as the gestural expression of emotions driven by the immediacy of the moment, by the lyrical instant of observation and personal experience meeting the physical material of paint. In "The American Action Painters" (1952), Harold Rosenberg defines the canvas for the abstract expressionist as an "arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined." In his designation, the painting is an action, an event, not a surface for its medium, which was the opposing view of Clement Greenberg, who argued for a more formalist understanding of the abstract expressionist painting as a form referring back to its medium (shape, color, line).²²⁶ Although artworks from this movement ranged in style, and were not always easily categorizable or even visibly related, certain aspects united them, including a certain existentialist tension, or postwar disquiet, as well as a pronounced cosmopolitanism. Though the abstract expressionists relocated the art scene to New York (from Paris), becoming the first American avant-garde visual art to gain international status, labeled as the fine (high) art of

²²⁶ "American-Type Painting" (1955) in *Art & Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961/1989.

its time, they rejected pretention and did not hold to notions of the grandiose, favoring instead an expression of the intimate and local, with an occasional dose of humor or irony undermining their darker attention to components of the human condition. As Mark Rothko once said about the scale of his paintings, “I paint big to be intimate.” Referring to abstract expressionism as the “Modern Art” of the postwar era, Rosenberg writes that it “represents a revolution of taste,” as it breaks from conventional forms. O’Hara’s “action” poems and Cannon’s “action” recipes share this ethos, shifting our focus to the automatic method (the “process art”) of making new forms to mirror “the swift New York tempo.”

The materiality at the core of these actions, whether in medium or subject, is so distinctly linked to the postwar rise of consumer culture and the emergence of pop art, that we cannot but consider the work of O’Hara and Cannon within this framework, too, in particular regard to the commercial methods with which the poem, like the recipe, was made. Pop art returned Americans to the thingness of the everyday. It was a rebellion against high cultural discriminations of taste and elitist art. The things constituting an O’Hara lunch poem were the commodities visibly encountered in the city streets, a set of distinct signs absorbed by the walking body. By incorporating these products into poetic verse, thereby aesthetically consuming them, he redefined what it meant to taste during an era marked by “the collapse of an informed and critically independent public into an unstructured, amorphous and largely apathetic mass” (Mennell 317). By the time individual taste had become homogenized, rendered powerless by the media (in this case controlled by the food industry), pop art intervened to bring into play as well as critique a ubiquitous fascination with objects, transforming them into aesthetic fodder, and in doing so, changing how we consumed art.

O'Hara addresses the relation of his work to visual art, and painterly tensions in his poetry in "Why I Am Not a Painter." Though he claims to demarcate the difference of images and words, he comes to understand their sameness. The poem begins, "I am not a painter, I am a poet," and goes on to negotiate the concept of an object as a visual as well as linguistic sign. Though the painting created by his friend (Mike) originates from a word (sardines), O'Hara's poem depends on an image (oranges), which makes their creative processes not dissimilar, rather, inversely aligned. O'Hara matter-of-factly delineates this act of inventiveness, as if it is routine:

One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life.

In the end, the painting and the poem, through different mediums, contain the fluctuating modes of abstraction and representation with which everyday "stuff," through habitual encounter, becomes aesthetic. At the core of this poem's dialogue is its embodiment of the competing contemporaneous influences of Abstract Expressionism (painterly spontaneity) and Pop Art (the iconography of mass-produced food) in O'Hara's work, which are not so opposed. As Ira Sadoff argues, "O'Hara's Modernism and his connection with abstract expressionist painters and pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein...gave him license to translate painterly problems into poetry."²²⁷ What is perhaps more interesting about this poem is that it is a form of recipe: a recipe for composing a painting or a poem, a recipe for how to assemble, taste, or consume the object (food, art). The poem builds like a recipe as it

²²⁷ Ira Sadoff, "Frank O'Hara's Intimate Fictions"

describes the act of concocting a poem, first with color, then a line, then a page of words, another page, until the final product is twelve poems.

*

Poems for a Postwar Palate

O'Hara's sense of taste comes up more than once in Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*. He had an "innate taste" in art, she writes. His aesthetics, according to Thomas Byrom, were "a matter of excellent personal taste." And Herbert Leibowitz called O'Hara "an aesthetic courtier who had taste" (Perloff). O'Hara's poetry is also described as "very much the record of a *man of taste*" (Ross). While his prominence in the art world as curator of the MOMA and his social repute among New York literati may point to a refined palate, it is his discriminatory lens on everyday things – his taste for fast food – that is dramatized in *Lunch Poems*. O'Hara's quick style has been described by Byrom and other critics as code for *queer*: his "casualness, quickness, openness were what he wanted and often got" (Perloff).²²⁸ In his review in *Parnassus*, Thomas Meyer similarly highlights "the light, quick, casual though deft gesture."²²⁹ In his view, O'Hara's style is "camp, best exemplified by the urban, loose, and high-living male homosexual...chi-chi, dizzy, piss elegant, and faggoty."²³⁰ He gives credit to O'Hara's admission in writing of difficult emotional states marked by the hurriedness of modern life, but also by his specific sexuality (or sexualization of the urban consumption): "breathlessness, excitement, anticipation and

²²⁸ It should be noted that although O'Hara (in real life and through his poem's speaker) is free to amble the streets with limitless choices, he is expressively a queer body seeking to consume objects that might fulfill specifically queer desire, and is in this way a social outsider, alienated from the market. This paper will not thoroughly address the queering of taste that manifests in his work, but it is imperative to acknowledge that his sense of taste is operating from a queer sensibility.

²²⁹ He argues that this style is "opposite of all that is authentic, expressive, and profound."

²³⁰ And Ross defines O'Hara's "camp" as the "heavily coded speech repertoires and intonations of gay vernacular, which the attentive reader can find everywhere." He argues that "In the prepolitical climate of O'Hara's day...survivalism found expression in the highly ironized flamboyance of the camp ethic." This is similar to what Perloff identifies as the "comic pathos" so characteristic of his gay sensibility (xix).

expectation.” These descriptors are especially important to a discussion of O’Hara’s work as it straddles the high art discourses and the popular culture of his particular moment: casual, quick, open, light, loose – words denoting queerness, but which we would readily use in reference to Cannon’s recipes, and which are in synch with values disseminated in industry advertising campaigns. In this way, we cannot read the brazen and excessive appetite of *Lunch Poems* without a consideration of the cohesive lyric subjectivity to which it belongs, as both queer and collective.

If “small insufferable things become culinary” in an O’Hara poem, then we might consider how culinary things become signs of the insufferable realities of life specific to postwar New York, particularly from a queer perspective. As O’Hara writes in one of the later poems in his collection,

...I am a real human being with real ascendancies
and a certain amount of rapture what do you
do with a kid
like me if you don’t eat me I’ll have to eat myself
it’s a strange curse my “generation” has we’re all
...perpetually
ardent²³¹

These lines candidly expose some of the innermost tensions throughout O’Hara’s lunch poems, which revolve around the real as well as the imagined experience of desire, articulated through the language of consumption. This idea emerges especially in “[Melancholy Breakfast],” a poem written in collaboration with Larry Rivers, O’Hara’s lover, for a collection of lithographs entitled *Stones* (1958). The images upon which the poem is built are those of breakfast (egg, toaster) personified with human actions: “the silent egg thinks / and the toaster’s electrical / ear waits.” The thinking and waiting of inanimate objects structure the poem’s human melancholy, which comes through in the admission of

²³¹ “For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson,” *Lunch Poems*.

the final line: “the elements of disbelief are very strong in the morning.” The cause of melancholy, this supposed disbelief, is composed of *elements* signified by food objects, and the event of breakfast is itself associated with melancholia. However, food as it appears in many of O’Hara’s lunch poems is the opposite: a mode of diversion, play, humor, and pleasure, as if to suggest that if the “insufferable” may be locatable in everyday instances of taste, so may resiliency.

In an O’Hara poem, a speaker’s want to be eaten, and to eat, is often synonymous with the desire for contact, intimacy, joy. Food is a code, as in another poem in which he addresses an encounter with his lover as an act of eating: “you tasted wonderful,” he writes (“Variations on Saturday”). The body that yearns to eat may be read as the body that seeks to love or be loved, to touch via taste, in such a way that thinking about food encodes (or translates) sexual (queer) desire. Even so, for as “real” and empowered as he seems in his appetite for love, he acknowledges the isolationism at the center of postwar human relations; he is representative, a solo wanderer among things. The heart is a predominant trope throughout *Lunch Poems*. In “Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir, the heart is “unhabitual,” and “one’s heart is torn.” Love, and the necessity for it, compels him. In “How to Get There, he imagines this disappointment: “never to be alone again / never to be loved,” in a direct address to New York City, but also to an absentee or imagined beloved. In this love affair he treats the city as a living person. His style, a casual unattached movement in language through space, keeps him from lingering for too long on such “insufferable” thoughts, and is his aesthetic resistance to the idea that the necessity of love (as of food) is absolute. Furthermore, love and suffering function as one pair of many opposites (or tensions) circulating the collection. O’Hara writes in “St Paul And All That,” “I am alive with you / full of anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxiety / hardness and softness.” Anxiety and

pleasure have equal footing in this dichotomy, they are neither reconciled nor negated yet take up presence in their contrariness; they are the “surprise” of the O’Hara poem. They do precisely what Charles Altieri notes: “demystif[y] views of both the reconciliation of opposites and the poetic image.”²³²

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While many critics following Helen Vendler have considered O’Hara’s poetry as it merges the mundane and the meaningful, the low and the high, none have attended specifically to the role of food as material and aesthetic in his work. Food is at the foreground of *Lunch Poems*, even if only because these are poems O’Hara wrote during his lunch break while walking around New York City. While food is noticeably absent from the lunching that occurs in these poems, *Lunch Poems* as a whole embodies the conditions of consumption, recovering the sensory world of detail through the lens of a person who tastes. But food is also the “stuff” of which the poem is made: matter of the quick, habitual, easy, reproducible, the poem is a performance in consumption. Eating is action and spectacle. O’Hara’s poems, in this way, stylistically mirror Cannon’s approach to cooking: they are playful, spontaneous, idiomatic, yet indebted to classical forms, especially as they break from them. His poem is made of the instant, which has its own aesthetic occasionality, yet it is, like Cannon’s recipe, part of a narrative of necessity, in which hunger is translated as (queer) desire. Because of their shared postwar sensibility, we can trace how subject matter (the depiction of food objects) shapes and is shaped by the formal aspects of their respective art forms (the structural assemblage of material “stuff”); the poem that communicates eating, like the recipe that employs poetics, linguistically exudes the instantaneity and fastness touted in the rhetoric of U.S. nationalism.

²³² Charles Altieri, 99?

For O'Hara, consumption occurs in the daily act of walking during his lunch hour in New York City. The city is mappable yet fictive, a living organism yet mythic; at times a backdrop, at other times a distinct personality which he directly addresses. There is a geographic and linguistic symmetry to his style. The topography of the cityscape is a mirror to the emotional terrain of the lyric subject, one in which swings of anxiety, loss, and desire prevail. He may be publicly exposed, just as the poem is a record of surfaces, but we are granted inside access by way of the materiality of things; an inescapable interiority. The walk fills a time otherwise reserved for eating lunch, and instead of inviting us as voyeurs to his meal, we witness his walk, which becomes his mode of eating, his ingestion of the urban. The foods that he craves, remembers, or encounters during his walk collectively form not only a portrait of Manhattan, but of a postwar pathos, circulating in the text in a way that echoes their material presence in real time. Foods in O'Hara's poems, such as cheeseburgers, liver sausage sandwiches, fig-newtons, and blintzes, have many uses: they provide a sense of the transforming national diet which is actively being shaped by food industry advertising campaigns and propagandist branding efforts (*Coca-Cola*), and they expose the growing presence of immigrants in the city (*chorizos*). They also indicate his movement through and knowledge of other cultures. In "A Little Travel Diary," O'Hara's poet-speaker is "wending" his way through "the gambas, angulas, / the merluzas that taste like the Sea Post on Sunday / and the great quantities of huevos." Food is his contact with otherness, even his own. *Lunch Poems*, a New York text, a picture of middle-class food culture in the Fifties, is also a record of many of the features that O'Hara left to American poetry. By inserting the pastoral genre into an urban setting, conjuring a traceable romantic tradition of lyric, and animating the vernacular within the modernist lyric, O'Hara constructed a new aesthetic form.

which activates the imagination: his “door is open” to the external scene, doors “stay open terribly late” for him, and the world of the poem is open to us. Taste, in this structure, enables contact with the world around him; it literally commences intimacy. Though Perloff considers this instance as one of suspended animation – a pause would seem to imply stasis – the action guiding the poet-speaker’s observations and reveries is eating. His lunch is a liver sausage sandwich, worth forty cents from The Mayflower Coffee Shoppe, a doughnut diner. It is characteristic of O’Hara’s poetry that something so mundane appears next to something so grandiose – August Saint-Gaudens’ gilded-bronze statue of the war hero general William Tecumseh Sherman, “The Equestrian,” located at the center of Grand Army Plaza (59th Street and Fifth Avenue) – that these things, sandwich and statue, are consumed simultaneously or sequentially.

If there is surprise in an O’Hara poem, it comes from the symbiotic presence of high and low objects of culture. The allegorical angel leading Sherman to peace is, in the speaker’s reading, pointing him directly to the Bergdorf Goodman luxury department store, a symbol of lavishly exclusive high fashion.²³⁴ What is striking is how fluidly O’Hara pulls together ordinary objects with broader human circumstances. For example, he is emotionally raw (“naked as a table cloth,” his “nerves humming”), “close to the fear of war,” isolated (under a starless sky), and trapped within a “season / of distress and clarity,” but eating is a diversion and form of escape, his stay against the shifting, mystifying modern cityscape. Only when he stops to eat does he become aware of the immediacy and openness of things: sound images, the quickness of time, the rapidity with which things change. Yet we never witness him actually eating – his is a disembodied private eating – so we might wonder if what he does eat has any symbolic value (Perloff). That there is all of this grandeur while consuming

²³⁴ This store appeared in many popular films of the Fifties, and in this way O’Hara’s poem joins the art of his time in its use of popular culture.

a German sandwich, how can we not read the irony connecting the origin of this sandwich and the fear or trauma of war? Here, O'Hara makes a mockery out of the surrounding excessiveness by locating the poem in the event of the personal local. Perhaps it is only the imagination in O'Hara's poem that creates movement, but it is enough to activate us as readers.

If the liver sausage sandwich is a literal object within a seemingly concrete setting, what do we make of the unreal or surreal images ("lavender lips," "daydreams walking by with dogs in / blankets") that form the comic fantasy of the poem, in which the mundane is modulated into the fanciful. As Perloff argues, "it is all potential, conditional, projected into a possible future."²³⁵ The poem stylistically creates this sense, with non-sequiturs, illogical appositives, incomplete clauses, and "syntactic dislocations." We are paused with the speaker, yet present participles pile up within long lines of verse containing wordplay that in effect animates the present. The poem becomes the music of the city, the music of making contact via taste, and reads like a new form precisely because of how it reproduces the effects of other art forms. As the poem's title suggests, it is about, or rather of, music, a "melodic graph of the poet's perceptions," an experience in which nerves hum, water sprays sound like piano hammers, the season sounds like a locomotive, and the afternoon is described as a trumpet.²³⁶ Yet O'Hara also "adapt[s] the techniques of film and action painting to a verbal medium," as Perloff argues, framing the poem "as a series of cuts and dissolves, whether spatial, temporal, or referential."²³⁷ If we are, at the outset of the poem, engaged in the literal taste of lunch, we are, by the end, experiencing the aesthetic dimensionality of the poem as an object that opens the possibility for new tastes.

²³⁵ *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 123.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

The most direct commentary on food appears early in the poem, when the poet-speaker, having only twenty-five cents in his hand, emphatically declares, “it’s so meaningless to eat!” We can read this in relation to his preceding reference to “the fear of war”; he seems to be saying, in this sense, that the entity of war would make even something as necessary as eating unnecessary, meaningless. Or we could take his comment literally, in which case he must convince himself (and does so jokingly, even ironically) that with so little money to buy food, there is no use (meaningfulness) in eating. This is similar to a line in “Five Poems,” in which the speaker, in typical comic high drama of O’Hara’s style, derisively says, “an invitation to lunch / HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT? / when I only have 16 cents and 2 / packages of yoghurt.”

Though the present tense of the poem is a place situated between seasons, time is rapidly shifting from the perspective of the speaker. As with many of the lunch poems, O’Hara’s “I” in “Music” is familiar yet omnipresent, opens an intimate conversation with an addressee (the “you”), who is a composite of beings: lover, city, universe, reader. If eating is “meaningless,” it is also the action upon which the poem’s meaning is built; food is an instance of personal nourishment, but also a metaphorical matter of human meaningfulness. O’Hara’s poems remind us that meaning may be derived from habitual acts, and a book of poems built directly out of the mundane experience of lunching contains its own question of (or answer to) meaning. The tender imperative of “Music” seems to be spoken by the poem to the reader, an urgent invitation to taste, to make contact: “Clasp me in your handkerchief like a tear, trumpet of early afternoon!”

*

“It’s my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk,” begins the poet-speaker of “A Step Away From Them,” who might just as well be broadcasting, *It’s my lunch hour, so I write a poem*.²³⁸ In a single act, the mundane and poetic are fused. The poem causally unfolds from the promise of lunch, a daily habit. Although there is nothing easy about this poem’s subject, its ease is implied in the form of the speaker’s routine movement through (and consumption of) the world: its streets, things, and words. Written a day after Jackson Pollock’s funeral, the rhetorical walk is prompted by lunch (as nourishment) and death (as dissolution), as the speaker moves between restorative and destructive states. The evanescence of the moment, whether marked by vitality or loss, is what keeps him always “a step away,” in the sense that his own death looms, though his immersion in the material daily life of the street (cabs, grates, cats) keeps him in attendance to the living, therefore distantly “a step away” from death. Through classic O’Hara enjambments, lines stylistically embody this sense of suspension. The public dimension of private taste is documented as he walks downtown from MOMA to Times Square, which is a particular form of contact with the world of immediate objects. Displays of real vulnerability and comic performance remain in flux. Taste, the poem tells us, is shaped by the external world yet individually conceived; a means of social connection while also deeply personal.

Eating, or more specifically lunch, is the action of the poem which is contrary to dying, even though we never actually see either happen; we simply are reminded that “one has eaten,” as nonchalantly as we are told one has died. The first visual image of his walk comes when the speaker encounters construction workers who “feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola.” Rather than write of these “laborers” eating their lunch, O’Hara describes them as feeding their torsos; the expression *to feed* implies a more

²³⁸ The poem was supposedly written on the spot and never altered.

instinctual physical act, suggestive of necessity and subsistence. While the speaker feasts on the city's visual and sound images, these "laborers" attain nourishment through the actual means of food; they are part of the machine of the city yet separate from him. O'Hara uses synecdoche here in a way that sexualizes them – they are specifically feeding their torsos, the area where digestion occurs. In voyeuristically watching them feed, O'Hara eroticizes their hunger as "other," and in doing so exposes his own. Moreover, their torsos are described as "dirty" and "glistening"; both their grime and radiance are sexually suggestive, dual aspects of the male body that in the speaker's mind hold mystery and beauty. He moves quickly from the sight of their torsos to their yellow helmets, making the banal conjecture that "they protect them from falling bricks," before turning onto the avenue where another filmic image is erotically conceived: "skirts are flipping / above heels and blow up." Through stream-of-consciousness, the poem constructs the general heat of the day to seem full of lust. Verbs abound, though often in passive form, creating an overall erotic energy to the language of the poem: feed, flip, blow, stir, play, pour, click, rub. The "Negro" who appears in the doorway, "languorously agitating," an image suggesting the contained tension of both listlessness and excitement, is continuous with the sexualized laborers. That he has a toothpick implies he has just eaten. It would seem that all of the figures of the poem are in some way bound and connected by the event of lunch, a mundane midday pause that is observed as attentively as death.

Food comes up again just after the poet-speaker considers the "great pleasure" of abundant and redundant light ("neon in daylight," "light bulbs in daylight"), in contrast to the darker reality of imminent death. This notion of pleasure leads him to eat. He stops for a cheeseburger and chocolate malted at Juliet's Corner, a diner. But the ordinariness of the moment is never very far from its counterpart, surprise, and O'Hara's poem combines

otherwise mismatched things, imbuing the everyday with wonder, and translating the artful into the commonplace. We move seamlessly with the speaker's instantaneous association between this local place name, Juliet's, to the foreign celebrity name of Giulietta, "è bell'attrice." The routine of an all-American lunch, told in simple narrative terms, is not disrupted by the sudden inclusion of exotic Italian words; rather, the mundaneness of lunch leads to the fantasy of Giulietta. Likewise, the "lady in foxes" getting into a cab with her poodle (a symbol of upper-class wealth) is a part of the scene of Puerto Ricans lingering on the avenue; O'Hara does not hierarchize either image. The local and the foreign, as well as the real and the imagined, get conflated in the single moment of the poem, as ordinary objects and figures of urban Americana are aestheticized.

The only time that O'Hara interrupts the fast flow of things he sees occurs in an instant of interiority after we learn his three friends have died, a fact he divulges with equal significance to all of the other objects he mentions; he asks, "But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?" And without pause, he plainly states, "And one has eaten and one walks." Diminishing his own somber grasp for meaning and perhaps self-consciously aware of its risk of sentimentalism, O'Hara moves from an existential question about life's meaning to a matter-of-fact report that lunch was eaten, with the illogical conjunction "and," as if it were an answer of some sort; as if habit (eating, specifically) were the way to create bodily presence or fullness.

The poem closes with a final image of a glass of papaya juice. Not unlike the burger, exotic fruit juices (imported by Puerto Rican immigrants) were a popular commodity in the Fifties; but unlike the burger, they represented the ingestion of something foreign rather than American. After the speaker has pondered not only the death of his friends, but the impending destruction of the Manhattan Storage Warehouse (a space for art), the poem rests

on this literal glass of juice to be consumed. Yet the body that consumes is disembodied, for he describes in the last line that his heart is in his pocket – it is “Poems by Pierre Reverdy.” The juice may be inside of him, but his own heart is outside of him. An object of necessity, the heart becomes a metaphor for aesthetic, or rather, poetry is the object of necessity. The juice and the heart and the book of poems are equal matters of need and aesthetic. And O’Hara’s poem, combining cultural vernacular and artifice, becomes an object in the pocket of the reader-consumer. If, as Perloff argues, O’Hara’s poem is “a construction of the postwar moment,” it is one in which the act and art of consumption is a certain being-aliveness, an affirmation of pleasure in a time of anxiety and loss.²³⁹ Yet it is important to query how fast food and the poem similarly seem to skitter away from experience in a way: O’Hara’s friends died and lunch was eaten; Cannon makes food that tastes (or at least looks) just fine. Both are *stepping away* from the intimacy of tasting, moving too fast to register the sensation or emotion.

*

While “The Day Lady Died” has been analyzed as an elegiac, musical, painterly, consumerist, and queer text, it is also a poem about taste. Real taste. The taste for things is comprehensive: we assume that Patsy must have a taste for Verlaine, Mike must have a taste for Strega, and the discriminating poet-speaker must have an intuitive sense of the taste of others in order to buy these objects, plus a fastidious taste of his own for things as various as hamburgers, Genet, Gauloises, and the music of Billie Holiday. To have a taste for things is to discriminate, and much of *Lunch Poems* is a catalogue of what the poet-consumer likes or doesn’t like, a set of preferences often built on opposites, on the stuff of high and low. Even

²³⁹ *Poetry On and Off the Page*, 98.

the poet is not impervious to consumerism; instead, it is his source of quandariness, though he may seem, from his tone, to exert control.

The poem itself mirrors the abundance of cultural goods (circulating as commodities) and their overindulgence in the Fifties and Sixties. An ordinary day is inundated with seductive ads and signs for the walker moving through the city and for the reader moving through the poem; the all-caps lettering turns words into signs, and we experience, alongside the poet-consumer, the daily interface of desire and consumption as excessive. Yet O'Hara's taste for everyday things is not exactly an explicit expression of his power, though the art of discriminating may be subversively empowering in terms of status, for as Ross argues, "their value is linked to how people use them to make sense of their world," implying an idea of taste as survival. Taste is O'Hara's mode of physical contact and intimacy with the external world, a more private rather than socially authoritative gesture, a way for him to make meaning. If he is a discriminate shopper, this is part of his clever play on taste; his quandary is not so real or serious.

Like Warhol's Campbell's soup can paintings, O'Hara's poems contain what Perloff calls a "flat literalism"; the commercial object and the art object are surfaces without dimensionality, at least at first glance. Yet all sense of flatness is transformed by O'Hara's aesthetic assemblage of these seemingly disparate things into the dimensional and dynamic space of the poem, where realism and artifice are at times indistinguishable. Moreover, the specificity of ordinary objects as they constitute a scene of desire tells us much about the necessity for art (poem-making) as nourishment. In fact, the central question of the poem, though it is (or perhaps because it is) so plainly embedded in proper names, numerical references, and allusions to places, hinges on eating: "I don't know the people who will feed me," the poet-speaker admits, referring to his upcoming dinner but also to his foray into the

city via walking. The proximity – and enjambment – of “feed” and “walk” suggests reciprocity; he walks in order to be fed. Yet the poem is a documentary reel of the day in which he came across the news of Holiday’s death after seeing her face on the New York Post, and tells of it retrospectively in the present tense, as if this loss (both personal and collective) could be filled with the very memory of mundane things; as if death were not a disruption of everyday life, and life continued merely through the act of lunch. If the poem is constructed out of the anxiety of not knowing who will feed him, it is important to remember that this is a rhetorical question of privilege, asked during a shoeshine from, presumably, a black boy for whom the same question is real and troubling. Ross considers how “references to postcolonial “Negritude” – Genet’s *Les Nègres* and those “poets in Ghana” – have indirectly, perhaps even unconsciously, prepared the reader for the final confrontation with American ‘negritude,’” itself a concept to be consumed. The things that appeal to the consumer-poet’s taste are racially selective, in so far as they represent a trend among white intellectuals of the ways in which black culture at this time (through jazz idolatry, for example) was being consumed (Ross).

Though the speaker primarily consumes the urban stuff of everyday-life (magazines, poems, newspapers, liquor, cigarettes), he also eats literal food – a hamburger and a malted, the same lunch as in “A Step Away from Them.” The hamburger and the poetry from Ghana appear in this instance as parallel objects for consumption that divert from the poem’s central weight of loss. It is worth noting that many of the foods that constitute O’Hara’s poems are those in paintings by his pop art contemporaries.²⁴⁰ In a Warholian sense, O’Hara’s poem is pop because it negates the category of taste as a link to status. Yet

²⁴⁰ Lichtenstein’s “Sandwich and Soda,” “Mustard on White,” “Hot Dog,” and “Meat”; Wayne Thiebaud’s 1965 “Four Sandwiches” or “Five Hot Dogs” (1951); and especially Warhol’s “Hamburger.”

O'Hara's poem also draws from the devices of Modernism; it is a *bricolage* of the experienced world, a recovery of the past through the epiphanic moment.

In the end, there is no market value to the poet-consumer's final experience of Holiday's live performance, the music of which leads him to bodily transformation: he is "sweating a lot," "leaning" against a door, and breathless. He is alive even in the confrontation with death. The poem maps O'Hara's process of arriving at the news of Holiday's death. The momentousness of death is made of the trivial. The speed at which the poem's arresting closure happens is created stylistically: through syntactic dislocations and paratactic chaos (the pile-up of "and"s), the sequentiality of surface detail, and the absence of punctuation. Death is not immune to the culture of consumption, and enters the speaker's body in much the same way that food does, fast. The poem mirrors this process, moving quickly until the final stop, leaving even the reader without breath. Yet Holiday's music, like O'Hara's poem, attests to the continuation of the living, to the power of aesthetic to lift us from the ordinariness of habit; to art as a private and collective necessity, a pause from an otherwise fast world. If O'Hara's is "a new poetry in the making" (Perloff 183), it is definably materialist love poetry – addressed to the city, to Holiday, to a lover – that asks us to read in a new way, to have a taste for the low as well as the high, and to recognize the poem itself as a pause constituted by (and constituent of) the fast world; the moments of awareness it enables are those that arise *via* the fast world.

V

Although O'Hara's "glamorous hyper-sophistication" and unconcealed self-consciousness are at times apparent in his poems, he writes poetry of and in the instant,

without pretention, without care of the art world critics with whom he spent time (Ford xii). In fact, in his talk at the Club, an artists' forum on East 8th Street, in 1952, he criticized poets following the "deadening and obscuring and precious effect" of T.S. Eliot (Ford xii). O'Hara was interested in writing a new form of poetry, and deliberately experimented with this aim, yet he was not striving to follow the high tradition of English poets to do so, just as Cannon was digressing from the snobbery of Child's French tradition; rather, he aligned himself with the vernacular poetry of Williams, and even with the plainspeak of Stein, as Cannon allied with popular advertising. Newness, originality, surprise – these were aspects that came from his attention to the everyday, to fast food culture. The result was a collection of highly digestible rather than obscure (dispeptic) poems. O'Hara was invested in poems as products of a specific junction of time and place – like Cannon was in recipes – where randomness and intimacy could collide. But the poem, like the Fifties recipe, was itself a piece of time, an object that the reader, like the cook, had to give time to, during an era when quickness was the trend. By creating new genres of food and poem, O'Hara and Cannon transform urban consumer and food culture aesthetically and linguistically. Everyday food is made of cosmopolitan matter, high art is composed of the gastronomic quotidian, yet somewhere at their intersection is the nourishment, pleasure, and meaningfulness Americans were seeking, even though O'Hara ironically interjects in "Music," "it's so meaningless to eat!"

We learn from Perloff that O'Hara "used to keep a typewriter on the table in the kitchen, and he would type away, make poems all the time, when company was there and when it wasn't, when he was eating, all kinds of times."²⁴¹ The kitchen, as a micro-milieu of the larger city, must have been a stimulating site for language; here is where real life and poetry blur for O'Hara, who is described as eating while he typed lines of poetry. Mark Ford

²⁴¹ *Poet Among Painters*, 115.

tells a similar story of how “James Schuyler, who shared an apartment with O’Hara in the mid-Fifties, recalled one morning when he and Joe La Sueur began to tease O’Hara about his ability to compose at speed and on demand,” after which O’Hara instantly wrote the poem “Sleeping on the Wing,” which asks the question: “Is there speed enough?” (Ford xvi). Ford identifies this question as one that “reverberates throughout O’Hara’s oeuvre”; and it is also one that, as we have seen, resounds through Cannon’s recipe collection. It is something we hear the Futurists ask in their cuisine and art. It is the question at the heart of postwar culture, as ideas of the automatic and immediate define the production and consumption of products ranging from recipes to poems to artworks. As O’Hara writes in that same poem, referring to himself the poet, “you are a sculptor dreaming of space / and speed.”

The culinary and literary are part of a shared aesthetic apparatus that continues to produce future eating cultures, and through which the effects of consumerism on a national and global scale may be realized. Drastic changes to the American foodscape that occurred in the Fifties and Sixties, and which reverberate in the work of Cannon and O’Hara, are still being felt into the twenty-first century, as Americans deliberately revert back to a taste for pre-war agricultural and culinary principles. A vocabulary of wholesome rather than manufactured living prevails in terms such as local, raw, natural, organic, sustainable, slow. In reaction to a *fast* era, Americans have entered an intentional *slow* era. The formation of initiatives and countercultural food movements such as *Slow Food* are evidence of a burgeoning taste for slow things, slow processes, and slow intake. Many of the innovative (though destructive) technologies of the post-war continue to propel us into a new artistically-driven science – and art – of food that intends to rescue a sensory-deprived culture by returning us to a more conscious experience of eating as it occurs through practices of avant-garde art. O’Hara’s poem, even in its fastness, is an answer to its

meditation on death, and although death is not thematic to Cannon's cookbook, its offering of recipes helps to sustain life. The cookbook, like the poem, is a medium generative of pleasure. The poem, like food, is sustenance, or at least a recipe for such. Beyond economic, political, and environmental discourses of food as a necessity, which I do not take for granted, it is ultimately the aesthetic experience and communication of pleasure that food enables. Perhaps this is likewise the necessity of art, though it occupies the aesthetic realm – to reflect on our embodied humanity (which is not impervious to global inequalities created by food systems) – and food is a reflexive matter with which it does so. In the next chapter I focus on a new semiotics of food, examining supermarket poetics and postmodern localisms of the contemporary foodscape through a lens of race.

Three

The “Recyclable Soul” of Food

Sweet potato pies, a good friend of mine asked recently, “Do they taste anything like pumpkin?” Negative. They taste more like memory, if you’re not uptown.
– Amiri Baraka, “Soul Food,” 1962

I

In accounts of the Black Arts Movement of the Sixties, culinary artists are noticeably missing. According to Askia Touré, BAM was a massive cultural revolution led by poets linked with ““New Music” rebels, visual artists, dramatists, actors, film-makers, dancers, scholars, cultural workers, theorists, and others.”²⁴² It is hardly a surprise, however, that cooking would have been an omissible art, for as Psyche Williams-Forsen notes, “In the raging war of high and low culture, cookbooks – dismissed as largely women’s domestic fare – were not elevated.”²⁴³ Where food is mentioned in documents from that era, it is usually a political metaphor for aesthetic action. For example, describing the mission of The Revolutionary Theatre, Amiri Baraka insists it “must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind.”²⁴⁴ In “Black Writing is Socio-Creative Art,” Charles H. Fuller, Jr. claims: “action provides food for our work.”²⁴⁵ Both activists saw the potential of political art to nourish. Yet Baraka, the poet who founded BAM, directly aligns the cultural power of “Soul Food” and “Black Writing” as expressive forms of black pride in his 1966 collection of social essays, *Home*. Indebted to Ralph Ellison’s recasting of Proustian experience (“I yam what I am!” the narrator of *Invisible Man* proclaims, tasting the black South of his childhood), Baraka’s sweet potato tastes “like memory.”

²⁴² Kalamu ya Salaam, “Historical Overviews of The Black Arts Movement.” *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).

²⁴³ Foreword to Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking*, xxiv.

²⁴⁴ “The Revolutionary Theatre” (<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/blackarts/documents.htm>)

²⁴⁵ <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/blackarts/documents.htm>

Despite contending discourses within this sociopolitical postwar context about the stigmatizing conception of “blackness” produced by soul food, a cuisine indelibly linked to slavery and poverty, Baraka was an outspoken proponent. His essay “Soul Food” is a rebuttal to commentary published in *Esquire* suggesting that African Americans had neither a distinctive cuisine nor language. Rather than attend to ambivalence about black food practices, or to “ontologies of blackness” residing in foods, he praises collards, grits, fried chicken, and Hoppin’ John in an attempt to revalue the Black Aesthetic. But his was an ideology of art that favored a patriarchal agenda. Addressing the problematic relation between “intra-racial identification and othering” and the (re)construction of black American subjectivities, Doris Witt scrutinizes “the dialectic between soul food and selfhood,” especially in its disregard of the category of “feminine.”²⁴⁶ In *Black Hunger*, she enters debates over soul food with a psychoanalytic angle to ask, What about the women who were toiling to produce a new language of food; where is the space for women’s bodies, appetites, and voices? Baraka’s essay was the precursor to Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s 1970 cookbook, *Vibration Cooking*, in which she recalls a similar quarrel she had with *Time* magazine regarding the purported tastelessness of soul food: “Your taste buds are so racist that they can’t even deal with black food,” she replied in a letter to the editor.²⁴⁷ Distinction and taste, it would seem, and their discriminatory undercurrents, were the very factors driving momentum within this historic Black Arts movement, and Baraka and Grosvenor, by valorizing the impact of food in their writing, proved that to have a cuisine was indeed to have a language, thus status, and consequently, personhood. Grosvenor would take this discussion further,

²⁴⁶ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

²⁴⁷ *Vibration Cooking*, 175. The 1969 article in *Time*, written by an unnamed author, was entitled “Eating Like Soul Brothers.”

reinstating the category of the feminine by transferring the cultural agency, the culinary authenticity, to black women for their work at the cross-section of food and literature.

This chapter resituates the culinary autobiography of Grosvenor and the poetry of Harryette Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992) within a mislaid tradition of avant-garde black women's culinary arts and within a broader literary history, to consider how food (and the language of food) is used – in material and metaphorical forms – as a way to rupture and reconstruct historically racialized spaces of the high/low.²⁴⁸ By reading Grosvenor's narrative recipes alongside Mullen's prose poems, I suggest that a new type of transaction emerges between the black artist as a consumer and as a seller of culture, in effect exposing the underlying tension in the exchange of raced objects, bodies, and texts in the second half of the twentieth century. Grosvenor elevates the ordinary domestic recipe to an art form, while Mullen infuses obscure poetic verse with popular commercial rhetoric; in doing so, both authors expose how modes of reading are acts of consumption that expand tastes.

The question overhanging this chapter is borrowed from food anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who asks: "how do we apprehend or come to know foods...then turn them, conceptually as well as physically, into parts of ourselves? By what means do those who make and sell us what we consume affect our symbol-making so that their products "become us"?"²⁴⁹ Both Grosvenor and Mullen react to this phenomenon by imagining alternative strategies of consumption in and through their work. Complicating the classic adage – you are what you eat – both offer an interventionist response to a symbolic system that preys on the vulnerabilities of its consumers, whose choices, though they mark freedom, are inextricable from historical and social markers of status. What we eat is produced in a

²⁴⁸ "A Conversation With Harryette Mullen," Farah Griffin, Michael Magee, and Kristen Gallagher, 1997. <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/mullen/interview-new.html>

²⁴⁹ Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, 14.

pervasive language of commodity capitalism intended to sway and uniformize our tastes, to encourage personal and cultural identification, to mark status, hence we become the products (of what) we eat. Grosvenor, aware of the power of choice, attempts to exceed the “culinary limitations” imposed on her racial identity by choosing and exploiting the soul food products with which she is perpetually associated. Mullen makes similarly clear her concept for a literary engagement with the predominant cultural symbol-making of the Nineties: “I want us to be more conscious. When I was writing this poem it made me very conscious of what I was doing in the supermarket – how we behave as consumers and define ourselves by the products we purchase.”²⁵⁰

This chapter identifies four key overlapping approaches with which Grosvenor and Mullen correspondingly approach eating.²⁵¹ The first, *Rooting*, involves a focus on excavating the vernacular of daily life, as they adapt everyday objects, stories, and words of popular culture and genealogical history in order to create a new aesthetic form, though it may be elusive (i.e., not accessible to everyone). *Revising* is a second concept in their work highlighting how both authors commit to a revisionist project in which consumed things get remade with positivity through the enactment of a sort of textual regurgitation. *Performing* (culinary, linguistic, and textual) is another aesthetic approach used to represent language as a doing (just as cooking and eating may be read as performance); action that combines politics and play to highlight the dynamic malleability of taste. Finally, *Eroticizing*, the insertion of black women’s experience into consumer culture through images of authoritative

²⁵⁰ Interview

²⁵¹ This organizational configuration is not meant to be reductive or limiting to the discussion at hand, and is in some ways arbitrary considering that the analysis overlaps these categories (Rooting, Revision, Performance, Eroticization) at many points. It is merely intended to provide a clearer picture of the parallel textual “activities” or doings of food, consumption, and taste with which I’m juxtaposing Grosvenor and Mullen. I also do not mean to propose that their processes of, for example, performing consumption in the text, are identical or equivalent, though I do read them along an aesthetic continuum, despite the fact that their work originates in quite different genres.

consumption engages a particular eroticization of food that lifts it from its quotidian literalness into a more spiritual or aesthetic realm, to imagine the reclamation of power through food.

*

At the nexus of Black Power, gastronomy, and literature, Grosvenor's classic cookbook of "low-country" cuisine makes space for "all foods," asserting the authority of a collective yet individuated sense of taste, while also disputing assumptions about black cooking and racial identity, and the conventional cookbook genre. Far more than a generic domestic guide, *Vibration Cooking* is a hybrid coalescing of travelogue, fiction, folklore, and social critique. It is a text that represents food as a site of memory, wordplay, and racial identity. Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T*, though characteristically postmodern in its elusive style, a collage of various layers of signification and rhetorical play, is in her words simply "a book about food...and everything that's in the supermarket" (Interview CITE). It mixes poetic parataxis with plain allusions to contemporary life (political slogans, marketing jingles), inverting expectations of the poem as a high art form by literally inserting it into the marketplace of commodities. *Vibration Cooking* and *S*PeRM**K*T* effectively renegotiate social spaces of "whiteness" as they are constituted by foods and words, as well as normative gender categories, definitions of literary genre, and a fraught dichotomy of high/low cultural materials.

Just as Grosvenor's cookbook interjects within a broader aesthetic tradition of food and art – she invokes then disallows the literary lineage of Alice B. Toklas – Harryette Mullen's book of poems directly engages the subject matter, linguistic devices, and structural innovation of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. While Grosvenor was more uncomfortable borrowing from Toklas ("Was I trying to be a black Alice B. Toklas? The only thing I have

in common with Alice B. Toklas is that we lived on the same street in Paris” 189), Mullen is more forthcoming (in many of her interviews) about her indebtedness to Stein.²⁵² As Ron Karenga argues in his BAM document, “On Black Art,” “Borrowing does not mean you become what others are. What is important here is the choice of what one borrows and how he shapes it in his own images. Whites are no less white by borrowing from Black and vice versa.”²⁵³ Within these revisionary interventions, however, is a critique of the exclusionist politics of white feminist literature and of the avant-garde tradition, as well as of patriarchal structures of the Black Arts Movement. Both authors push against their literary inheritances to reframe a space for experimental voices of black women. This chapter traces such textual interpolations across historically racial lines, as well as the significant ruptures of taste in relation to food, language, and status embodied by their respective forms. For Grosvenor and Mullen, consumption is an authoritative mode of performance: political, erotic, and aesthetic. By addressing prevailing inequities in American culture in the last part of the twentieth century, they fill the literary gaps of Toklas and Stein. In a mode of *bricolage* that enables both of them to engage matrices of the high and the low, their texts are embedded with black vernacular, poetic language, and mainstream speech; objects and words of everyday life are recycled into new aesthetic forms. The result is a new experience of reading, with its own set of racially-driven taste acts, instances in which the consumer makes contact with the object through the mode of taste.

In “Poetry and Identity,” Mullen elaborates on her position as a doubly marginalized artist, perhaps responding to critics who designated *S*PeRM**K*T* as being “not a *black* book but an *innovative* book”:

²⁵² Grosvenor did, however, acknowledge that she used Toklas’s cookbook as a model for her writing in a 1971 interview in *Ebony*. Both authors similarly connect gastronomy and art as expat memoirists who share unconventionality, but in different ways.

²⁵³ <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/blackarts/documents.htm>

‘Formally innovative minority poets,’ when visible at all, are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group, or as representative of an aesthetic movement. Their unaccountable existence therefore strains the seams of the critical narratives necessary to make them (individually and collectively) comprehensible, and thus teachable and marketable. In each generation, the erasure of the anomalous black writer abets the construction of a continuous, internally consistent tradition, while at the same time it deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own radical individuality. She is unanticipated and often unacknowledged due to the imposed obscurity of her aesthetic antecedents.²⁵⁴

I consider this duality within the work of not only Mullen but also Grosvenor, who similarly juggles the expectation to be a “soul food” writer (to produce a *black* text), and to do “something creative,” “a different kind of cookbook” (to produce an *innovative* text) that might place her among other avant-garde artists of her time, thus make her legitimized and marketable.²⁵⁵ What Mullen points to – the effacement of black writers who belong to both a racial and aesthetic tradition – may be precisely why Grosvenor acknowledges that her book “slipped through the cracks for more than two decades” (195). Mullen identifies her own innovation as the very predicament of being *within* the cracks: “in between discourses, in between cultures, in between communities, with the possibility of movement back and forth between these different arenas and discourses, so that the poetry comes out of the resistance, the conflict, the struggle, the difficulty, the discomfort or awkwardness of that position.”²⁵⁶ It is this between, not as a space of erasure but as a site for creativity, from which Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking*, too, emerges.

II

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s “Belly Lore” and Recipe Politics²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ “A Conversation With Harryette Mullen”; “Poetry and Identity,” *West Coast Line 19* (1996): 85.

²⁵⁵ *Vibration Cooking*, Introduction to the 1986 Edition, 187; Preface to the 2011 Edition, xxxiv.

²⁵⁶ “Expanding the Repertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing,” *Tripwire*, 5 (2001): 13.

²⁵⁷ Clifton Fadiman

You're a huckleberry beyond my persimmon.
– black folklore

Raised on the “low-country,” “down-home” cooking of rural South Carolina, known as Gullah or Geechee cuisine, (though she grew up in North Philadelphia), Grosvenor does not hide the conflict between her personal obligation to preserve the traditions of her African roots, and her artistic impulse to expand ideas of “eating Black,” to influence the culinary arts more broadly. As she once wrote, “with the exception of black bottom pie and niggertoes, there is no reference to black people’s contribution to the culinary arts” (xxxviii). Her recipes in *Vibration Cooking* embody this tension. Yet in the same way that Mullen attests to her own experience of navigating the between, Grosvenor’s innovation derives precisely from her movement among different cuisines, vocabularies, and cultures. The eating habits and tastes she encountered during formative world travels, expatriation in bohemian Paris, and while living in New York City inform her all-inclusive style of cooking and writing. She is forthright about not considering herself a “soul food” writer, preferring instead to focus on a philosophy of food based on its “nonracial aspects” – “Food is not racial,” she writes – and she argues for a more comprehensive association of African-Americans “with all foods” (189). Grosvenor models this approach by cooking across global, racial, and class lines: “my kitchen was the world...I experimented with all the cuisines of the world” (189). Thus her cookbook contains recipes for chitterlings but also *feijoda*; for Hoppin’ John as well as salad *niçoise*. Perhaps echoing Zora Neale Hurston’s famously divisive words, “At certain times I have no race. I am me,” Grosvenor’s intention to expunge culinary racism leads to quite contradictory messages; a claim that foods “have no race,” yet a defense of black cookery as

“an agent of change.”²⁵⁸ Throughout her cookbook, she embraces the same portrayals of soul food from which she attempts to distance herself, so that “the languages of self and culture often appear at odds.”²⁵⁹ On the one hand, she understands food habits and tastes as inextricable from identity and, consequently, incentive for group politics; on the other, she refuses to essentialize black culinary history. Acknowledging this incongruity, and the uncategorizable nature of her cooking, she writes,

My feeling was/is any Veau a la Flamande or Blincheshe’s Tvorogom I prepared was as “soulful” as a pair of candied yams. I don’t have culinary limitations because I’m “black.” On the other hand, I choose to write about “Afro-American” cookery because I’m “black”...I exploit Afro-American dishes every chance I get” (189).

For Grosvenor, “soul” is an attitude (171), an experimental performance, even an aesthetic; not a racial essence. In a Whitmanesque declaration, she conveys her multitudes.

One example of the exploitation of which she speaks occurs in her discussion of collard greens. In a move to highlight a traditional dish such as collards, yet to maintain that black cookery exceeds stereotypes, she prepares collards on TV in a nontraditional way, and is reproached for “discredit[ing] the race” (190). Even her section on collards in *Vibration Cooking*, with its playful catalogue of greens, stylistically reads more like a poem than a series of recipes, breaking culinary and aesthetic conventions. In the first paragraph of this section, she provides a narrative of collards reminiscent of the historical anecdotes of M.F.K. Fisher: “Collard greens according to the *National Geographic* are prehistoric. The Romans took them to France and England. The Romans are said to have considered them a delicacy. I know I consider them a delicacy. They are very rich in minerals and vitamins. They are biennials” (129). At a later point, she also points away from the racial aspect of collards to reiterate, “I

²⁵⁸ “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” / Rafia Zafar, “The Signifying Dish: Autobiography and History in Two Black Women’s Cookbooks,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), 464.

²⁵⁹ Anne E. Goldman, *Take My Word*, 51.

love to turn people on to the nutritional and psychological values of collard greens” (189), an attempt, it might seem, to resignify collards. Compare this to Baraka’s passage on collards in “Soul Food,” which anticipates Grosvenor’s “attention to the class inflections of the culinary metaphor,” but in a much different tone, choosing instead to take the opportunity to critique the black bourgeoisie: “Collards and turnips and kale and mustards were not fit for anybody but the woogies. So they found a way to make them taste like something somebody would want to freeze and sell to a Negro going to Harvard as exotic European spinach” (102).²⁶⁰ In many moments throughout *Vibration Cooking*, Grosvenor is aware of her own authority as a black culinary artist revising master narratives – of food and history – knowing that “cooking as a trope for the reproduction of culture has a long history in African American women’s narratives.”²⁶¹ Her cooking is thus reconstructionist, as she consciously “counterwrites” images and myths of food, race, and language into new forms.²⁶²

Within her shifting and contradictory perspectives on food, Grosvenor is likewise ambiguously positioned “between poverty and affluence, between black nationalism and white feminism.”²⁶³ She juggles the desire to preserve the cultural integrity of her community, which involves an attendance to commonplace Black styles associated with low culture, with her transparent aesthetic agenda as a black woman artist emulating models of high art, yet she is able to transform or rather blur the distinctions of high/low in her treatment of these forms. For example, the family recipe for chitterlings (food of “southern nigras” 93) and the musicality of “nigger dialect” (66) are elevated into art forms; not only does she discuss them as such, but she also showcases them in her cookbook. However, she scatters her narrative with Parisian recipes and untranslated French expressions, enfolding these into the realm of

²⁶⁰ Goldman, *Take My Word*, 49.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34

²⁶² Zafar, 454

²⁶³ Witt, *Black Hunger*, 156.

everyday cooking and speech, and thereby making them more accessible to women whose race or class might preclude such contact. For example, *andouillette*, she reveals, is just a fancy word for chitterlings. In one instance, she makes explicit her preference for the low over the high: “Crepes are delicate to make and you have to have an expensive and fancy pan to make them. I prefer hoe cake of bread like Grandmama Sula used to make” (16). Shortly after, she unabashedly admits a taste for Aunt Jemima pancake mix (17), which has its own complex set of racist meanings within white American consumer culture. Even the structure of the book, which I will address in more detail later, is built from the disparity of “home” and “away from home”; the favored hoe cake speaks of home, in contrast to the crepes which are foreign. Yet it is perhaps her opening essay in *Vibration Cooking*, “The Demystification of Food,” which best clarifies her philosophy: “I don’t like fancy food. I like simple – plain – ordinary – call it what you choose. I like what is readily available...the daily ritual...a beautiful everyday happening” (xxxviii). Something in this sentiment recalls the aim of Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, in which she also attempted to demystify food through an emphasis on the simple, plain, and ordinary of quotidian life. For Grosvenor as well, the ordinary holds beauty; all food has “soul.”

Yet issues of class, which are always an implicit part of her discussion of race, complicate her relationship to food. We are never sure of her status – she has “no serious job” (89) and lives an avant-garde lifestyle, yet frequently aligns with the “we” of her family and community, which is typically underprivileged. For example, in her letter to Stella, she consoles: “Don’t worry about being called middle class,” then begins a catalogue of class-related complaints: “I’m tired of not having a decent bathroom. I’m tired of being poor. I’m tired of being tired. I’m tired of walking these maggoted streets. If decent living is middle class, then they can sock me some from the middle” (163). In a recipe for “Salmon,” she

recalls that in her childhood, “Poor as we were we never ate nothing but sockeye salmon” (39). This is linked to another comment on racial differences as conveyed in food preferences, reflecting the value of high-quality food in the black community: “Black folks spend more money for food than white folks” (145). At one point in the cookbook, she breaks into a more didactic sermon: “This is the richest country in the world. Any citizen should be given at birth the guarantee of a life free from hunger. And tell *me*, what is a second-class citizen? You either a citizen or you’re not” (71). Because of the link between racial and economic status, Zafar argues, “Black women and their cookbooks come across as less “high culture” than the popular American guides to French or Italian cuisine which crowd the “Cookery” shelves of bookstores and libraries.”²⁶⁴

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Between Black Arts and Second-Wave Feminism

I will now step back for a moment to consider Grosvenor’s cookbook within the context of both the Black Arts movement and second-wave Anglo-American feminism, yet also as part of African American culinary literary history. We learn from Grosvenor herself in her introduction to the 1986 edition of *Vibration Cooking* that when her cookbook was published in 1970, there were fewer than ten published cookbooks by African Americans (192), though, according to Witt, two dozen African Americans published nationally distributed cookbooks during the peak years of soul food from 1968-1971.²⁶⁵ Rafia Zafar offers an explanation to the dearth of cookbooks by Black women: “for a twentieth-century African American female publicly to announce herself as a cook means that she must engage

²⁶⁴ “The Signifying Dish,” 453. Grosvenor was also proud to share her achievement of celebrity status, crossing paths with the Galloping Gourmet, Barbara Walters, Dick Cavett, James Baldwin, David Bowie, etc. (188).

²⁶⁵ *Black Hunger*, 156.

The first cookbook by a Black woman was former slave Abby Fisher’s ghostwritten *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking*, which appeared in 1881.

with the reigning ghosts of American racism.”²⁶⁶ This is perhaps why Black cookbooks in the post-war function as “recoveries and recastings” of African American culture, according to Zafar, who poses a poignant question: “When negotiating the intersections of memory, history, food, and creativity, well might the Black woman author ask: In writing a recipe, can one also right history?”²⁶⁷

Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking* is a possible affirmation of this righting, a rupture of racist narratives, essentialized identities, and literary genres, and in this way she initiates a “gastronomic Black Reconstruction.”²⁶⁸ Yet it is important to consider her artistic contribution as the product of a new creative and political black consciousness of the Sixties, which catalyzed a radical aesthetic movement. In Zafar’s tracing of this history, the rise in political activism led to a “burgeoning market for Black subjects,” which expanded the market for books by and about African Americans, subsequently widening the spectrum of genres within black publications to include cookbooks (451-2). *Vibration Cooking* appears after the peak of the Black Arts Movement, and the placement of Baraka’s poem as the front matter of her cookbook is a clear indication of her affiliation. The poem’s central theme, aesthetic beauty, seems reiterated in the idea of mobility in one of its lines, which appears twice as an imperative: “walk through life.” Grosvenor’s cookbook is a demonstration of this action. The other repetitive word, or concept, throughout Baraka’s poem is “all” – “love all the things,” “for all the people”; Grosvenor casts a similarly encompassing net in her approach to cooking, while simultaneously using and elevating food as an art form to re-envision black America. Witt reads Grosvenor’s diasporic aesthetic as a reframing of Paul Gilroy’s “alternative theorization of black modernity as a phenomenon of transatlantic cross-

²⁶⁶ “The Signifying Dish,” 450.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 450-451.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 451.

cultural exchange” in terms of the culinary; in her work, food and/as movement is as integral an art as music in his model.²⁶⁹ It is through taste, and its embodiment in language, that Grosvenor’s liberatory politics materialize. Tasting across racial, gendered, and class borders, her recipes empower access to a cultural field in which subjectivity and status are in-process. Black migration, as a historical reality and an aesthetic trope, may be considered in the performance of eating, and Grosvenor’s cookbook as a travelogue renegotiates the idea of mobility and visibility through the problematical relationship between black women and soul food.

Although Grosvenor affiliates with the “prevailing black nationalist ideology” of the early 1970s, stylistically adopting its aesthetic dogma, she is critical of its omission of black women, and seeks to create a space for them in which to become producers and consumers of new cultural forms.²⁷⁰ Just as African American culture was being commodified by white tastes, by a white consumer base, so was the Black Aesthetic determined by a male-dominated agenda to the exclusion of women, and Grosvenor sought to highlight the culinary contributions, consumption practices, artistic talents, and bonds of and between women. One way in which she does this, beyond the explicit dedication of her cookbook, is by incorporating the epistolary genre within her cookbook – one entire section towards the end of *Vibration Cooking* is comprised of the letter exchange between herself and her friend/character, Stella, and emphasizes their feminine solidarity. As Anne E. Goldman argues, Grosvenor is critical of the “gendered inequity in representations of Black Art,” and as a counter-response, invokes this feminist literary tradition.²⁷¹ For example, her letters to Stella recall the dialogue between Janie and Phoeby in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes*

²⁶⁹ *Black Hunger*, 157. Witt refers to Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁷¹ *Take My Word*, 48. Grosvenor also draws from the eighteenth century tradition of the epistle in fiction and verse, from Jonathan Swift to Aphra Behn.

Were Watching God (1937); like Janie, Grosvenor tells her story, “framing her reevaluation of cooking with a traditionally feminine series of appeals...counsel[ing] Stella and, by implication, all her women readers.”²⁷² Yet aligning herself with other black women writers of her time (Toni Morrison, Alice Walker), she constructs a space – in the kitchen and in the literary canon – for voices excluded from the Anglo-American literary tradition, for the cookbook as a coextensive postmodernist literary text, rendering an implicit (and sometimes overt) critique of the racism inherent to second-wave feminism during the Black Power era.²⁷³

As the feminist movement sought to free women from kitchen servitude, Grosvenor, following in Child’s steps, brazenly gendered culinary labors, asserting food as the material and metaphor for pleasures of the body, erotic exchange, emotional communication, and her love for men: “I like men who enjoy food. Cooking for a man is a very feminine thing...Food is sexy” (xxxix). Grosvenor was provoked by “the fact that in a country that discriminates against color, sex and intelligence, a black intelligent woman catches hell” (152), yet the expression of her intelligence was not lost to her belief in the erotics of food. Her cookbook is her gendered response to experiences commodifying black culinary arts in that she alters the familiar story of black women cooks laboring in white kitchens, as they have existed in our national mythology and cultural imaginary; there is thus “*power* in exploding the single story” through the syncretism of multiple stories.²⁷⁴ In the kitchen by choice not force of necessity, Grosvenor uses cooking to defeat gendered preconceptions by approaching it as an art not a labor. She extends the idea of cooking as a viable form of self-expression (it speaks love, anger, passion, as she reinvents traditional recipes with erotic

²⁷² Ibid., 48.

²⁷³ See Morrison’s 1971 New York Times essay, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib.” (Witt, 170)

²⁷⁴ Williams-Forsen, xxvi.

verve), and also as a vehicle for the cultural transmission of stories, in such a way that cooking is no longer entrapped drudgery but creative outlet. As a cook, she is both the hunter and the storyteller, and her cookbook is a manifestation of this, a literary artifact that exceeds the bounds of gender categories.

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Grosvenor's political aims are most evidently exerted within the aesthetic project of *Vibration Cooking*. Though her link to the Black Arts Movement carries a personal politics, her cookbook advances the restoration of black cultural traditions, values, and voices by inserting itself within a larger literary context. While the cookbook has predominantly been classified as an extra-literary text, Grosvenor raises the literary bar, infusing her cookbook with literary qualities you would expect of a postmodernist novel. In doing so, she redefines the culinary autobiography, which M.F.K. Fisher so revolutionarily brought to the forefront of American culinary and literary Modernism, as a significant genre. Goldman points out that self-distinction and affiliation are always in contest in Grosvenor's cookbook, as it so self-consciously navigates the contours of individual and collective voice, of personal and cultural authority.²⁷⁵ Weaving history with family story, culinary anecdote with recipe, her text operates at multiple levels, illustrating the ways "Black culinary traditions can be imagined or inscribed – by the author, by her readers – as a way of enacting the cultural, expressive, and historical agenda of the African American female."²⁷⁶ Not only does Grosvenor's cookbook provide a form of material nourishment (in the literal aspect of food), it represents a means of cultural sustenance, and inadvertently makes a case for the value of aesthetic nourishment; she reminds us that art (the art of the story), like food (which is inscribed with story), is a fundamental necessity.

²⁷⁵ *Take My Word*, x.

²⁷⁶ Zafar, 450-1.

Grosvenor's avant-garde approach to writing operates quite reciprocally to her method of cooking, for the two acts inform one another. In her attempt to demystify food and perhaps explain the title of her cookbook, she makes clear: "when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration" (xxxviii). The reader cannot but wonder, in this moment, how to proceed with a book of recipes that only ever approximate (or omit entirely) measurements. If there is instruction, it is only given in estimates (as is done in the earliest French cookbooks): "a little," "a pinch," "handfuls," "about," "just enough." Her emphasis on vibration as a technique, though reliant on the intangibles of intuition, spontaneity, physicality, and experimentation, leaves the reader, for whom cooking may not be instinctive, without guidance, yet also authorizes the home cook with a more active engagement with taste. Sometimes, a recipe is only ever its description of taste, as in "Fish Head Stew," the first line of which goes: "Is delicious" (38). By the time we reach the end of this recipe, we have nothing more than a family story overlapping with a travel story, and no idea of what goes into a fish head stew. Yet we somehow come to trust her; we are invited into the vibrational aspect of her cooking and writing, which suspends our expectations of what makes a proper (or usable) recipe, and concurrently, a story. It is precisely her cooking-by-vibration that signals her artistry; the creative expression of food in and as language – "Just turn on the imagination" (xxxviii), she writes. She even likens the artistic endeavor of cooking to music in two instances: "Afro-American cookery is like jazz – a genuine art form that deserves serious scholarship" (192); and she quotes her daughter's praise, "My mama cook like Aretha Franklin sing!" (188). The opening line of the first section of her cookbook, "Home," announces her connection, albeit arbitrary, to the New York School art scene of the time: "I'm from the village of Fairfax, Allendale County, South Carolina, so is Jasper

Johns” (4).²⁷⁷ To think that within the same decade Americans could pick up a cookbook of Child’s exceedingly detailed directives for measurements, apparatus, and mastery of technique, often spanning several pages, and one filled with Grosvenor’s idiosyncratic, autobiographical sketches interspersed with jokey recipes presenting inexact quantities in brief and inconsistent forms that read like prose-poems, with parataxis, alliteration, and song. It is no surprise, however, that the latter form was marginalized, not only along racial categories, but also because Americans wanted to identify themselves as belonging to high culture by ascribing to the more refined ideas of taste (thus status) marked by Child’s bourgeois French style of cooking.

A cult “underground classic” and “kitchen bible,” *Vibration Cooking* engages the traditional and eclectic, the ordinary and lyrical.²⁷⁸ Familiar recipes are placed next to – and literally turn into – extraordinary tales. Plain words evolve into elusive formations. The mundane is elevated, while the aesthetic is enfolded into the everyday. Grosvenor’s experimental text is not easily categorized or definable, and that is its point. A multi-genre montage of cooking instruction, anecdote, poetry, folklore, history, anthropology, ethnography, fiction, drama, letters, indexes, “travel notes,” and autobiography, *Vibration Cooking* defies any resemblance to the cookbook as we conventionally know it, though it is indebted to *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*. It is a storybook. Grosvenor explains in the preface to the 2011 edition, “Coming from a culture of storytellers, I wanted to tell stories” (xxxiv). Indeed the recipe *as* story reigns in her cookbook, in all of its varied, ambiguous, contradictory forms. Stories transport and transform. Storytelling as revision becomes a reflexive way to disrupt histories of food, narratives of race, and language itself. Like the

²⁷⁷ We learn in one of her letters to Stella that she was hanging out with “mostly painters. The whole beaux arts crowd” (166), but this particular reference to an artist of Abstract Expressionism reveals that she was as race-blind – or should I say taste-blind – in art as in food, borrowing from various influences.

²⁷⁸ Williams-Forsen, xvi.

postmodernist texts of her literary counterparts at the time, Grosvenor's cookbook as a form is built from "disruptions and ambiguities" (Williams-Forsen) and "switchbacks" (Goldman).

The title is itself vague, and doubling. It is either "Vibration Cooking," which alludes to Grosvenor's aesthetic, "Or, The Travel Notes of A Geechee Girl," which presents what we expect to be a cookbook as a travelogue. Witt argues that the label "Geechee" is a confusing and inconsistent term to which Grosvenor attaches herself, perhaps borrowed to "reinterpret and revalue the African heritage of black Americans."²⁷⁹ The metaphor of travel is not only enacted by the author (who moves from her own birth to motherhood) within the cookbook's narrative recipes, but also by the reader, for whom the experience of reading is a sort of trip. Grosvenor is transiently between geographical and linguistic places; "travel produces neither an "I" emphatically rooted at home nor a subject whose visits to foreign places wholly defy efforts at self-situating; instead, it suggests the contingency of identity" (Goldman 52). Through travel, she insists "on her right to ongoing cultural and personal hybridization"; and, I would add, aesthetic synthesis.²⁸⁰ Within the cookbook, her individual title headings run the gamut; they are catchy and creative invitations to the text, such as "Birth, Hunting and Gator Tails," "Philadelphia, Mrs. Greenstein and Terrapins," "Hospitals Ain't No Play Pretty," "Taxis and Poor Man's Mace," and "White Folks and Fried Chicken." These invoke a similar tone and style to Toklas' titles, for example, compare these to "Dishes For Artists," "Murder in the Kitchen," "Food to Which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva Led Us," "Servants in France," and "Food in the Bugey During the Occupation." Grosvenor's table of contents with fictionalized titles signals to the reader that travel is metaphorically an approach to food and language, a mode of taste.

²⁷⁹ *Black Hunger*, 173. Witt's point is that Grosvenor is not actually "Geechee," which refers to people from the Sea Islands.

²⁸⁰ Witt, 175.

Vibration Cooking is structured into seven sections, primarily named according to oppositions: Home, Away from Home, Madness, Love, Mixed Bag, Some Letters, To Be Continued. The frontmatter includes a dedication to the women of her family in appreciation of their work in “miss ann’s kitchen,” followed by an epigraph – a poem by Baraka, as noted earlier – and a brief essay, “The Demystification of Food.” Grosvenor inserts an interlude entitled “Hopping John,” a recipe that reads like poetic verse:

Cook black-eyed peas.
When they are almost done add rice.
Mix rice and peas together.
Season and – *voilà!* – you got it.

If she intends to “demystify” food, this instructive poem, with its assuring address to the reader, “you got it,” presents her simplistic approach, and is a springboard into her narrative: “And speaking of rice,” she writes in the paragraph that comes after, “I was sixteen years old before I knew that everyone didn’t eat rice everyday. Us being geechees, we had rice everyday.” From this narrative she shifts suddenly back to instructions for cooking rice, moving seamlessly between recipe and anecdote and recipe, as if one opens way for the other such that they are inseparable. This style continues throughout the book.

Rooting

If, as Mintz argues, the products we consume become us, how does Grosvenor’s cookbook use the roots of everyday black culture – the soul food, the vernacular – reclaiming the low to produce a more empowering picture of black identity? The first section, “Home,” begins exactly where we would expect of a traditional autobiography: with birth. Yet it also sets up the predominant tension in the cookbook, between geographic home and beyond in the constitution of identity, which is foregrounded in the section that follows, “Away From Home.” Grosvenor’s first-person narrator (a persona of herself) identifies as

much with the products of “home” as she does with those encountered “away from home.” Soul foods are the stuff of which she’s made, the low materials tied to physical sustenance and family lore, yet are also the products perpetually marketed to blacks, and so her approach is to rescue this cuisine from its racist implications and redefine it as a source of pride.

Like Fisher and Child, Grosvenor expatriates to Paris, and this segment highlights her time living there in 1959 and again in 1968 on Rue de Fleurus (the same street as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas). Her taste for things expands in travel; she goes away from her roots to reclaim them. In a line reminiscent from the cookbooks of these forerunners, she remembers, “I had a kitchen and I loved to cook all of our meals in. I immediately set out to find the new markets, etc” (62). Her encounters in the markets and restaurants of France, however, are not romanticized. They instead remind her of the ways in which all foods are inscribed with cultural and racial differences. On two occasions, she critiques the French and their food tastes: “French people can be so narrow-minded” (57); “Europeans can really be unnatural” (66). Her example is the European style of eating fruit with a knife and fork, with which she draws a parallel to linguistic discrimination: “It didn’t take me long to adapt. You know people got to dig that “nigger dialect” is really beautiful. The slaves were just adapting to a language that wasn’t their own” (66). In her brief treatise on adaptivity, Grosvenor plays on the idea of “unnaturalness” to empower black language as a “musical” force, yet criticizes European tastes; “the masters” are as unnatural as Europeans in their refined styles of eating and speaking, and she praises their transformation into new tastes. Yet she rebels when she returns to South Carolina and eats figs from the tree: “I picked some figs and stuck them directly in my mouth. I didn’t dare tell anyone that I had been eating prosciutto and figs rolled together with a fork” (66). Stella writes to Grosvenor

in a letter towards the end of the cookbook that gets at some of the recorded experiences of foods and their nationalistic meanings:

Everybody getting upset over the black nationalists. They ain't seen nationalists til they check these French out. Ain't nothing nothing if it ain't French (they a bitch with their shit). French cigarettes, French beaches, French women, French sex, French ice cream. Well, they got it. I'm getting the hell out of here. *Haute cuisine* and *haute couture* is a bunch of *haute merde*. (165).

She dabbled with *haute* gastronomy even alongside “low” dishes. In “Away From Home,” there are recipes for pasta, Jerusalem artichokes, and of course, omelettes. Grosvenor’s egg recipes are no-fuss compared to Child’s, even an insult to the meticulous French technique (which she subversively critiques), and involve an indiscriminate layering of eggs and vegetables, which are then prepared “on moderate flame until eggs are cooked,” then “cover[ed] tightly (about 20 minutes)” (65). She does list various types of eggs, accommodating a more European culinary vocabulary: caviar, goose, duck, ostrich, turtle, terrapin, but her handling of them is understated, even remiss.

Knowing that bodies are the products of their foodscapes, Grosvenor wrestles with the ways in which foods inform constructions of racial identity. During moments in the cookbook when she insists that food is not racial, she does so in a backhanded manner – she emphatically writes: “White folks act like they invented food and like there is some weird mystique surrounding it – something that only Julia and Jim can get to. There is no mystique. Food is food. Everybody eats!” (xxxviii).²⁸¹ While her statement is not contestable, she is at the same time acknowledging that food is racial, that race does determine access to certain foods. Even though food is more than material sustenance in her cookbook – it is metaphor,

²⁸¹ Her reference here is to Julia Child and James Beard, the dominant chefs of that era. Child, paradoxically, was invested in the same project of removing the mystique in food; their aims were not so different.

love – she knew firsthand the line between poverty and privilege, between necessity and art. Within the cookbook narrative, she attempts to redefine the term *classic* along a racial divide:

White folks be talkin' about classic and they mean Beethoven (he was supposed to be a brother, anyhow) and French cooking. Classic to me is James Brown and soul food. If you check out the difference between what black and white folks eat it ain't no wonder they can't get along. (145)

Grosvenor boldly asserts the idea of black cookery as classic, disrupting cultural associations of the traditional with French cuisine, using the analogy of music to reinforce her point. By repositioning James Brown and soul food with classical significance in American culture, she makes space for black innovation and expression, replacing the “master” narrative.

Moreover, she distinguishes eating habits as a direct reflection of or influence on race relations. This opinion is reiterated at another point: “a lot of interracial marriages break up because of the cultural gap in cooking” (170). If food is *not* racial for Grosvenor (even though her writing is replete with racialized discourse), what exactly does she mean by this gap?

For a book built on the premise that food is not racial, Grosvenor returns again and again to the inequalities of race as they are embodied in foods. Grosvenor likens the power of cooking to an element of human endurance she deems characteristic of the black race, distinguishing between black and white foods in order to show reveal imbalance. Following a recipe for “Red Rice,” she writes, “Cooking those good meals there would be way beyond the capacity of most women. Isn't it amazing that black people in spite of all the misery and oppression have been able to keep on keeping on? ...If they (“white folks”) had known about neck bones and dry peas they might have realized that they could survive” during the depression (20). This connects to a later section entitled “White Folks and Fried Chicken,” in which she criticizes the finicky palate of white Americans: “White folks act like they would

starve for sure if they couldn't have a hunk of meat. Eating neck bones don't bother me" (144). If food is a form of power, it is black culture within which Grosvenor recognizes its potential in contrast to the inferior eating culture of Anglo-Americans. In a recipe for Terrapins, she mocks the "gourmet" cuisine of "white folks" as merely a rendition of the leftovers of black innovative cooking:

Ain't nothing but swamp turtles. They used to be plentiful on the eastern seaboard. So plentiful that plantation owners gave them to their slaves. Now they are the rare discovery of so-called gore-mays. White folks always discovering something...after we give it up. By the time they got to the bugaloo, we were doing the "tighten up." By the time they got to pigs' feet, black people were giving up swine. By the time we get to Phoenix... (41)

Here, even "gourmet," which she purposely misspells, is only "so-called," just as were notions of "classic" discussed by her earlier. While she laughs at the fact that discoveries of foods are made by white people once they are passé within black culture, she also makes a politically-charged claim about the pioneering developments in American culinary culture that specifically black cooks have instigated, though they remain unrecognized. Grosvenor gives credit where it is due on her own terms, using the cookbook as a political text, even if subtly. She does explicitly critique white cooking towards the end of the cookbook, further structuring a "we"/"them" divide, in reference to her letter to *Time* magazine:

You white folks just keep on eating that white foam rubber bread that sticks to the roof of your mouth, and keep on eating Minute Rice and instant potatoes, instant cereals and drinking instant milk and stick to your instant culture. And I will stick to the short-lived fad (soul food) that brought my ancestors through four hundred years of oppression...Soul food is about a people who have a lot of heart and soul. (175)

In this same letter, she notes that chitterlings, a soul food negatively linked to "southern nigras" are found in fancy Parisian restaurants under the disguised name of *andouillette*.²⁸² As Goldman argues, "although such anecdotes are often framed as personal narrative, the cross-

²⁸² She also discusses this in her recipe for "Chitterlings" on page 93.

cultural comparison they develop positions the subject as an ethnographic “we,” a collective identity rigidly framed in opposition to “them”²⁸³; Grosvenor’s “critique of “white bread culture” positions pronouns, constructing an “I” contingent upon its affiliation with an aggregate that is unable to accommodate difference.”²⁸³ By replacing white dishes with black analogues, she “performs a Black female signifying...on white gourmet foods”²⁸⁴ “If eating “Black” functions as one of the primal determinants of an individual’s life,” Zafar argues, we can see how Grosvenor takes up “the task of recreating that primal, gastronomic entity as [her] group identity becomes ever more fragmented, stratified, and diverse.”²⁸⁵ The everyday act of eating is necessarily personal and social, vital and aesthetic. Eating habits and preferences, as well as cooking styles, link food inextricably to the historical structures of race, gender, and class, and show us how cooking reproduces culture. Though Grosvenor jokes about tea preparation – “Judge by taste – not color. I’m talking about herbs, of course, nothing personal intended” (142) – her awareness of the ways by which race shapes taste is foundational to the production of her cookbook, particularly as a vehicle for tastemaking.

At times her own biases get obscured in the language of cooking: “Can’t no Teflon fry no fried chicken. I only use black pots and brown earthenware in the kitchen. White enamel is not what’s happening” (xxxviii). Here, she exerts a preference for black methods of cooking by addressing the superiority of black-colored material objects, as a way of empowering black culture. Moreover, she employs a more pronounced black dialect to articulate this assertion. In another anecdotal moment, she directly calls attention to the racially self-conscious association with certain foods: “Mrs. Jackson was going to bring some sweet potato pies but Johnnie Mae thought that would be too colored” (120).

²⁸³ *Take My Word*, 50.

²⁸⁴ Zafar, 457.

²⁸⁵ “The Signifying Dish,” 464.

Despite the negativity this anecdote points to in black foods, and Grosvenor's previously cited reference to such a thing as racist taste buds, she often transforms images, names, and therefore meanings of foods by rewriting them into positive new forms of recipe through wordplay. Consider recipes for "Steak With Beautiful Black Sauce" and "Stuffed Heart Honky Style" (112-113), whose names say it all. Here is the passage leading to the former:

I got a friend who won't eat no white bread, drink white milk, won't use no white flour or white pepper. She only uses black pepper, drinks only blackberry wine, black coffee, chocolate milk, eats chocolate cake, black beans, black bread. She says it is because she is so fed up with black being used in a negative sense, that is to say blackheads, blackball, black list, black out, the black plague, blackhearted. Last time I was at her house she made a delicious... (112)

Eating "Black," in this case, is an empowering mode of racial protest through the reclamation of food, the ubiquitous signifier of identity. In a recipe for sardines, Grosvenor reveals how significantly the history of racism (slavery) shapes her own food choices: "I LOVE THEM. We used to have sardines in mustard sauce or tomato sauce over grits. The plain sardines are good over grits or in a sandwich with a slice of onion. I do not eat Portuguese sardines because of Angola" (39); not an actual recipe in the literal sense, this becomes an occasion to make a political stance with her tastes. Likewise, her recipe for "Harriet Tubman Ragout" presents cooking as an act of resistance, not just a metonym of critique, announcing to her reader, "This is a true story" (25). How we read – the discernment of what is "true" in stories and recipes – is continuously brought into play in her cookbook. She retells the tale passed down to her about the Underground Railroad:

sometimes they would be in the middle of their dinner when the stops (homes that hid slaves en route to freedom) got word that a slave or slaves were coming through that night. They might even have some neighbors or even members of the family there who were not cool...so they had to have signals to let each other know that tonight it would happen. Uncle Costen

said they had a special dish they would serve called “Harriet Tubman Ragout” (25).

As a “revision of a history of slavery,” this passage reveals the importance of food as a mechanism for political involvement. Grosvenor’s cookbook may present cooking as a symbol for political critique, but in this historical instance, cooking is political action. She casts a lens on slavery as it was resisted within the homes of African Americans through culinary communication, yet as Goldman points out, the dynamics of intraracial relations were more complicated; solidarity was not a given, community was a choice, and food could be a unifying language” (Goldman 44-45). As Mintz explains, “the use of cooking by slaves as a means to escape the definition of themselves imposed on them by others is a case of tasting freedom.”²⁸⁶

Food also transcends the limits of identity for Grosvenor; just as she expands the word “soul” to apply to a more general philosophy of cooking as of life, she considers food as a life-source, not only because it is literal sustenance, but because of its aesthetic potential. In a letter to Stella, she captures this duality, “You want to know why I say soul food is life? Well, first off, food ain’t nothing but food. No matter who you are and where you live you got to eat. Cooking is a creative thing. Cooking is one of the highest of all the arts. It can make or break life” (170).²⁸⁷ Food is food, but as Grosvenor’s cookbook proves, art, like food, is something we need, which explains why it can “make or break life.”

Revising

²⁸⁶ *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, 14.

²⁸⁷ She elaborates: “soul food depends on what you put in it...If you have a serious, loving, creative, energetic attitude towards life, when you cook, you cook with the same attitude. / Food changes into blood, blood into cells, cells change into energy which changes up into life and since your life style is imaginative, creative, loving, energetic, serious, food is life. You dig” (171).

In Grosvenor's attempt to revise the recipes and myths of black culture, she begins with the names of things, and models a kind of renaming. In "Madness," a section focused on the power of anger in racist confrontations, Grosvenor includes a subsection entitled "Name-calling," which underscores the primal influence of naming as what forms identity. She begins by crediting the introduction and creation of new foods with the history of slavery: "A lot of new foods were brought to this country via the slave trade" (74). The discussion this opens – of names of foods as an analogue to names that racially distinguish – is perhaps her most irate and impassioned, and leads her to play on names in various ways. The first recipe in this part is "So-Called Okra." After a two-line recipe, she gives this explanation to her reader:

If you are wondering how come I say so-called okra it is because the African name of okra is gombo. Just like so-called Negroes. We are Africans. Negroes only started when they got here. I am a black woman. I am tired of people calling me out of my name. Okra must be sick of that mess too. So from now on call it like it is. Okra will be referred to in this book as gombo. Corn will be called maize and Negroes will be referred to as black people... People are always calling *people* out of their name, too. (75-6)

In this argument, "okra," "corn," and "Negroes" are evenly approached; black bodies are objectified by "so-called" identifiers in a way that corresponds to designations for foods. Grosvenor's act of reclaiming names is one that seeks authenticity, asserts a certain voice of cultural authority. She returns to this idea later in the book, re-writing the histories of culturally possessed foods by poking doubt into the legitimacy of their names: "Now I have done a lot of research on food and found out that Long Island ducks are not from Long Island at all. They are the descendants of ducks imported from Peking around 1870. Georgia peaches are descendants of peaches brought from china" (118).

Grosvenor also takes liberty with a historical track-record of misnaming in a simultaneous endeavor to rename foods, and in doing so ruptures their meanings, which

often results in tongue-in-cheek recipes. As Zafar argues, she “enumerates the culinary imperialism inherent in the renaming of foods.”²⁸⁸ Her recipe for “Cracker Stew,” for example, is a humorous play on what she disparaged as the cuisine of “instant culture”:

Take a can of any kind of soup and add 1 box of any kind of frozen vegetables and then add 1 cup of Minute Rice. Heat and serve with toasted crackers on top. (77)

It is hard not to read the racial slurring within a recipe whose name puns on the pejorative word for poor Southern white people, especially as what follows this is a recipe for “Dynamite Black.”²⁸⁹ The reader moves from an unappetizing stew made from things canned, boxed, and frozen, carryover convenience cooking from the Fifties, to an indulgent dessert of sugar, dates, walnuts, eggs, and vanilla, which has no real specificity (is it a cake? a pudding? a soufflé?) other than its signifying conjunction: it is dynamite (exciting) and black. In this instance, “black” functions as a noun rather than a description, punning on what a person would be named, and in effect, confusing our typical interaction with a recipe. The richness of “Dynamite Black” (African American life) in contrast to the poverty of “Cracker Stew” (Anglo-American culture) is reiterated later in the cookbook when Grosvenor attends dinner at house of a white colleague who opens “a box of frozen peas (in a cellophane buttered pack). A box of instant mashed potatoes and...a can of chicken (packed in water); she writes, “...I knew something was wrong. No smells of food cooking or having been cooked” (100). She flees for her own kitchen where she “fried a piece of liver and put on a little big of grits and in a short time...had an epicurean delight” (102). (It should be noted that Grosvenor herself uses mixes at times, like in recipes for “Spongecake” (34) and “Piecrust” (45), and confesses, “I use cake mixes and doctor them up. That way if they don’t

²⁸⁸ “The Signifying Dish,” 455.

²⁸⁹ At another point in the cookbook, Grosvenor uses a different derogatory slang term for white people in her recipe named “Redneck Ragout”: “This dish costs 5c a serving and will serve from 3 to 5 people – depending on how much they dig rednecks” (147).

work out I don't feel as bad as when I start from scratch" (18). Perhaps this also informs Cannon's rationale.) Her final corrections are of "So-Called "Indian" Pudding," interwoven with historical bits about Indians and naming, and "Spiced Brazil Nuts," about which she makes sure to caution: "don't let no smart aleck call it out of its name and say spiced niggertoes. You just be correct" (79). Such "cautionary tales" are scattered throughout the cookbook, as in the coda to the recipe for "Hush Puppies"; after she tells the story of their naming, she teases, "You can believe this if you believe all the other American folk tales" (91), leaving the reader to wonder what can be trusted from this narrator.²⁹⁰ The recipe, we begin to accept, may be merely a fiction. In any case, her recipe-stories test the reader, in particular the white reader. "Besides providing the writer with a degree of interpretive control," Goldman argues, these gestures "affirm black pride as they critique the paucity of white culture."²⁹¹

The final section of the cookbook is perhaps the most radical as it literally revises the structure of the cookbook as we know it: "To Be Continued." Grosvenor does not end her cookbook, does not impose conventional closure, but rather creates the text as an opening, a continuous becoming. This section has only two parts. "The Kitchen" is an all-caps poetic form that, through repetitions of various (and all) activities performed "in the kitchen," this space is represented as the center of all life. "A Poem" is the second piece, entitled "*en la casa de verta*," by Victor Hernandez Cruz, a Puerto Rican poet (and the first Hispanic poet to be published by a mainstream publishing house) in 1969. Grosvenor's affinity for Cruz must have been based on their shared approach; he once described his poetry as "his way of traveling," and his major concerns include immigration, city-dwelling, and language play. He

²⁹⁰ ?

²⁹¹ *Take My Word*, 50.

storytelling, through the tastes of food rendered in language. At times, the cookbook reads like an oral history. A recipe for “Uncle Zander’s Corn Muffins” includes “1 tablespoon some kind of short’nin” (37); we hear the oral transcription. In this way, Grosvenor’s playful and performative use of language functions as verbal resistance, as it conveys the “performances of black speech and music.”²⁹⁴ The comical effect resembles Child’s humorous TV cooking, or her notorious mishap recipes for chickens and lobsters. In a recipe for “Frogs,” Grosvenor writes, “Take a frog and cut off his back legs and throw the rest of him to the dogs” (76). An amusingly titled “Uptight Ragout” succinctly instructs: “Take leftover meat and a couple of chicken legs and add fresh vegetables and rice and cook together until done” (64); this is the complete recipe. The ragout may exhibit the opposite of uptightness, but for the uptight cook looking for direction, this recipe could go either way. And we might also wonder why such a recipe, if it can even be called that, is necessary; the point does not seem to be to expand one’s culinary repertoire, but rather to critique, subvert, and poke fun at the recipe itself (while also revering it fundamentally) as an object with larger cultural and racial meaning.

Grosvenor’s performative virtuosity is perhaps what leads Goldman to read *Vibration Cooking* within the African-American literary tradition of the trickster figure. Her first-person point-of-view, at once a spokesperson for Black women’s cookery and a self-stylizing “I” splitting into multiple personae, changes as rapidly as the narrative. This makes for an unreliable narrator, and a more active interpretive role for the reader, in food and in language. The first story of the cookbook is the story of her birth, a remarkable event that borders on magic-realism, a tall-tale that we nevertheless accept; it is, after all, the beginning. Born as a three-pound twin, she is put “in a shoe box...on the wood-stove oven door. That was a kind

²⁹⁴ Williams-Forson, xxv.

of incubator.” When her mother attempts to throw her in the fireplace, “all praises due to the gods Aunt Rose [catches her]” (3).²⁹⁵ This fantastical family account then segues into stories of hunting, from which recipes for unusual animals follow, including: coon, peacock, kangaroo, elephant, bear, and gator. The recipe for “Squirrel” intersperses instruction and narrative: “Brown the squirrel just like you do the rabbit...The winter that I was nine he went hunting” (5). The recipe for “Peacocks” totally deviates from form: “Are too beautiful to be eaten and I don’t think the Creator meant for people to have peacock feathers sitting in vases on window sills. If I was Jimi Hendrix I’d get rid of that vest. It is said that peacock feathers bring bad luck and I believe it” (6) – not only is the reader denied measurements and procedures, but Grosvenor makes a persuasive case for why *not* to eat peacocks, with religious and superstitious reasoning; she refuses to give cooking recipes altogether. The recipe for “Elephant Tails” has nothing to do with food: “Bracelets made from the tail of the elephant are said to bring good luck but only if someone gives you one. Never buy your own (7). But what feels especially trickster about this section is Grosvenor’s use of gourmet, outsourced foods that we wouldn’t expect to appear in African-American culinary history, for example, kangaroo tails (“canned and imported” from Australia) and elephant tails. Perhaps this section explains what Grosvenor means when she writes that she “exploits” African-American dishes. In her 1986 introduction, she tricks a white woman who derogatorily asks her how to cook collard greens – “How do you people fix those?” – by responding that she should prepare them as a salad with Italian dressing (190). As Goldman

²⁹⁵ She also recalls being stomped in the head by a mule (8).

argues, such mistranslations “provide a check on readers – at least white readers – eager to make African American culture their own” (49).²⁹⁶

There is, too, an element of role-playing that is thematic to, yet also enacted by, the cookbook, an “autobiographical gymnastics.”²⁹⁷ Grosvenor recalls a time when she disguised herself as the descendant of an African chief, Princess Verta from Tabanguila, an island near Madagascar, while traveling in Dover, England in 1958, which subsequently made the local news. Not only does her role as the Princess allow her to play with the line between self and other, which the genre of autobiography inherently does, it also reveals how she is disrupting a narrative of “Home” with a story of otherness from abroad. Through parody, the author-as-actor insists that identity, which is multi-dimensional and contingent upon circumstances, is something performed, and in this way she “call[s] attention to the dynamics of self-representation” and to the formulation of subjectivity in the act of literary metamorphosis.²⁹⁸ As Goldman argues, “the act of telling is itself an idiosyncratic maneuver that acknowledges, even as it critiques, the Afrocentrism of the Black Arts movement.”²⁹⁹ In another instance, Grosvenor tells of a time in her life when, aspiring to be an actress (to be the “black hope of the American theater”), she works instead as a cook for the Hedgerow Theatre:

I used to get the Chester bus to Rose Valley from Media and it was only full of black women who worked out there. They couldn't figure how come I was wearing jeans and sweaters to work. In my most Chekhovian voice I would say, “I’m an actress, not a domestic. I’m on my way to the theatre.” They would look at me like I was out of my mind. One day I got on and the driver said, “Too hot to scrub floors today, right sweetie?” (54)

²⁹⁶ Witt refers to how “white culture renewed itself through parasitic dependence on black cultural innovation” by patronizing soul food (160), just as it had with jazz culture. This idea mirrors the class distinctions implied in Child.

²⁹⁷ Goldman, 53.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

Here, Grosvenor figures a persona that might affect the difficulty with which she is read, yet mocks her own inability to overcome race, gender, and class categories through this performance of passing.

Furthermore, her cookbook exposes how foods do or do not *pass*.³⁰⁰ There are several ways in which she interrogates racial disparities in the treatment of foods: how they are named, cooked, and ultimately, tasted cross-culturally. Grosvenor's "quandary" is white American consumerism, for as Zafar asks: "even if Aunt Jemima's image on the pancake-mix box has been updated, has the consciousness of American consumers been similarly revised?"³⁰¹ The answer may be obvious to Grosvenor, but she persists in constructing herself both in light of African American cookery and in the global stories of food that surpass or expand it. Even so, she at times buys into the commercialized image of the black woman in the kitchen, seemingly accommodating the palate of white consumers by shamelessly advising: "As for pancakes – go and use Aunt Jemima and they always come out right" (17). We might wonder if Aunt Jemima, in this context, is a useful or detrimental affiliation. Nevertheless, Grosvenor tackles the often racially-informed conceptions of food that perpetuate racist stereotypes and shape cultural tastes, despite her apparent belief that "Food is not racial" (xxxv). Our experience of *Vibration Cooking* instead reminds us that in matters of food and art, taste is necessarily discriminatory.

Eroticizing

Just as "Home" contrasts "Away From Home," her section on "Madness" offsets "Love." The former focuses on stories of racism (in hospitals, taxis, and at work) that fuel Grosvenor's anger, while the latter demonstrates the favorable opportunism of food as love.

³⁰⁰ The aforementioned preparation of collards on TV is one example.

³⁰¹ "The Signifying Dish," 450.

Early in “Home,” Grosvenor stresses the importance of a love of tribe that originates in childhood: “When you are tribal you don’t have slots for loving – you love” (10), and this philosophy seems to inform her philosophy of food throughout her cookbook. She follows this statement with a recipe for “Aunt Virter’s Fried Liver and Onions,” the language of which is imbued with love: “Have your liver sliced not too thick and not too thin. About $\frac{3}{4}$ inch is my vibration. Let your skillet get real hot” (10). Here, vibration as double-meaning, as an intuitive measurement and a bodily expression; hotness is an allusion to passion within the skillet as body. Later in this same section, she describes how a poundcake got her a proposal for marriage: “The fine young man loved the cake. He said that he had a thing for girls who get on their hands and knees to scrub floors (I never use a mop) and who can cook. The dude asked me to marry him but I didn’t” (18-19). Rather than note the sexism inherent in her exchange with this man, she chooses instead to highlight the connection between cooking and/as love, in a way that undermines feminism at that time. In the section “Love,” Grosvenor begins with a list of things she loves in poetic form:

I love.
I love a lot
of people, places and things.
I love my tribe and my friends.
I love couscous, watermelon...persimmons...sardines and grits...turnip
greens... (103).³⁰²

The section is also broken into subsections based on a random assortment of loved things, within which recipes are integrated: dinner parties, friends, African clothes, and bon voyage parties. Perhaps the most obvious metaphor for love is her recipe for “Stuffed Heart Honky Style”:

Slit the heart and remove any gristle and fat and other weird-looking vessels

³⁰² For the purposes of this discussion, I have only cited the foods (not other objects) mentioned in this passage.

of blood. Fill with soul dressing. Sew up. Then salt and pepper the heart and sauté in peanut oil until it is nearly beautiful black and then cover with tomato juice and beef broth mixed together. Simmer in a covered saucepan until it is tender and breaks easily (113).

The wordplay in this recipe is too obvious to be unironic. The heart is specifically “beautiful black” and filled “with soul” (the recipe for “Soul Stuffing” follows), punning on soul food; it nourishes. Yet it is also something that gets broken, which could imply the risks of romantic love, but also the realities of racism, or what Witt refers to as the “parasitic dependence on black cultural innovation” via the patronizing of soul food by white culture.³⁰³ Finally, on the subject of love, the section “Mixed Bag” (the contents are true to its name) contains a subsection on “Aphrodisiacal Foods.” Instead of naming what these are, she gives a three-point argument for why it is “unwise” to be specific; “you can’t be no fool about it,” she humorously writes, “I mean you got to know what you’re doing and who you’re doing it to” (139). Even without particulars, her message remains – food is erotic.

III

Harryette Mullen’s Supermarket Poetics

Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot. This makes it art...
– Gertrude Stein

In syntactically erroneous grammar, Stein suggests in the above epigraph that asparagus is art, or more generally, food is art. Considering that Mullen’s *S*PeRM**K*T* may be read as a revisionist text talking back to (or even cannibalizing) Stein’s “Food” section in *Tender Buttons*, her 1914 collection of prose-poems, it is imperative to acknowledge this affiliation. However, the central pairing of this chapter will be *S*PeRM**K*T* and *Vibration Cooking*, for Grosvenor’s culinary example informs how Mullen thinks about food as racial matter. In

³⁰³ *Black Hunger*, 160.

recapitulating Grosvenor's project and reworking Stein's, Mullen mediates between the popular approach of Grosvenor and the hermetic style of Stein to produce a text that traverses racial, literary, and cultural high/low divides.

The epigraph to *S*PeRM**K*T*, a line from *Tender Buttons*, is apropos of her project to destabilize authoritative patriarchal discourses: "This is no authority for the abuse of cheese." Yet Mullen pushes against the inheritance of a feminist experimental literary tradition to make space for the sort of black experimentalism that we find in Grosvenor's text (Mix, 65). The sort of critique of white femininity that Stein makes from her stance of privilege is only a springboard for Mullen's reclamation of black experience, for as Marianne DeKoven argues, "race and class are frequently suppressed co-referents of representations of woman and the feminine" (). For this reason, Mullen's work "cannot be read as simply an experiment in remaking Stein's work, her "passing" as a kind of deracinated experimental writer," but rather as a what emerges from the margins, what is "made possible through generations of black labor, both manual and creative," particularly in the folksy example of Grosvenor (Mix, 87).

Mullen's title resembles Grosvenor's ("Was it cooking with a vibrator?" she recalls being asked) and Stein's ("tender" as a provocative descriptor for something so ordinary as buttons): it is connotative of the erotic, conflating material desire (food) and bodily desire (sex) in the invented term *S*PeRM**K*T*, a linguistic cross between "supermarket" and "spermkit" (rape kit). This doubling of context occurs across the text as a whole, as well as within individual poems that connect the polysensory nuances of pleasure and pain. The erasure of letters indicated by asterisks emphasizes her belief that consumption is what defines identity in American culture – the missing lettering spells *u-a-r-e*, an acronym for the

maxim, “you are what you eat” (Mix, 77). In one interview, Mullen describes the process of arriving at this title:

I just wrote the word supermarket on the board. Then I x-ed out the letters u, a, r, e, and in a way, you can think of that as “you are what you eat”...within the word supermarket, the word sperm is there. The title offers a playful alternative reading of the supermarket as a cultural text...as a kind of synecdoche of consumer culture. It is also a world of language, because everything in the supermarket is labeled.³⁰⁴

She conveys the supermarket as a “world of language” (somewhere between the kitchens of Grosvenor and Stein), a Barthesque semiotics of eating, in a way that seamlessly blends the high and low. Her project engages a critique of consumption in the late twentieth century, while aesthetically embodying or performing it in textual form, for her “attention to the marketplace in *S*P_eRM**K*T*— whether the grocery store, the street corner, or the publishing world — makes visible again the realities of consumption,” particularly in how the experiences of consuming are structured by gender and race.³⁰⁵ In fact, her text exposes that the desire to consume foods, words, or bodies, by literally eating or buying them, may only be understood in relation to constructions of gender and race as they determine tastes (Mix, 77).

The consumers that navigate Mullen’s text, as they do within the metaphorical space of the supermarket, are the extended products of a culture inundated with commodities. Personified in commercials and slogans scattered throughout the text, culture is the lyric point-of-view at times. Mullen’s aim is not only to tackle the politics of food consumption at the national level, but to leverage the local in the longer reach for the global: “I’m concerned with the direction of what’s called globalization,” she says. That she invests this issue in a practice of poetry, producing poems that are assemblages of the everyday in order to trigger

³⁰⁴ “The Queen of Hyperbole: An Interview,” Emily Allen Williams, *African American Review*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2000), 705-6.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

a large-scale impact, reveals her belief in the necessity of art; her aesthetics are a masked radical politics. As she elaborates, “Literature, art, is ideological even when it has no political agenda. There is a certain implicit politics that is inherent in any work that engages with reality in any sense.”³⁰⁶

As practiced supermarket shoppers we recognize familiar signs, but as readers of poetry we are introduced to a new hybrid form in *S*PℓRM**K*T*, and in both cases, how we consume tells us how we identify ourselves, how we position our desires and tastes in relation to the foods and words that are sold to us, and how we ultimately become the very ideas embedded within the products we ingest. Mullen’s bricolage of stuff from the immediate environment is in many ways a Nineties’ fix, a cross between the impulses of mass consumption and a renewed attention to the local. We are placed in a specific time and space in *S*PℓRM**K*T*, though we may be disoriented by the elusive quality of her poetry, which creates what Charles Bernstein calls “a poetics of cultural modernism.”³⁰⁷ She lunges future forward while drawing from the food histories of black experience and the modernist techniques of literary craft. The book is built upon an arc of sequence, yet its seeming orderliness contains a certain fill-in-the-blanks challenge, for as Lyn Hejinian writes (describing Stein’s style), it is full of “cracks, holes, punctures, piercing, gaps, and breakage – and the possible spill.” In some ways this account of poetry may be applied to cooking, particularly Grosvenor’s related work in the kitchen, but also Stein’s experimental concoctions, for in Stein’s estimation, “Cooking, cooking is the recognition between sudden and nearly sudden very little and all large holes.”³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Interview with Daniel Kane, Poets Chat.

³⁰⁷ He is referring specifically to *Trimnings*.

³⁰⁸ *Tender Buttons*, 47.

The structure of *S*PeRM**K*T*, though it may appear as a uniform compilation of thirty-two prose-poems that formally look alike, in many ways resembles the makeup of a supermarket. It is a series of aisles, within which there are shelves; a panoply of messages and directives. Our role as consumers in the space of the market is converted to reader in the space of the text; we navigate these overlaid “environments of language” at once. The experience of the poem is not much different from what Mullen, referring to the trip to the supermarket, describes as “a possible excursion into language.” She explains that her book “is sort of like your shopping list when you go to the supermarket. So, each one of the aisles that you would find and the things that you would find in the supermarket, that’s how this book is organized.”³⁰⁹

Mullen’s supermarket, composed of objects, spaces (aisles, shelves), and foods, is not so different, structurally or aesthetically, from Stein’s textual composition of the domestic triumverate of “objects,” “rooms,” and “food” in *Tender Buttons*. Where Stein produces a picture of wartime rationing, Mullen’s text showcases the “generic life” of the 90s, including daily materials such as junk food, “frozen food” (73), “fast food” (88), “plastic wrap” (71) and other plastics (76), “ziplock” (73), and teflon, pitting the mundaneness of consumption against a national backdrop of bounteous choice during which her text emerged.³¹⁰ She resituates the black woman’s relationship to the marketplace, consumption, and commodification in its difference, though consumer culture deceptively promises the sameness of experience (Mix). The supermarket in Mullen’s text is a politicized space, a

³⁰⁹ A Conversation with Haryette Mullen, Farah Griffin, Michael Magee, Kristen Gallagher, 1997

³¹⁰ *S*PeRM**K*T*, 67. The “generic” contrasts a counteractive movement at the turn of the century, which focused on the specifically organic, local, and artisanal, and was mainly part of a racially homogenous (white) cultural discourse of food in America. On this note, *S*PeRM**K*T* captures the fusion/division tension in American food culture and social life in the 90s, for although this period may be characterized as “the fusion decade” in the culinary realm (fusion is the conscious blending of cuisines), it was socially a period of division throughout the country; race riots occurred from coast to coast, while soul food was having its fashionable heyday, especially among white consumers (Sylvia Lovegren)

vocabulary, a landscape in which bodies circulate as products of the market, just as foods and words do so to tell a particular story (about race, class, and gender).³¹¹ The structure of the sequence prose-poem mirrors the structure of the supermarket experience, a whole composed of aisles and shelves, parts of a larger narrative of naming and consuming. Like the commonplace objects of *Tender Buttons*, those in *S*PeRM**K*T* are not found in common places; “Any subject...leads not to understanding of its own superficial nature, but to the author’s general and firm perception of a general nature.”³¹²

As she writes in the first poem of *S*PeRM**K*T*: “Lines assemble gutter and margin. Outside and in, they straighten a place” (65). Language, we come to find, is Mullen’s subject, as it is for Stein, hence the pun on “lines” – of the supermarket, and of the text – as spaces with and of insides/outside. We are reminded, too, of lines from *Tender Buttons*, which Mullen is intentionally recycling, such as this one, whose thematic punning is related: “A line in life, a single line and a stairway, a rigid cook, no cook and no equator, all the same there is higher than that another evasion” (71-2). Mullen is direct in her aim:

I always wanted to use the pun as a lever to create the possibility of multiple readings. Yes, It’s about the lines at the supermarket and about the lines on a page and, well, the supermarket as an environment of language. There is so much writing in a supermarket. There are signs everywhere, labels on products, and I liked the idea of the supermarket as a linguistic realm where there are certain genres of writing.³¹³

Many of her poems involve a dynamic confrontation with words. Moreover, language gives order: lines “Organize a stand,” “Shelve space. Square footage.” The speaker inserts herself within the supermarket narrative, cited as “the tale of an eye,” yet the poem is also the tale for the reader, a form representing and embodying what Michael Pollan coined the

³¹¹ Cultural critic Warren Belasco discusses the supermarket as a “site of contention” for African Americans; “resentment of outsiders and calls for solidarity often centered on food shopping (161)

³¹² Hadas is speaking specifically of *Tender Buttons*, 63.

³¹³ Interview, Cynthia Hogue, 1999

“supermarket pastoral,” a romantic story of food which falsely levels out racial, class, and gendered distinctions.³¹⁴ The language of food signifies a variety of situations, and invokes consumers across identity differences; “all express themselves,” are given voice in Mullen’s poem: the single, divorced, widowed, family, young, and especially, women. At the end of the poem, the pun on “lines” returns as another metapoetic move: “More on line incites the eyes. Bold names label familiar type faces. Her hand scanning throwaway lines.” In the supermarket, one stands in line, one reads while standing in line, one reads the lines, and reads between the lines. Reading in this context is a form of consumption. But the language of lines is also disposable, fleeting; here is perhaps Mullen’s critique of the “throwaway” rhetoric of commodity culture in the Nineties, wherein “Using puns and the multiplicity of meaning in the pun is one way to use a few words and bring out more issues.”³¹⁵ The last line in the final poem of *S*PeRM**K*T* returns us full circle to our presence in her lines: “Speed readers skim the white space of this galaxy” (96). Here, she alludes to the supermarket as a white space, a white construct of language, within which reading is a racial act, comparable to tasting. This resonates with what Stein writes in the same poem mentioned above, “there is a melody that has white for a tune.” The mundane act of buying food is, as Kyla Tompkins argues, like “The colloquial nature of eating, its everydayness and seemingly asocial biological imperative renders it invisible as a socially constructed and highly discursive practice” (). Yet history reminds us that to have a cuisine is to have a language.

Rooting

For as reliant on Stein as Mullen may have been in constructing her text, she embraces a specific black folk tradition of food and language, referencing her forbears in

³¹⁴ articulate earlier in thesis?

³¹⁵ Interview, Hogue

Trimnings, "...with Dinah, with Jemima. Someone in the kitchen I know."³¹⁶ Grosvenor is among them. In one interview, she even explicitly links one of her poems to a piece of folklore from Grosvenor's cookbook.³¹⁷ Perhaps it was Grosvenor's literary translation not only of black cookery into a modern form, but also of the oral tradition into a written one, that Mullen emulates. Grosvenor's cookbook has the musicality and soundscape of spoken word, and what is spoken is the vernacular of food, in all of its bluesy cadence.

*S*PeRM**K*T* shares this influence, mixing high poetic diction with black dialect. Mullen addresses her interest in the transference of oral to written language:

I was interested in concentrating, distilling and condensing aspects of orality and literacy. Because when you have an oral tradition and you also have writing, you don't have to put the oral tradition on the page as transcription...I am more interested in a transformation of the oral into something that draws together different allusive possibilities in one utterance, which is something that writing can do better than speech. I'm interested in taking a speech-based tradition and transforming it through the techniques that are available to me in writing.³¹⁸

Her poems contain fragmented utterances that capture, like Grosvenor's recipes, the "allusive possibilities" to which she refers, not only through the integration of everyday speech and domestic folklore verbatim, but also through several literary devices.³¹⁹ Her writing has the linguistic innovation we associate with high poetry, yet the lyricism of slang. While Grosvenor's art form may also belong to a discourse of high art – she elevates the recipe to the status of poem – she nevertheless keeps her focus on preserving a low style of cooking in everyday vernacular. Conversely, Mullen fixates on the low subject of supermarket fodder, using the popular language of advertisements, even converting poems

³¹⁶ In *Recyclopedia*, 1991.

³¹⁷ "There's one item that just fascinated me, something she found in black folk tradition. I had never heard this before: "You're a huckleberry beyond my persimmon." Now see, this is what I'm talking about, exactly." (Interview?)

³¹⁸ An Interview with Harryette Mullen, Calvin Bedient, *Callaloo* 19.3 (1996) 651-669.

³¹⁹ Consider syntax, appositives, alliteration and consonance, repetition, song, and manifesto.

into forms that read like recipes, yet she remains loyal to abstruse dictates of poetic verse that characterize high art.

The supermarket goods of *S*PeRM**K*T* are portrayed in a contrast of black and white images that recall Grosvenor's linguistic distinction of black and white foods in her cookbook. It would seem that the culinary world, depicted through the kitchen or store, is a micro-representation of the racism at large in society. Mullen's objects such as "white porcelana," "white flours," "nice white rice," "white milk," and egg "whites," contrast "black kitchens," "coarse dark textures," "darker richer upper crust," "colored stacks," and "colored labels, the discounted irregulars," often along a metaphorical divide of regularity/irregularity, as well as cleanliness/dirt (the book is obsessed with this discourse), and health/disease ("It must be white, a picture of health"). Her textual spacing of certain poems further illuminates the racial marketing of foods (thus bodies, and texts) within the space of the supermarket; that in one aisle (poem) you find fatback and chitterlings (soul food), while in the adjacent aisle (poem) you find bread, a symbol of white middle-class eating; "a tub of guts" stands out against the "rich finely powdered" flours.

This poem riffs on the ingredients that go into making bread in a way that mirrors the construction of racial and class stereotypes, functioning as a sort of recipe in and of itself:

Well bread ain't refined of coarse dark textures never enriched a doughty peasant. The rich finely powdered with soft white flours. Then poor got pasty pale and pure bland ingrained inbred. Roll out dough we need so what bread fortifies their minimum daily sandwich. Here's a dry wry toast for a rough age when darker richer upper crust, flourishing, out priced the staff with moral fiber. Brown and serve, a slice of life whose side's your butter on.
(83)

Class and race intersect with equivalence in this poem, at the jagged edges between descriptors: refined/coarse, rich/poor, upper/peasant, white/dark, soft/rough,

fortified/bland. Mullen appropriates the black dialectical language of the poor (“ain’t”) with a tone of sarcasm and wit, assuming the authority to make absolutes about the production of ideas of race as they are inscribed in foodstuff (she puns on “of course”) to address a range of social stigmas around poverty and inbreeding.³²⁰ The poem mocks the idea that *you are what you eat*, that refined, enriched, fortified bread leads to those same qualities of character, to interior “moral fiber,” as if by mere access to “fine” foods one automatically obtains status. Her pun-filled prose accentuates the inaccuracies within language, especially that of marketing and advertising: “rich” is embedded in “enriched,” “finely” is repeated in “refined,” “inbred” plays on the recipe as a sound-echo for what goes “in bread.” And if we weren’t already aware of the speaker’s ironic indictment of the American factory that propagates discriminatory images through food, even the toast is described in rhyme as “dry wry.” If it is a “rough age” when the “darker richer upper crust” (the black bourgeoisie of Baraka’s critiques in his soul food essay) outdoes the working class, perhaps the poem points to the question of whether class differences reign more important than race within the supermarket age, or at least it underscores their reciprocity. The word that stands out, isolated by punctuation (enclosed by commas) – “flourishing” – is the only present participle, a word signifying the present tense of prospering in reference to what seems to be the morally elite black upper class. In the end, “a slice of life” is, paradoxically, a toasted “brown” piece of bread that gets served, to complete the recipe (the dough has already been rolled out and toasted). Mullen puts a pointed question to the reader-consumer, punning on butter – whose side are you on? – in an indirect political move to address consciousness about one’s choices, and the discriminatory realities that determine our consumptive habits. The materiality of

³²⁰ Mullen employs this dialect in another poem, “They never gets a tan in the heartwarming easy bake oven because they is eternal raw ingredients for programmed microwaving half-baked expressions of family love,” to privilege such *expressions* of family through black cooking over the artificial (presumably frozen) foods, or their imitations, prepared in the microwave.

bread is offset with its metaphorical significance as a representation of the inequities of everyday life.

Mullen's poems are frequently the site of "two ideas colliding together" (her quote) as in this one in which she critiques images of the prototypical American infant which are perpetuated by the marketing of jars of baby food:

Ad infinitum perpetual infants goo. Pastel puree of pure pink bland blue-eyed babes all born a cute blond with no chronic colic. Sterile eugenically cloned rows of clean rosy dimples and pamper proof towhead cowlicks. Adorable babyface jars. Sturdy innocent in the pink, out of the blue packs disposing durable superabsorbent miracle fibers. As solids break down, go to waste, a land fills up dead diapers with funky halflife (93).³²¹

This poem repeats some of the language and sentiment of the previous and other poems; words such as *pure*, *bland*, *sterile*, *clean*, *innocent* reappear throughout the text, and their recurrence develops and mimics a sense of the obsession for perfection that pervades white American culture, which Mullen hopes to expose through recontextualizing the images and language of advertising campaigns and commercial packaging. The very first word of the poem, *ad*, is a pun that sets up the poem as both a critique of advertising and of the seeming endlessness with which the ideal baby is marketed; the Latin adverbial phrase suggests infinity, and this doubling suggests that ads continue forevermore. *Goo* is the sentimental language that gets perpetuated in ad images promulgating ideas of the perfect baby, which are contained in this poem: *pure*, *cute*, *clean*, *rosy*, *adorable*, *innocent*, *miracle*. It is also a reference to babytalk, and to the actual waste material produced by infants, part of the infinite cycle of consumption upon which the poem rests and critiques, and even which it emits on the page. Not only is the model American baby racially light-colored in skin and hair and blue-eyed – an allusion to the physical ideal of the "Aryan race" as the pure, master race – it is also marked by specific gender markers (pink/blue) that are perpetually constructed. Mullen uses

³²¹ Interview

alliteration across the entirety of this line to emphasize and thus undermine the homogeneity or sameness construed in this picture; *p* (pastel, puree, pure, pink) and *b* (bland, blue, babes, born, blond), and a rhyming *c* (chronic colic). But sounds deceive, just as the images they serve to maintain, and beneath these commercial surfaces, within the niceness of sounds, lays a tension, which Mullen attempts to counter-write through her ironic play on words.

Eugenically cloned rather than literally birthed, the baby of Mullen's poem is a symbol produced by ad culture (not conceived in the womb); a sterilized copy of "baby" that accrues cultural value as a desired consumable. An unrealistic portrait housed in the poem but appropriated from the supermarket emerges: one that advertises a baby that doesn't cry, doesn't have colic, and is clean and sturdy. In Mullen's supermarket, rows are not described as filled with jars of baby food, but as containing the ideas inherent in the images on labels of jars, and her writing makes this distinction: these are rows of facial characteristics, "dimples" and "cowlicks," that imply perfect clones of white babies. The lines of the poem, parallel rows, reproduce this effect. However, this idea is not "durable," the poem critically reminds us; the *puree* is not a description of the baby food but instead refers to the body of the baby as a product for consumption, a puree of false ideals. This is perhaps why Mullen ends the poem with an image of excrement. Since we can assume that the baby food in jars is not solid, it is unexpected that Mullen finishes with a reference to the breaking-down of solids, and in this way she transfers attention to the idea of the advertised body; food is digested into excrement, transformed into America's junk, just as a slogan is consumed then expelled. Consumption in this narrative amplifies waste – the landfill piles up with things mass-assimilated. We buy the images we want to become in the objects we consume, and that which is incorporated leads to waste. Wastefulness is a concept ingrained in an American fixation on values of perfection, control, order, hygiene, and purity (present in

many of Mullen's poems); values disseminated to justify the segregation of bodies along racial, gendered, and class lines. Mullen refers to the poem as a reflection on her childhood, one that renders the consequences of consumption, especially in relation to identity: "when you would walk down the baby food aisle and every baby was pink and blonde and blue-eyed, as if this is what a baby looks like all over the world, or all over this country, that's what a baby looks like. At least that has changed. A lot of these poems have to do with commercials that I watched when I was a child...So that kind of went from the food to...the waste."³²²

The racism produced through advertised images extends from the human to the creaturely world in a set of cultural metaphors. The poem that begins "Kills bugs dead," the first line of which you would find on an extermination product in a supermarket, places the reality of predatory bugs within specifically "black kitchens." They "foul the food," but they also come to be seen as potential assassins of the black race, assuming this is the "we" with which she identifies. The species referred to defines the pests but also plays upon the stereotype of blacks (whose kitchens they invade): "Wipe out a species, with God at our side. Annihilate the insects. Sterilize the filthy vermin (71). Mullen turns the marketing language for a product of pest control into the human language of racism in regards to genocide, so by the end of the poem, the foulness and filth within the kitchen is representative of a more wide-scale cultural perception of racial difference, which ads, she critically shows us, sell to consumer citizens. An image of sterility is reiterated as the ideal.

Insects appear once again in the final poem of the collection, which ties together the overlapping issues of race, gender, and genealogy on which the whole text is formed:

Flies in buttermilk. What a fellowship. That's why white milk makes yellow butter. Homo means the same. A woman is different. Cream always rises

³²² Ibid.

over spilt milk. Muscle men drink it all in. Awesome teeth and wholesale bones. Our cows are well adjusted. The lost family album keeps saying cheese. Speed readers skim the white space of this galaxy (96).

“Flies in buttermilk” recalls lyrics from the popular children’s folk song, “Skip to My Lou,” a dance game of stealing and swapping partners: “Fly’s in the buttermilk, Shoo, fly, shoo,” the lyrics go. The expression is also southern slang for an interracial couple, and for light-skinned blacks.³²³ Mullen repurposes this image of racial mixing to call attention to how we read the material differences inscribed in foods, bodies, histories, and texts. Buttermilk, a form of cultured milk (yet another allusion to refinement as an ideal), symbolizes white culture. The presence of flies suggests the soiling of its purity, the negative result of miscegenation, yet the inescapable reality of sharing “the white space of this galaxy.” Though her reference to “fellowship” is ironic (flies do not belong nor thrive in milk, “Mullen points to a heritage that, no matter how assiduously denied, includes both black and white figures who are bound together – genetically, socially, historically” (Mix, 85). Perhaps critical of a culture that increasingly privileges the treatment of animals over people, she describes the cows as “well adjusted” (a condition contingent upon laws that regulate the meat industry, which the organic food movement of the Nineties spurred, as it affected agricultural and marketing practices) in a way that seems to contrast the galaxy of human subjects. Mullen plays on this idea of sameness in contrast to the visibility of difference not only in terms of race (segregation versus diversity), but also in terms of gender (women produce milk while men “drink it all in”), insisting that we reread history as a set of “lost” relationships and lineages. If the family album is lost, so is the historically accurate knowledge of one’s roots, and Mullen attempts to reconstruct a new reading, or to help us read differently.

³²³ urbandictionary.com

In the end, she critiques the cultural and literary history that “Hide[s] the face” of black laborers and artists in the kitchens and on the page who have had a formative role in its shaping; one poem reads: “Hide the face. Chase dirt with an ugly stick. That sinking sensation, a sponge dive. Brush off scum on some well scrubbed mission. It’s slick to admit, motherwit and grit ain’t groceries” (95).³²⁴ The final line of this poem, and of the whole book, riffs on Little Willie John’s 1955 King Records recording “Grits Ain’t Groceries” (Mix) – grits, a symbolic dish in southern soul food becomes an identifying feature linked to one’s grit (determination) and wit. Mullen’s recipe, with its imperatives to *hide*, *chase*, and *brush off*, actions directed at the social and genealogical histories “through which motherwit would have been passed down” and which a literary tradition would have been shaped, exposes the problematic ways that we read the past with an intent to purify narratives of race.³²⁵ Her instructions are instead laments, and ironically point to our futile attempts to hide, chase, and brush off historical realities. Just as Stein challenged the gendered structures of language (though she did so from a position of white privilege), Mullen intervenes to expose the falsity of a clean literary history, redefining the avant-garde as it has been formed by black voices in culinary and literary realms. The *face* of black tradition, of black cultural currency, materially and artistically, cannot simply be scrubbed away, for as Mullen reminds us, playing on words with the rhyming proximity of *admit*, *wit*, and *grit*, it is superficial (*slick*) not to acknowledge the commodification of black subjects. Yet she points the reader toward the possibility of thinking outside consumer culture, investing power in “‘motherwit and grit,’ intangible qualities that cannot be purchased...but are, instead, inherited matrilineally.”³²⁶ The desire to complicate and remake the narrative of modernist experimentalism occurs in

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid., 88.

³²⁶ Ibid., 87.

the images throughout *S*PeRM**K*T* that evoke the preservation of cleanliness and purity in contrast to dirt and ugliness. She resurrects the idea of a “body with an interior” (87), of a “recyclable soul,” by rewriting how we, as implicated consumers, read food, race, and text.

Revising

Another way in which Mullen reclaims the low matter of black tradition is through a process of renaming that is not dissimilar to Grosvenor’s, particularly in the “name-calling” section of her cookbook discussed previously. She is committed to the re-imaginative use of words to create unpredictable encounters for the reader, just as Grosvenor is in recipe language: “That’s what poetry does when it remakes and renews words, images, and ideas, transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected.”³²⁷ Often her words compellingly rename their ghostlier versions. Her text is essentially built upon these iterations of words; each reappearance of a word is its re-vision, such that language is “re-vivid revival reruns recycling itself” (78). Her style, to borrow Neil Schmitz’ description (of Stein’s method), “resumes, pieces together, its own alogical coherence. Certain motifs nebulously emerge and then constellate into discernible patterns.”³²⁸ If the products we consume become us, Mullen is intent on taking control of this process by redesigning the spatial and linguistic parameters to this system of symbols. She paradoxically does this through the authoritative use of the commonplace. With an interest in “the collision of contemporary poetry with the language of advertising and marketing, the class of fine art aesthetics with mass consumption and globalization, and the interaction of literacy

³²⁷ Ibid., vii.

³²⁸ “Gertrude Stein as Postmodernist,” 1210. In *Tender Buttons*, Alice B. Toklas’ name literally gets recast within the poems, taking on dual meaning – “alas” is both “Alice” and the expression of disfortune, as in the poem “Cooking,” an activity which Alice would have controlled: “Alas, alas, the pull alas the bell alas the coach in china, alas the little put in leaf alas the wedding butter meat, alas the receptacle, alas the back shape of mussel, mussel and soda” (53)

and identity,” *S*PeRM**K*T* enfolds the high and the low, in much the same way that Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking* recycles the past into new definition.³²⁹ In fact, the words she reiterates in discussions of the approach of her work (remake, reconfigure, renew, revise) underscore her active commitment to literary reconstructionism. Though Mullen may engage the very disjunctive experience of the market that she critiques, recurring configurations of words across the temporal space of the text cohere, producing familiarity for the reader.

This sense of the familiar comes from the realism in her poetry (though it is simultaneously obscuring), as she quite literally borrows from media rhetoric, creating a sort of continuum between daily life and aesthetic engagement. Mullen describes her poetry as originating from “folklore, commercials, and everyday speech.” The jingle, a “type of formation,” “a kind of everyday poetry,” reappears throughout her work. Through the interplay of the jingle-jangle and high verse, she collapses the boundaries between the commonplace and art; if writing is a form of recycling, the jingle is “something that is very much a part of how language is improvised on a day-to-day basis,” Mullen insists, “We are continually creating new versions of this.” She further points to “how much poetry material there is all around us and how much we are participating in the creation of something that is poetic -- it's not always *poetry* but it's the stuff that poetry is made of.”³³⁰ The reclamation of the poetic – defining poetry on her terms, authorizing its “stuff” – in turn has the power to impact how people read. In Mullen’s rendition, poetry *is* the ordinary. In her obscurations of boundaries between the high/low, Mullen reinvents a new form. She explains the visual collage of her artistic process:

*S*PeRM**K*T* was about my recollections of jingles that have embedded themselves in my brain...I thought about the power of those jingles, that

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Interview

mnemonic efficiency of poetry, of the quick line that is economical and concise and compressed ... *S*PeRM**K*T* is trying to think about the language in which we are immersed, bombarded with language that is commercial, that is a debased language. Those jingles are based in something that is very traditional, which is the proverb, the aphorism. Those are the models, so I try to think back through the commercial and the advertising jingle... I try to recycle it. The idea of recycling is very much a part of *S*PeRM**K*T*, to take the detritus and to turn it into art.

By retrieving the rhymes of old jingles, and recycling commercial aphorisms, she creates a new poetics of consumerism, of supermarket culture, pointing back to the black aesthetic of Grosvenor, who is in many ways as important a literary predecessor as Stein for how she merges the language of African folklore and bohemian Paris, soul food and *haute cuisine*, slang and poetry into a postmodern montage of intervening tastes.

But like Stein, Mullen is interested in imbuing the simple with a more-than-meets-the-eye density. In several interviews, she recalls her initial frustration with the impenetrable quality of *Tender Buttons*, the feeling of being an outsider to the text's language, which over time converted into the devoted fascination of an apprentice: "I remember my earlier attempts to read Stein, and thinking, "I can't read this! I can't understand it!" I felt frustrated but it was intriguing."³³¹ It would be the very challenge of Stein's opaqueness, even its lack of ease, that kept Mullen engaged with the text as a model for *S*PeRM**K*T*, and made her realize, "I could use what she was doing."³³² The similarities between the texts substantiate her intentional response to it, and point to her intervention in a history of experimental literature and feminist poetics.³³³ Stein's "idiosyncratic approach" to words, her linguistic innovation, and the authority with which she made language the focal subject of her work,

³³¹ Interview with Harryette Mullen, Cynthia Hogue, 1999, Bucknell University.

³³² Ibid. Her text *Trimings* was also influenced by *Tender Buttons*, particularly the section "Objects."

³³³ Similarities include: the book's structure (a series of units constituting a whole); the prose-poem form; paratactic, compressed sentences; the subject of material culture through a lens of domesticity; a cultural critique embedded in modernist poetics; and an investment in "ideas of consumption...objects...consumer fetishism." Preface, x. / Interview with Cynthia Hogue.

held for Mullen an appealing mystery (“The language is elusive and there is a secretive quality”) as well as elegance (“I really appreciated the elegance of what she was doing”).³³⁴ She expresses admiration for how Stein “boil[s] down language to the absolute, essential elements,” yet also how “the technical, syntactical construction” of sentences “allow[s] more ambiguity in the work...create[s] different levels of meaning.”³³⁵ It is both “simple yet elusive” poetic prose.³³⁶ And in her own poetry, she strives for this same balance. Mullen’s poems, too, are esoteric, dense, convoluted. She explicitly addresses the importance of such an allusive (and elusive) method: “I wanted the poem to be interesting and complex, as I think experience is, language is; language has that capacity.”³³⁷ And she elaborates this idea in another interview:

...in some ways I think I’m ruined, because the kind of poetry I was writing before has much more of a mass appeal...I’m always feeling a certain tension because poetry “should” be accessible, simple in certain ways. Plain speech. An American style really is a plain speech style...but on the other hand, there is a dazzle of the intellect and there is the complexity of the thought or the kinds of connections that can be made when you are working on different levels of signification or different rhetorical levels. I hope that this is a productive tension or conflict.³³⁸

The oppositional ideas of a poem’s function are starkly delineated: a poem should have mass appeal, accessibility, simplicity, plainness, which Mullen attributes to a distinctly American style, yet also intellectual complexity. It should be made of commonplace objects, ordinary words, and simple forms, yet “dazzle” aesthetically. The poem is mundane and artful, material and metaphor. It is no surprise that she affiliates with yet separates from Stein, distinguishing her own work as more diversified, linked to popular culture in the style of Grosvenor, even as it preserves its modernist roots: “my own prose poems depart from her

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Preface to *Recyclopedia*, ix.

³³⁷ An Interview with Harryette Mullen, Calvin Bedietn, *Callaloo* 19.3 (1996) 651-669.

³³⁸ Interview with Harryette Mullen, Cynthia Hogue, 1999, Bucknell University

cryptic code to recycle and reconfigure language from a public sphere that includes mass media and political discourse as well as literature and folklore.”³³⁹

Just as foods function as signs, words are signifying objects “with outsides and insides and histories and futures” in a Steinian Modernist sense.³⁴⁰ In his discussion of Stein’s re-vision of language, Kaufmann compares her elucidation of the essential form enclosed in a word with Picasso’s visual figures, in a way that is relevant for understanding Mullen’s project: “She makes not a physical shape but a verbal and ideational one, and so shapes a reality of language.”³⁴¹ Her text is reflexive of its medium: foods and words. This is a particularly modernist attempt to negotiate one’s relationship to the world via words, to use language to interrogate its condition as a viable mode of communication; one that repeatedly fails to convey meaning. Words are invented and remade not for the function of representation but as things in and of themselves, and “the whole this is not understood.”³⁴² Perhaps for this reason, Terry Eagleton argues that the obscurity of modernism is intended to derail texts from the instant consumption so prevalent in the quick-fix era; indeed, one chews Mullen’s words while bracing for indigestion. Yet her poem is at the same time a decipherable composite of mass culture, of mundane, local matter.³⁴³ Meaning is not easily consumed, nor is it intended to be, but foods, like words, remain part of the realm of everydayness. Mullen performs, undermines, and revises the routine patterns provoked by daily material life in writing, with the perspective that language, like eating, is habit; she “makes the reality of signs apparent and makes the habits of language and of reading

³³⁹ Preface to *Recyclopedia*, x.

³⁴⁰ Michael Edward Kaufmann, “Gertrude Stein’s Re-Vision of Language and Print in *Tender Buttons*,” 450. Stein writes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “Hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, in these studies she began to describe the inside as seen from the outside” (192).

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 450.

³⁴² Stein

³⁴³ See Chapter 1.

conscious by foregrounding her materials...language and print.”³⁴⁴ If the objective of *Tender Buttons* and of *S*PeRM**K*T* is to contain the “anatomy of language and culture,” foods represent a system of meaning that comprises the familiar and foreign, concrete and symbolic, at once: “She must anatomize the system even while being subjected to it.”³⁴⁵

Mullen’s *S*PeRM**K*T* unites the language of the supermarket with the lyrical mode, yet reengages a poetics of micro-sensations from the perspective of a poet of color. She is upfront in her focus: “I’m interested in the interaction of language and identity in poetry.”³⁴⁶ We may hear this as a variation of what Grosvenor’s cookbook tells us about the interpenetration of language and identity enabled through cooking. But like Stein, Mullen departs from conventional grammar, syntax, referentiality, and linear time in order to capture consciousness through verbal cubism. She creates her own new language by recycling (via mimicry) and eroticizing the ordinary discourse of domesticity, subverting a conventionally feminine model of language, as well as other dominant prose styles.

In Mullen’s Preface, she defines her book as constituting “serial prose poems that use playful, punning, fragmented language to explore sexuality, femininity, and domesticity.”³⁴⁷ Yet she expands the practice of linguistic innovation inherited from Stein to include commercials and advertisements from popular media. This brief one-line poem early in the collection reads like the duplicate of an ad: “Desperately pregnant nubile preferred stock girls deliver perfect healthy psychic space alien test tube babes, in ten or less, or yours is free, we guarantee” (70). Mullen appropriates the language of an authoritative, discriminating “we.” The impression given is that what is on-screen is transferred “off

³⁴⁴ Ibid., Though this is Kaufmann’s description of Stein, I borrow it for my reading of Mullen, which is analogous.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., see previous note.

³⁴⁶ Interview

³⁴⁷ ix

screen,” into the space of the poem, in such a way that their presumably competing languages conflate. At other times her poetry appropriates advertising rhetoric: “Check out this week’s seasonal electric reindeer luz de vela Virgin Mary markdowns. Choose from ten brands clearly miracle H-2-O” (68), and we even hear the promising slogan for an exterminator product: “Kills bugs dead” (74). The poem becomes a subversive form of advertisement, though exactly what it is attempting to sell the reader may be unclear.

Not only do labels guide consumption, so does the text enact this for the reader in moments to make us more conscious about how we consume the language of food; she asks: what are the expectations we bring to the text, and how do we understand the consequences of our consumption? The supermarket, in this rendering, is a “metonymic reservoir of ways that we see the world and ourselves in it. We are consumers; that’s how we are constructed as citizens.”³⁴⁸ Her text plays with this metonymical construction by restaging our quotidian habits and needs within the space of high art. The poem, then, is not so inaccessible: it is a shopping list, a recipe, a jingle-jangle, something we encounter daily, though it may elude us.

We see how Mullen, modeling Stein’s counter-discourse to the conventional cookbook, engages a similar task to deploy and subvert supermarket rhetoric and mass advertising as it relates to the racial, class, and gendered tensions within her own domestic reality. If *S*PeRM**K*T* is one version of a domestic guidebook, it is somewhere between the low kitchen anecdotes of Grosvenor that classify as literary, and the high cubist recipes of Stein that reproduce commonplace habits. Stein’s prose

varies between imperative and statement and uses a shorthand style...seems to connote incompleteness – a faltering of stability, anxiety over the changes made, or her own dallying on the edge of the unsayable, the openly homoerotic. Her difference from cookbook prose is obvious, as her prose is

³⁴⁸ Interview, Hogue

not “readable” in an ordinary way and veers constantly to other “topics” to make clear its polysemous nature.³⁴⁹

Likewise, Mullen’s similar style of prose, a cross-section of imperative and statement in shorthand, borders on unreadability. The text seems aware of its own silences, even as it attempts to fill them, to reauthorize the black female consumer as an empowered subjectivity, a tastemaker, by linguistically representing her as a participant in the market. In a text that has no real beginning or ending, Mullen generates a sense of the unfinished story of black eating, in a way creating her own rendition of Grosvenor’s “To Be Continued.” The contact made by her subjects with foods as a language effectively disrupts the supermarket narrative of white culture. Katherine J. Parkin considers the historical exclusion of black women from market dynamics: “Even as evidence poured in that other groups consumed their products, food advertisers ignored the potential of other markets. They wanted white middle- and upper-class women as consumers.”³⁵⁰ If the black body had value, it was primarily as a usable or devourable commodity; “since the beginning of American pop culture we notice a recurring theme of the black body perceived and described not only as a source of food, but as an edible substance in itself.”³⁵¹ Mullen’s text critiques the culture that circulates the black body as yet another consumable by re-inserting it back into the supermarket aisles as an empowered, desiring consumer, but her political effect is achieved through the ambiguous literary techniques that insist on a different way of reading, and which activate the reader-consumer in a new, self-consciously discriminating role.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 391-3.

³⁵⁰ *Food Is Love*. “Food advertisers in particular remained hesitant to associate their products with African Americans and resisted including their images in mainstream advertisements. One of the largest publishers in the country, the Curtis Publishing Company, excluded blacks from its famed market research and discouraged circulation agents from promoting its periodicals in neighborhoods and towns inhabited by African Americans. Even at the end of the century... food advertisers continued to be uniquely uninterested in reaching African American consumers” (13).

³⁵¹ Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me*.

Another way that Mullen borrows from *Tender Buttons*, in effect recycling it into a contemporary form, is in her formation of *S*PeRM**K*T* as the stylistic rendition of a cookbook, within which poems at times read like recipes, such that “the parallel between food and the cooking of food...and the apprehending and expression of experience is obvious” (Schmitz, 1213). This is the reverse literary move of Grosvenor, whose cookbook rejects conventionality, and instead reads more like a postmodern autobiographical travelogue narrative; her “contents” promise recipes, but the reader discovers provocatively unusual headings and subchapters, as if inside a novel. Mullen alternatively intersperses the language of conventional recipe, alimentary detail, lists of ingredients, and cooking imperatives, with such poetic devices as alliteration, internal rhymes, and rhythmic nuance. She parodies the genre of the shopping list, the recipe, and even the high aesthetic of the poem in this bold amalgam. Her paratactic sentence poeticizes conventional prose. Out of the linguistic realm of the market comes what Mullen refers to as “Instructions as a genre of writing.”³⁵² “Just add water” is the opening line of one poem, an act that “can reconstitute,” just as her language reconstitutes new forms from an inheritance (68). Mullen’s recipe is often a more general instruction for living, as in this poem, “Chill out a cold, cold world. Open frost-free fridge. Thaw and serve slightly deferred gratification” (73). Here, she plays upon the possibility of pleasure to be attained within a cold (indifferent, hostile) world, in a critique of the frozen-food culture of the Nineties.

Mullen reinvents the form of recipe within a context that is and is not about food.³⁵³ In this poem, the food industry and the drug trade are equally malevolent cultural forces:

Eat junk, don’t shoot. Fast food leaves hunger off the hook. Employees must

³⁵² Interview, Hogue

³⁵³ In this way she is influenced both by Grosvenor, who alters our expectations of the recipe by frequently transmitting recipes into story forms that exceed direct culinary concern, and by Stein, who uses the stylistic coordinates of the recipe as a space for linguistic play.

wash hands. Bleach your needles, cook the works. Stick it to the frying pan, hyped again. Another teflon prez. Caught in the fire 'round midnight, quick and dirty biz. Smoked in the self-cleaning oven. (88)

This poem begins like a recipe, with instruction, riffing off “junk” as represented by food and drugs, two forms containing pleasure (to be *hyped*) and risk (to be *smoked*). It is unclear to whom the poem is addressed, though she assumes that the victim is at the mercy of both the food and drug systems. The poem is part forewarning, part disparagement, aimed at a consumer who perhaps lacks the capacity to think critically about the actions being demanded of him/her: to *eat, bleach, cook, stick it*, the accumulation of which seems a recipe for shooting heroine. Underlying the poem is the idea that eating fast food is as harmful as doing drugs, as Mullen plays on consumption through metaphors of violence, using language such as *shoot, 'round of fire, dirty biz*. Food and drugs are *quick* and *dirty*, part of a business we uncritically maintain as a culture by buying into false advertising ideals. Employing a casualness in tone, the rhetoric of street slang, commercialized diction, and the found language of the public restroom, Mullen parodies the advertisement, critiquing a system that sells us what we choose to consume; what keeps us alive is indistinguishable from kills us. Hunger, in a personal sense, is not to blame (is not *off the hook*) in activating one's desire for fast food; the “McDonaldization of society” is to blame.³⁵⁴

In perhaps her most directly instructive poem about cooking, Mullen seems to summon Grosvenor's style, weaving the language of folklore, soul food, political ad, nursery rhyme, and poetic pun. Her paratactic sentence mimics the recipe as mishmash in the kitchen of *Vibration Cooking*:

Off the pig, ya dig? He squeals, grease the sucker. Hack that fatback, pour the pork. Pig out, rib the fellas. Ham it up, hype the tripe. Save your bacon, bring home some. Sweet dreams pigmeat. Pork belly futures, larded accounts, hog heaven. Little piggish to market. Tub of guts hog wilding. A pig of

³⁵⁴ *The McDonaldization of Society*, George Ritzer, 1993.

yourself, high on swine, cries all the way home. Steak o' lean gets away
cleaner than Safeway chitlings. That's all folks. (82)

The opening line of this poem, an obvious rhyming jingle with slang, addresses a specific though unnamed audience, who is then given rudimentary guidance in how to break down (butcher) a pig. The language of this piece is especially active as a recipe; verbs accumulate: *back, pour, pig out, rib, ham, hype, save, bring*, though often in disorienting forms (*wilding*), and nouns even function as veiled actions. Rhymes abound, as in *pig/dig, back/back* and *pour/pork*, contributing to the overall musicality of the prose. Mullen plays with the edges, insides, and spaces between words, borrowing cultural expressions for over-consumption – “pig out,” “hog heaven” – and also decontextualizing words or altering their meanings so that we wonder what exactly a “pork belly future” or a “larded account” contains. There is a carnivorous, guiltless pleasure to the language that cooks the pig, especially in the rhythmic expression, “Ham it up, hype the tripe.” We hear the political war advertisement of rationing from World War II: “Save your bacon, bring home some,” alongside the fairy tale spin-off of the “Three Little Pigs”: “Little piggish to market...cries all the way home.” The pig, in this moment, rather than on the spit, is the consumer who has made a “pig of [her]self, high on swine.” Grocery chitterlings are mentioned, though not as something necessarily desirable; they are dirty in contrast to the tripe directly “off the pig.” Mullen’s speaker returns in the end to the reader, wrapping up the poem as if it were an advertisement of sorts with the tag end of a Warner Bros cartoon: “That’s all folks,” to leave us wondering: What is all? What do we dig? Are we the helpless victims of a system that preaches excess over moderation, greed over restraint? The gluttony and messiness of this poem differ from the clean surfaces investigated in other poems. If the *folks* of this poem are indeed the readers, and the scene is one of soul food, how does Mullen intend us to read the racial dynamics embodied in the poem as a recipe?

Tompkins argues that the cultural connections between food objects and black bodies, “seemingly benevolent” and erotically generated, “bring to the forefront the violence and ambivalence of American racial politics in which desire and disgust for black bodies commingle intimately and produce representations of market, parlor, and kitchen cannibalism” (). While Tompkins refers to images of the black body as a metaphorical form of food that is desirable to consume, Mullen takes this a step further by cannibalizing the textual instances in which the racial food of language ideologically positions whiteness as the determinant of taste, challenging Grosvenor’s contradictory claim that “food is not racial.” She even discusses how one of her poems from *Trimmings* actually “cannibalizes Gertrude Stein’s “Petticoat” poem ...I’m using the language of Stein. She has a “light white,” “an ink spot,” “a rosy charm.” So I put those words into my poem. Then I expanded.”³⁵⁵ Here is Stein’s poem in full: “A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm” (22). And Mullen’s re-vision: “A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plum recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress” (15). Mullen is redecorating the history of modernism inherited from Stein in order to include her own voice alongside Stein’s.³⁵⁶ Where language excludes, Mullen interpolates; she reclaims Stein’s work as well as the culinary and literary work of women of color – the body alluded to in Stein is no longer an “ink spot” but “is ink” – and “wears” or performs her color explicitly.

³⁵⁵ Interview, Hogue

³⁵⁶ Mix describes how Mullen is “trimming away the racism of Stein’s experimentalism and trimming the veil of privilege and supposed innocence that hides racism from white eyes. In reworking her relationship to literary history, Mullen comments on the trimming away of Stein from histories of modernism, 72. Mix calls attention to Stein’s reliance on economic and racial privileges in our reading of her work, wherein it is difficult to determine if her writing contributes to white supremacist ideologies “even as she saw herself working to valorize black identity.” Consider Stein’s poem “Dinner”: “It was a time when in the acres in late there was a wheel that shot a burst of land and needless are niggers and a sample sample set of old eaten butterflies with spoons” (*Tender Buttons*, 55).

Performing

Between Grosvenor's narrative of popular food as a doing of race (cooking black as identity performance), and Stein's modernist simulation of cooking through a doing of language (reading as a mode of consuming), Mullen's text engages the physical matter of ordinary foods and words as they are racially enacted. Perhaps the "sinuous immediacy" of Stein's discourse is pertinent to Mullen's: "Items are rendered not as objects extended in space...but as things being done" (Schmitz 1212) In *S*PeRM**K*T*, food is a verb-tense like language, it is action; there is "past perfect food" (91), as in this poem:

In specks finds nothing amiss. Rubs a glove on lemony wood. But the gleam of a sigh at a spotless rinsed dish. Spots herself in its service, buffed and rebuffed. Shines on the gloss of bird's eye drop leaf maple tabletop. Pledges a new leaf shining her future polishing skills. The silver dropped at dinner announces the arrival of a woman at a fork. She beams at a waxing moon.
(80)

From the very first line of *S*PeRM**K*T*, lines assemble, and this poem shows such accrument. The subject is missing from the opening, and we are unclear to whom the actions belong: some mysterious figure, an everywoman, who *finds*, *rubs*, *spots*, *shines*, *pledges*, *beams*. This is a domestic portrait, but whether or not the figure is a hired laborer or a homemaker, she is nevertheless "in its service," performing menial tasks such as cleaning dishes, polishing furniture and silverware, presumably in preparation for dinner, and in this way maintains the theatrical limelight of the poem. Her aim is for perfect order – to clean, to correct what is *amiss*, to create *gleam*, *gloss*, and *shining*; for others, or herself, we're not clear. Mullen plays on the idea of *turning a new leaf*, as the figure in her poem seems to be constructing her own image while she arranges this scene; she herself is "buffed and rebuffed" based on the grammar of cited line, and sees her own reflection, yet also her flaws; she *spot herself*, which suggests that she sees herself but also that her self is a spot to be

polished. Just as the objects of the poem are surveyed, she vainly inspects her self as yet another object among them; she is objectified like the women in commercials, a saleable and consumable image. Popular products are hidden in the text, such as Pledge and Bird's Eye, to reinforce the poem as a rendition of advertisement. "Her future" is at stake, and we assume that although "the arrival of a woman at a fork" occurs, she is the one who, at the end of the poem, "beams at a waxing moon." This image indicates her gratification in the desire and possibility of escaping this domestic interior, of trading an inner reality for a larger worldview, which is extended through the only external image in the poem. Though the poem offers a *bird's eye* view of this scene, in the end it transfers the authority of perspective to the lens of its subject *waxing* furniture, whose view of the galaxy (referenced in another poem) is expansive and broadening (*waxing*).

Mullen's text teems with verbs of consumption: *chow*, *nuzzle*, *swallow* (77), *back*, *pour* (82), *make and break and scramble* (91), just as Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking* invokes a story of food with animated anecdotes. If we read consuming as performance in Mullen's poetry, her subjects, rather than passive recipients of the language of food, assert some control over their bodies, or at least navigate the commercialized food landscape with a certain conviction about what they eat, and in eating, produce their subjectivities. Given the reality that food advertising is geared towards white consumer culture, Mullen complicates the idea of the supermarket, exposing how it is not a democratic space (though it is advertised as such), but rather one that marginalizes black foods, bodies, and tastes, and is surrounded by distinctively class-delineated neighborhoods. The performance of consumption as it is crafted in Mullen's poetics becomes a mode of refashioning subjectivity. Eating is discussed in this way, as a racially performative act, by Tompkins, who describes it as a "ritualized repetition," through which subjectivity and embodiment come into being...Eating is an act

through which the body maintains the fictions of its materiality, both discursively and biologically.”³⁵⁷ Mullen’s subjects circulate within the supermarket, and though eating may not be the primary activity of *S*PeRM**K*T*, consuming (buying food, buying the language of food) is the “performative nexus through which physicality and political subjectivity coalesce in the flesh as it is ritualistically constituted through the repetitive ingestion of materials”³⁵⁸

Eroticizing

If *S*PeRM**K*T* “comes out of [an] ongoing critique of dominant culture,” it is one that hails people to consume according to their specific identities: “you are ideologically hailed through your race, your class, your gender. You come to identify the ways that you are hailed and so you are identifying with a particular gender, with a particular race or class, or all at the same time. Or sometimes you are divided up into compartments and sometimes you are hailed for your class, but not your race or your gender.”³⁵⁹ Mullen juggles these compartments throughout her book, even if not explicitly, when considering that the consumer is typically imagined to be a woman: “I was thinking about domestication, about the role of women, women as consumers, women having a...supposed power as consumers but also being disempowered in other ways.”³⁶⁰ She extends this discussion to race, to how African Americans are programmed by “limited images that are available in the marketplace. You know, you can’t necessarily buy who you really want to be. You have to buy the available images.”³⁶¹ One way that she manages this reality is by authoritatively transforming available images into new forms, particularly by eroticizing them. In the following poem,

³⁵⁷ Tompkins,

³⁵⁸ Ibid.,

³⁵⁹ Interview, Hogue

³⁶⁰ Interview

³⁶¹ Ibid.

racial, gendered, and class differences coincide. Familiar, commonplace images are embedded in erotic action:

Past perfect food sticks in the craw. Curdles the pulse. Coops up otherwise free ranging birds whose plucked wings beat hearts over easy. Flapping aerobically, cocks walk on brittle zeros. They make and break and scramble to get ahead. Whisk the yokels into shape. Use their pecker order to separate the whites. (84)

In sexually charged language, this scene imitates mating: there is “stick[ing]” in the throat, pulsing, flapping. Phallic images of “cocks” and “pecker[s]” are punning and suggestive. We may read the birds as female subjects who are cooped-up and being exploited (here is, perhaps, the need for the spermkit?). Even desire is presented as a cultural construct within the market. Mix notes that the past perfect tense is “as far into the past as we can travel linguistically,” and offers a historical reading of “cocks” as the white Southern aristocracy “protecting its “assets” by indoctrinating the poorer whites in the ideology” that race is more significant than class (Mix 84). In this reading, the whites are the ones separated and divided in the end, but this line doubles as a sexual image. All of these identity issues overlap within a language of cooking; food is what begins the poem, though it is of the past, and is what is being made in the present: “hearts over easy” is a pun on eggs over easy, and eggs are being broken, scrambled, whisked, separated – the metaphor of manipulated bodies in consumer culture.

This sort of doubling happens throughout Mullen’s work. She describes *S*PeRM**K*T* as generating an “erotics of marketing and consumption.” Although the text is concerned with the relationship of the body to the cultural material landscape of food, and with national advertising campaigns that sell food with bodily images (thus selling bodies), it is also in many ways a representation of the disembodiment of eating, a phenomenon characteristic of the end of the twentieth century. Mullen adapts the language of domestic

femininity in order to subvert it and offer alternative versions of female desire; her “attention to the feminine spaces of consumption is similar to Stein’s project of reappropriating traditionally feminine domestic spaces.”³⁶² The supermarket is a site where desire, identity, and commodification are “rigidly interpolated.”³⁶³ Compare the aforementioned poem, “In specks finds nothing amiss,” which emphasizes the domestic role of women and women’s desires as constructs of national habits of consumption as they are promulgated by mass advertising, with this next (and textually adjacent) poem about the masculinity associated with eating:

What’s brewing when a guy pops the top off a bottle or can talk with another man after a real good sweat. It opens, pours a cold stream of the great outdoors. Hunting a wild six-pack reminds him of football and women and other blood spoor. Frequent channels keep high volume foamy liquids overflowing, not to be contained. Champs, heroes, hard workers all back-lit with ornate gold of cowboy sunset lift dashing white heads, those burly mugs.
(81)

The language of both these poems embodies the disparity between images of women and men as they circulate. Mullen highlights the disjunction of gender roles based on how “narratives of fulfillment through consumption mediate consumers’ experiences” to show how women’s desires center on homemaking, while men’s desires revolve around the outdoors (football, hunting) and beer (Mix 83). “A woman is different,” we learn in a later poem (96), and that difference is reinforced through TV commercials. While the previous portrait is comprised of activities of caretaking that evoke tenderness – the figure in that poem rubs, buffs, shines, pledges, beams – here the tone is gruffer – the guy pops, sweats, opens, pours, overflows. Manliness is externally expressed, even outspoken, an output of raw, wild, bodily, material desires which are irrepressible, rather than the containment typically associated with female subjects. These contrasting sexualized depictions come

³⁶² Ibid., 77.

³⁶³ Ibid.

directly from mass media, and Mullen reminds us of this in her re-use of the rhetoric of TV commercials (“frequent channels”) and product advertisements (the promised shine of Pledge). Consumption is a mediated experience, and does not always lead to the sort of gratification promised by ads; Mullen’s poetry acts as yet another mediator between nature and culture, life and art. The guy “pops the top” off a bottle, an expression imbued with sexual connotation, and the bottle becomes a metaphor for the body when Mullen refers to an ambiguous “It” – it is the bottle, but also implicit of the body in an obvious image of ejaculation: releasing a “stream,” foamy liquids overflowing, not to be contained,” “burly.” Drinking beer, watching TV (football), and hunting are the primary three activities of the world of men evoked in this poem, a world that is homoerotically conceived; men talk after a sweat, and experience intimate physicality together, even though hunting reminds them of women, whose tracks (“blood spoor”) are reminiscent of the blood of animals. Men, according to images that sell beer, are “champs, heroes, hard workers,” and cowboys; they stare at a sunset, rather than at the feminine moon of the previous poem. “What’s brewing,” the poem seems to ask and answer, is sexual desire, and the outward, uncensored expression of it. Mullen admits, “I was always fascinated, once I was older, that the beer commercials have this sort of pornographic aesthetic,” an aesthetic she recycles in order to mock it.³⁶⁴

The female subjects in *S*PeRM**K*T*, in comparison, are wives, daughters, “docile martyrs,” and anorexics; they are the products of ideas marketed through food and other domestic objects to appeal to these realities. Mullen approaches food as a serious matter in terms of thinking about women’s bodies and the impact of media on eating disorders, exposing the “psychosexual uses and abuses of food.”³⁶⁵ She is concerned with “the way that we feel about the body, about our appearance, and the fact that we still imagine, or that

³⁶⁴ Interview, Griffin

³⁶⁵ Delville, 59

advertisers seem to imagine, that women still do most of the cooking, cleaning, and shopping.”³⁶⁶ She asks the reader to think about how advertisements appeal to desires; how we identify with the foods, products, and stories that sell us what we ultimately want to become in the process of consuming them, for as Mix argues, “it is the experiences of consuming that structure our interactions not only with the material but also with the emotional world” (83). There are several poems that allude to the act of choice, as it occurs within a culture of plenty, as a gender-specific form of control, even if it involves the refusal to consume. In this poem, the mother-daughter relationship is negotiated primarily through food in a direct address to the maternal figure:

A daughter turned against the grain refuses your gleanings, denies your milk,
soggy absorbency she abhors. Chokes on your words when asked about love.
Never would swallow the husks you’re allowed. Not a spoonful gets down what
you see of her now. Crisp image from disciplined form. Torn hostage ripening
out of hand. Boxtop trophy of war, brings to the table a regimen from hell. At
breakfast shuts out all nurturant murmurs. Holds against you the eating for two.
Why brag of pain a body can’t remember? You pretend once again she’s not lost
forever. (75)

Here, the daughter *refuses, denies, abhors, chokes on* the nurturing (through food and language) of the mother. She is presumably anorexic, willfully refusing to eat, yet her control is illusory, for she is a “hostage” to the market and its imagistic expectations of her; her self-denial is not a challenge to the consumer culture that swallows her alive, so to speak. Yet her fasting is a counter-response to the excesses of the body that symbolize eating culture; she removes herself from a system in which her body is a consumable object through the marketing of her sexuality. She is a “disciplined form,” but also a vanishing form (“lost”), like the figure in another of Mullen’s poems, whom the speaker addresses: “You’re not fully here until you’re over there. Never let them see you eat” (69). This discipline and “regimen” are conflated with global images of warfare; war imagery is projected onto the dynamics of food

³⁶⁶ Interview (Kane)

consumption. The fetishization of the slim body is essentially gendered, and Mullen's poems remind us: "Iron maidens make docile martyrs. Their bodies on the racks stretched taut. Honing hunger to perfect, aglow in nimbus flash. A few lean slicks, to cover a multitude, fix a feast for the eyes. They starve for all the things we crave" (72). Whether models or famine victims, women's slight figures are "a feast for the eyes" in magazines at the supermarket checkout racks; this pun is used to critique the costs of consumption, directing us to "the ironies of a culture" that ignores starvation yet fetishizes the body that hones (inflicts itself with) hunger. Mullen sets up a them/us dichotomy here, wherein the "they" is the martyred bodies, and the "we" is the public who consumes images perpetuated by media, as well as the women who "crave" to be physical replicas based on these false promises; the "we" is the reader of this poem. By writing the supermarket experience through the lens of "how anorexics treat themselves," Mullen portrays women as victims of the system, despite the alleged power in their choice to maintain a state of hunger while being bombarded with images of abundance via foodstuffs; women who engage a "rationed yet tingling indulgence...minus the need to work off guilt, to amortize the cost" (89).

Gender issues arise in many other ways in *S*PeRM**K*T*. "Feminine hygiene" is sold in the market. Seeds, in one eroticized reference, are the source of both vegetables and women's bodies, "tore open. Sown in good dirt, fingered tenderly" (92). The expression is also an allusion to the promiscuity with which men sow their seeds in the bodies (earth) of women. The act of fingering suggests sexual foreplay. The seeds are sold "in packets brighter than soup cans, cheaper than lottery tickets, more hopeful than waxed rutabagas, promising order...gardens." Mullen sets the image of seeds in opposition to processed foods (and other manufactured commercial goods which do not fulfill their promises), as emblematic of

hope, regulation, and nature. In doing so, she resituates power in the women's body as a site for the cultivation and harvest of new life.

The spermkit of the title is an object in one poem: "Refreshing spearmint gums up the words. Instant permkit combs through the wreckage. Bigger better spermkit grins down family of four. Scratch and sniff your lucky number. You may already be a wiener" (94). In the first of these two lines, actions are being taken on the words (they are gummed up) and on the wreckage (it is combed through), and the rhythmic balance seems to align these in such a way that words are an equivalent sort of wreckage. The sequential appearance of *spearmint*, *permkit*, and *spermkit* is a play on the eyes as well as the ears; these are variations of products sold to women to beautify or safeguard them. The puns and multiple meanings of words, such as "wiener" (instead of "winner"), contain the conflicts embodied in commodities that serve to amplify the supermarket as a cultural force – the "conflict[s] that define our image as a global power" – and the violence versus fortune that results.³⁶⁷

Mullen repeatedly uses the metaphor of beef as a dominant erotic product in the market. There are "swinging burgers" (85). "Tenderloins bleed pink light" in a poem that conflates meat items and women's bodies (71). "Meat is real" we learn in another poem. "Clean meat. Trimmed, not bloody" (90) is an image that links meat processing and menstruation to reveal how flesh is a commodity that metamorphoses via packaging. The body, like meat, is something onto which expectations and desires are compulsively projected: of cleanliness, realness, whiteness, and trimness, as in this poem:

It must be white, a picture of health, the spongy napkin made to blot blood.
Dainty paper soaks up leaks that steaks splayed on trays are oozing. Lights
replace the blush red flesh is losing. Cutlets leak. Tenderloins bleed pink light.
Plastic wrap bandages marbled slabs in sanitary packaging made to be stained.
A three-hanky picture of feminine hygiene. (71)

³⁶⁷ Interview, Hogue

The portrait of the body in this description is not so desirable: it leaks, oozes, bleeds, stains. Mullen's critique is pointed to the supermarket control of meat as a parallel to the media control of women's bodies, and the insidious cultural fixation on hygiene, containment, and purity (signified by whiteness). The stigma of menstruation is parodied as a more problematic marketing ploy towards women's bodies. Phonic correlations between the body and meat further emphasize their indistinguishable qualities; the flesh being described is ambiguous. Words repeat, or are juxtaposed, sharing a vicinity with other words that appear similar; the eye skims across the visible similitude of *leaks/steaks, blush/flesh*. A predominant sibilance runs throughout the poem, as in the second line with numerous *s* sounds and the alliterative pun of words linking double meanings of women/meat. The "It" is not only the objectified body of a woman, but of a white woman, for the "It" as an ideal *must be* whiteness. As elsewhere in Mullen's poems, the eating body is mostly disembodied, as Mullen makes evident the forces of consumption within two meat markets, the grocery store and patriarchal system. Though women's bodies are saleable like meats, in the sense that they are inviting commodities with market value, they are represented as excessive, messy objects to be cleaned-up and/or rewrapped, requiring sanitary packaging to contain their blood and desire (Mix). Mullen associates the imagery of cleanliness with literary production; the "dainty paper" metaphorically hints at how "women writers are expected to produce work that adheres to specific parameters for female creativity" (Mix). Yet this packaging is a false promise of what is inside, the fetishization and subsequent derealization of the body – a more complex narrative of repressed desire linked to animality, aesthetic authority, and power.

The critical task for Mullen is to expose the cultural connections between food objects and black bodies as they are fixed in the erotic materiality of production and

consumption on a global scale. She moves us beyond the cultural standardization of food, shifting our attention to the materiality of food as a form with which to understand corporeal dynamics, in particular the ambiguous line between living and dead matter, between body and world. In contrast to the carnivorous social interactions symbolized by meat, there is a continuous thread throughout Mullen's text for "raw ingredients" and the foodstuff of "dream startled gardens" over mass-produced comestibles:

A dream of eggplant or zucchini may produce fresh desires. Some fruits are vegetables. The way we bruise and wilt, all perishable.

In a market of artificial reproductions of real foods, of frozen and canned varieties, the dream is of fresh produce, which Mullen correlates with *fresh desires*. If we read *fresh* as new, this brief poem seems to point us toward a new vision, a new way of directing hunger. However, even this poetic still-life of fresh vegetables is susceptible to the fraud of ad culture, for fruits and vegetables are merely another aspect of the supermarket façade. Mullen's subject instantly switches from fruits/vegetables to persons (an unidentified "we") in a description relevant to both; all living objects bruise, wilt, and perish, that is the obvious claim the poem makes, but the central culprit underlying the text (supermarket) is a discriminatory industry culture that devalues human life.

IV

Eating exposes how racially marginalized subjects within the domestic and national imaginary get fantasized, violated, and perpetually marketed through consumable images produced by the white culture industry. Grosvenor's narrative recipe and Mullen's still-life poem are forms that disrupt a "happy history" of food by "destabiliz[ing] the intimacies assumed between the eater and the eaten," particularly when the eater (or the chef) is black (Delville 61). Reading food, it can be argued, is always already an engagement with race, and

an encounter with other social inequities as well, materially and linguistically, for as Tomkins self-consciously acknowledges, “Examining food objects in literature – even, or perhaps particularly, when they are so closely linked to raced subjectivities – uncovers a set of complicated relations through which the raced materiality of the body appears to be substantiated, but through which it is in fact located within discourse” (). The image of the black body as an edible object or fetishized commodity, she argues, “renders these inequities apparent, displaying the conflation of desire and disgust that a devouring relationship towards an objectified other must contain, demonstrating that eating and food culture are nexuses through which the white relationship to otherness is often negotiated” (Tomkins). In this account, the reader as consumer has a more socially accountable role in the act of devouring the otherness of the black text, which is both about food, literally, and aestheticizes food, as racial metaphor. Though food is a means of pleasure, it significantly opens critical reflection about the asymmetry of social relations as they play out in the culturally-charged language of taste. The reader of Grosvenor’s cookbook and of Mullen’s poetry is not immune to the power dynamics invoked by consumption. We approach the literary object as we do any product, eager to consume the ideas contained within it, for in doing so it becomes part of us. But perhaps this is too maudlin an assessment of literature’s affective quality. Reading Futurist theories of consumption, Cecelia Novero turns to Walter Benjamin’s trope of eating as an “operation of incorporation” in order to understand how language is a particular form of action occurring in the body.³⁶⁸ This activity of incorporation, she argues, is a *cutting*, similar to the one practiced in Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, and which Stein references in this line: “A sudden slice changes the whole plate, it does so

³⁶⁸ Benjamin’s theory, she writes, “proposes a critical, theoretical, but nonsystematic activity that first moves beyond the disciplinary boundaries between specialized academic work and cultural/political journalism, hence between the separation of word...from action,” *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde*, 91

suddenly.” The verb *to cut* is colloquially interchangeable with the action of *critique* (one who criticizes may be said to “cut down,” “cut to bits,” “cut up”); it is an act distinct from assimilation, one that aesthetically “interrupts and disrupts received ideas and that constitutes a nonorganic, temporal intervention in a reality presented in the avant-garde as de(con)structed.”³⁶⁹ It is not passive; rather, it is a devouring, the constructive production of experience.³⁷⁰ If we transfer this definition to reading as a sort of devouring, we are hailed by texts to be critical consumers. Grosvenor and Mullen remind us to be conscious in our acts of taste by producing new forms of text that reconstruct the lost intimacy between the eater and the eaten in the twentieth century.

Vibration Cooking and *S*PeRM**K*T* do not assimilate conventional literary styles; they are instead incorporative, reconstructionist, revisionist, rupturing ideas of taste in food and in language that disorient in order to reorient the reader more accurately in food culture and literary history. Though the material ambiguity of their texts (in both content and form) may unsettle us, we are confronted with the avant-garde as a consumable idea, for as Novero argues, “the metaphor of devouring the inedible marks the first encounters with avant-garde works” (xxiv). Mullen explains this aspect of her writing process, the authority of which is transferred to her reader,

That’s what writing can do for me. Because I’m present at the act of writing, in my body. But then the writing goes on without me and it goes places I can never go. So it’s disembodied the moment I stop writing it. I let the work go, and it’s no longer in my control. I’m not physically present with it to interpret it or to continue to tinker with it. Other people are tinkering with it

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 91-92

³⁷⁰ “In the avant-garde, incorporation is a form of devouring that instead distances itself from assimilation” (Novero, 96). “Benjamin sets incorporation against assimilation (passive consumption and comfort). Where the former is process oriented, the latter is product oriented...For Benjamin, incorporation is endowed with the force to dialectically change consumption (and generally reception) from a state of passivity and conventionality into a constructive nonorganic production (of otherness). The disorienting qualities of devouring epitomize for Benjamin the essential features of experience.” Novero, xxiv.

in their minds I suppose as they're reading it, interpreting it. But for me that's what is liberating about writing; it is mine and not mine at the same time.³⁷¹

The gift of the text, in this way, is not unlike that of food. The eater is invested with a certain power to devour then regurgitate, completing the (re)cycle of living matter.

In *American Hungers*, Gavin Jones, addressing Richard Wright's early aesthetic theories (which were influenced by Stein, specifically her 1909 text *Three Lives*), discusses the power of aesthetic nourishment in the formation of a politics of race. The discourse of food with which he describes Wright's aesthetics might as well have been referring to Stein's writing, and is germane to this chapter's discussion of the writing of Grosvenor and Mullen: Wright "attempt[s] to transcend cultural impoverishment by making language into an alternative material in itself, completely self-sufficient in a virtuous cycle whereby words mutually feed on one another" (280). In their respective production of texts of and about food, Grosvenor and Mullen endeavor to do just this; to make language do something different, to convert material privation into aesthetic pleasure. Jones explains how Wright "aims to surmount the absent things in black life by turning words into physical, intellectual, and emotional sensations that establish presence against an ontological void," arguing that "through the discourse of food, Wright links the material and the bodily to the power of cultural taste" (138). What this seems to suggest is the potential of words to embody material presence, to enable gratification, to nourish. In producing a language of food, Grosvenor and Mullen not only adjoin the bodily and the cultural in matters of taste, they affirm the necessity of style (aesthetics) to imaginatively feed us.

³⁷¹ Interview, *Index Magazine* with Christopher Myers, 1999.

Conclusion

Beauty will be edible or not at all.
– Salvador Dalí

Woe betide those who cannot distinguish between things which serve to please the stomach and those destined to delight the eyes
– *The Futurist Cookbook*

I

In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, “How Food Replaced Art as High Culture,” William Deresiewicz makes the case for foodism as the new culture, claiming that food has replaced art as the primary object of desire, discourse, creativity, and status in the life of the educated class, though it is *not* art per se:

what happened is not that food has led to art, but that it has replaced it. Foodism has taken on the sociological characteristics of what used to be known — in the days of the rising postwar middle class, when Mortimer Adler was peddling the Great Books and Leonard Bernstein was on television — as culture. It is costly. It requires knowledge and connoisseurship, which are themselves costly to develop. It is a badge of membership in the higher classes, an ideal example of what Thorstein Veblen, the great social critic of the Gilded Age, called conspicuous consumption. It is a vehicle of status aspiration and competition, an ever-present occasion for snobbery, one-upmanship and social aggression. (My farmers’ market has bigger, better, fresher tomatoes than yours.) Nobody cares if you know about Mozart or Leonardo anymore, but you had better be able to discuss the difference between ganache and couverture...

Now we read the gospel according, not to Joyce or Proust, but to Michael Pollan and Alice Waters.³⁷²

Deresiewicz is not so off the mark here. Something we might call *foodism* has become the 21st century aestheticism, as food has developed its own elaborate cultural apparatus similar to that of art, a whole body of literature from memoir to journalism, poetry to criticism. Take for example that Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* was designated as one of the ten best books of 2006 by the *New York Times Book Review*, next to literary authors such as Amy

³⁷² William Deresiewicz, “How Food Replaced Art as High Culture,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2012.

Hempel and Richard Ford.³⁷³ Or that the British duo known as Bompas & Parr (artists Sam Bompas and Harry Parr) were recently named by the *Independent* as among the top fifteen people who will define the future of the arts in Britain, an accolade pointed at their use of food as the medium, material, and muse driving this so-called future of art. It is a time when proof of one's cultural savoir-faire is in the pudding, so to speak; when food, though everyone must eat and not everyone has access to it, is a matter of high class, high culture, and high art. Although Deresiewicz takes great care in arguing for why food is not art, making the distinction that "Proust on the Madeleine is art; the Madeleine itself is not art," this does not seem to be the important debate, or at least this study hopes to derail a focus on the question of whether or not food is art. At the foreground, instead, is a reading of how the historical and future trajectories of food and art have created and will continue to generate dynamic points of contact, not because food is art or art is food (though such possibilities emerge in some of the work cited here), but because their affiliation, even if oblique, produces a coordinated system upon which culture radically evolves.

So how do the aesthetic transactions of food and art that marked the twentieth century resonate in the contemporary moment? And more importantly, how might these convergences indicate the modern fate of food, and of art? Or how might we rethink the category of taste as a site for equity and democracy rather than high culture? Where food is an aperture through which we might examine the materiality of art in new ways, art is, too, a form that expands our scope of food as aesthetic. Both further exemplify these and other divides: vernacular/high, traditional/modernist, humanist/technological, original/copy, real/gimmicky, necessity/aesthetic. In their coincident interpolations of taste, both food and art have an influential role on our national, bodily, and imaginative livelihood. Perhaps the

³⁷³ And writers are crossing genre for food – novelist Barbara Kingsolver published a homesteading memoir, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, in 2007.

answer to how to live aesthetically in a post-industrial, globalized, technological world is food. Another answer is just as likely art. Where the two come together makes an especially productive site for the rudiments of pleasure, for the impactful overlying meanings of place, presence, body, and their varied articulations. As Morton argues, as an activity of literature, “eating becomes praxis, a term suggesting the fusion of the theoretical with the practical”³⁷⁴ Likewise, cuisine is “a panoply of narratives that sustain praxis.”³⁷⁵

This chapter concludes the preceding chapters not as their culmination, but rather by using them as a springboard for further thinking about the conjunctive directions in which the culinary, literary, and visual fields are moving. As we transition more unswervingly into a 21st-century foodscape, the examples of the past – eating culture as it has changed in relation to broader aesthetic trends – inform many of the choices that continue to shape the future of food and, consequently, of consumption more generally. For example, the excessive fast eating of the mid-century that Poppy Cannon helped to propel finds, in the contemporary moment, a salve in discourses of the *local, raw, natural, organic, sustainable, slow*, a vocabulary of wholesome living (trends towards the healing properties of foods) that upholds a certain ethics of eating in its renewed attention to the relationship of the body to the environment.³⁷⁶ However, many of the innovative (though destructive) technologies of the 50s carry us into a new artistically-driven science of food that, in fostering a spectacle of the culinary avant-garde, intends to rescue a sensory-deprived culture by bringing us back to a more conscious experience of eating as it occurs through the principles of art. In both cases,

³⁷⁴ 270

³⁷⁵ Ferguson

³⁷⁶ Consider the current obsession with Kombucha, Acai, raw juices, quinoa, kale salad, coconut water, cacao powder, chia seeds, and other labeled “Superfoods.” Not to mention, restaurant menus reveal our food fashions. In Adam Platt’s definitive “Where To Eat” issue of *New York Magazine* this year, he mentions the fads and “boomlets” that have morphed into mainstream trends: Asian Hipster Cuisine, the urban forager movement, old-fashioned French, and tasting menus. In addition, underground eating events, pop-ups, and food trucks.

we are still reacting to many of the food trends and values that made the national stage of the mid-century, either by modes of reversion or conversion.

II *Food Futures: Feeding Machines and Prosthetic Consumption*

Seven hundred sixty-four years separate the fictional worlds of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and Andrew Stanton's Disney PIXAR *Wall-E* (2008), but in many ways, these films are transposable narratives reflecting the dehumanizing effects of the industrialized food world, be it modernist or futuristic.³⁷⁷ While Chaplin's context points us back to the Great Depression – his iconic character The Tramp is a factory worker on the assembly line at Electro Steel Co in the Thirties – Stanton projects into an intergalactic future place called Axiom, where post-human subjects such as Captain McCrea are literally the technological extensions of a complex machine-system. In both films is a satire on progress, a critique of the machine age through the marginalizing encounters with industrial food, and a hyperbolic exposé of the problematics of consumption.

There are two scenes in *Modern Times* that reappear in similar manifestations in *Wall-E*. The first occurs when the Tramp is being force-fed with an eating machine during lunch, a method intended to ensure efficiency during the workday: the worker merely has to “enter” the contraption, and passively await its feeding cues. The mechanism comprises rotating dishes, including soup, amuse-bouches, and corn on the cob, as well as a mouth-wiping device between courses. The Tramp must only open his mouth to receive the food, but when the machine short-circuits (he cannot, for example, consume the corn from the cob at the rate of the feeding instrument), he is both assaulted and bewildered (and presumably

³⁷⁷ *Wall-E* is set in the year 2700.

unsatiated) by the experience. His bosses insist on a repetition of these actions, and with each try, the absurdity of the event intensifies. Chaplin's scene comically highlights the insufficiency of the machine to sustain human life, and the dis-connection between the human and the technological; man is not industrial, and attempts at integrating only go awry – the human body is not nourished by the imitation of eating. This failed attempt is the representation of Chaplin's meta-narrative, and recurs in another scene in which one of the workers, a mechanic, while fixing one of the machines, gets literally devoured by the equipment when it goes haywire. Stuck inside, he must rely on the Tramp to hand-feed him lunch (raw celery, eggs, chicken, pie), but the paradox is blatant – his body is not the receiver of sustenance, and is instead being eaten by the machine, is the protraction of the industrial system. Chaplin's film contains several other moments (food filching, foraging, hunger, poverty) to depict the relationship of human and engine as the ultimate malfunctioning, a comical yet politically subversive response to modern working conditions and the food crisis, and one that remains timely throughout the century until now, bridging the mass-produced foods of the postwar with the engineered foods of our agro-industrial moment.

By the imagined year of 2700 in *Wall-E*, things are not much different, or at least that is what Stanton's portrait would have us think. The characters are reduced to passive forms whose bodies constitute the extension of a hover-chair for mobility, the appendage of a personal video screen mediating all communication and entertainment needs, and a host of robots-as-limbs to assist with continuous consumption. They are ideal products of technological motion, totally augmented forms that cannot survive without the machinic prosthesis. Stanton's science-fictional, cybernetic narrative in animation couldn't be more remote from Chaplin's silent slapstick feature – yet both effectively question what it means

to be human (a category that is always predicated against an amplified Other, the non-human or the post-human), and eating is one way of apprehending this.³⁷⁸

When *Wall-E* opens, an aerial view pans the post-apocalyptic urban landscape: Earth is comprised of the ghostly spires of former skyscrapers, trash heaps constructed as edifices, silent windmills, and dust. The only sign of life, other than the motorized robot Wall-E, is a single animated cockroach who becomes one of the film's main characters. All human life has been conquered and transferred to outer-space by Buy N' Large, a former corporation reminiscent of Walmart under the ironic name Axiom, where the same ideals of consumerism are cultivated by the technical format of the cyber-machine. While the relocation of the human to this vessel may appear as the advancement of the human (evolution via augmentation), it is implied that the same technological abundance and progress has led to the environmental toxicity which has devastated Earth. If machinery has created the opportunity of a post-human world, it has done so through the destruction of the human. The clamorous vibrancy of Axiom with its surplus of stimuli exists in stark contrast to the still of a deadened Earth. The interior walls of the space-ship project a constant stream of visual media and broadcast in voiceover the headliner "Welcome To Economy." Like some aesthetic facsimile of Vegas or Times Square, products and their images, daily routines, and advice slogans such as "live your dreams" are promoted in a continuous loop. A flashing sign with the words *fun/win* appears everywhere, indicating that pleasure is the gateway to success. An unidentified voice (like that of Oz) announces:

³⁷⁸ As James Boswell wrote in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, "My definition of man is, "a Cooking Animal." The beasts have memory, judgment, and all the faculties and passions of our mind, in a certain degree; but no beast is a cook. (1786). Also, in James Fenimore Cooper's words: "The art of eating and drinking, is one of those on which more depends, perhaps, than on any other, since health, activity of mind, constitutional enjoyments, even learning, refinement, and, to a certain degree, morals, are all, more or less, connected with our diet" ("On Civilization" 1838).

“everything you need to be happy.” Within this extreme setting, hundreds of grossly obese, infantilized humans float around via laser energy on lounge chairs, their only activity being the consumption of their environs: they push buttons, slurp “lunch in a cup” (a version of Chaplin’s feeding-machine), and engage their personal monitors through which they hit virtual golf balls or interact with others. The interface of the screen is their only real mode of human contact in a world otherwise void of interactive physicality. Meanwhile, numerous types of other machines service their basic needs. As highly augmented forms, these post-humans rely on their chairs as prostheses (as a bodily system of prosthetic appendages) that enable movement, connection, indulgence, consumption, and ultimately survival. Their bodies are merely the incorporations of the machine, coded and activated as cogs in the system, force-fed without any true agency, without what Katherine Hayles calls “embodied consciousness”; they are “data made flesh.”³⁷⁹ In one scene, a man falls out of his chair and is helplessly splayed and hence immobilized, desperate for a service operator (robot) to assist him. The population carries on around him, unaffected by the man down; there is no corporal or empathic connection, just the individual pursuit of consumption.

In another scene, entitled “The Captain vs. Auto,” we witness how the “transfer of human agency to our technologies allows our artifacts to come back with a vengeance,” a phenomenon defined by Vivian Sobchack to account for the potential failures of technology, and which we also see in *Modern Times* when the machine goes berserk, and when the equipment swallows the worker.³⁸⁰ The Captain and Auto (the autopilot robot), both prosthetic forms extending from the built machine, disrupt the flow of the world as it has been for the preceding 700 years when they realize their own agency, and are thus led to their own demise. Upon retrieving the green plant life that can return them to Earth, the

³⁷⁹ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, U. Chicago Pres, 1999) 38, 5.

³⁸⁰ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 212.

Captain must battle Auto, and though we assume Auto should obey the orders of its maker (for we assume that technology is under human control), the very machines invented by humans turn against them. This exemplifies Sobchack's argument that "any consideration of prostheses has to take into account their potential failure and, even, the conditions under which they might go wrong or turn against their users. The consciousness of machines always includes...a dimension of fear."³⁸¹ The autopilot controls function independently – Auto attempts to intervene in the Captain's plan to return to Earth, and their war (symbolic of human versus machine) causes manifold problems, such as injurious collisions, malfunctioning, and an eventual scenario of total disarray.

This war is what ultimately causes the Captain to take his literal first steps in the suspenseful penultimate scene of the film, "All Feet on Deck." At this point in the narrative, all people have fallen out of their chairs and slid into a massive heap, estranged from their machines; a return to Earth seems precarious. The Captain struggles to stand and walk towards Auto to disengage his power, an emblematic event of human triumph and heroism. This mobility marks the Captain's severing from his machine-body, a narrative reclamation of the human through a metamorphosis that makes possible his embodied agency, consciousness, and intelligence. Upon his unforeseen moment of walking, the film pivots almost regressively from an idea of the post-human to one of the pre-industrial human, invoking the awe and applause of the population aboard Axiom and of the film's audience. The Captain's walk is regarded as heroic. If this instance of heroism is human rather than technological, the film's critique may be that in our increasingly modernizing world, we have forgotten how to walk, and in this prophetic vision of the future, the world will inexorably result in collapse, leading to the potential of what Peter Lunenfeld might call "post-human

³⁸¹ Ibid., 214

problems.” Central to an analysis of *Wall-E* is a set of queries resembling those of Chaplin’s “social protest” film, linking embodiment, food, industrial design, and subjectivity, yet it is also narrativity that is interrogated as a textual body. The film seems to ask: what does it mean to be embodied, and how does our new design of bodies and spaces – the augmentation rather than evolution of “natural” processes and ideas of human (and “world”), most effectively delineated through practices of consumption – disrupt and thus transform the category of human?

This final scene also enacts a meta-textual closure. If the opening presents a narrative of dystopia (an Earth abandoned and destroyed by technological augmentation), the film’s ending recovers a utopian vision (an Earth reverting to primitive, agricultural ideals). In the end, the city is a wilderness, uncivilized and undeveloped, a sort of promised land. The Captain’s steps liberate him from an immobilizing dependency on the machine, and signify rebirth. We are left with the image of the people of Axiom, having just arrived on Earth, taking their first steps onto land, and planting “vegetable seeds and pizza seeds,” a scene that links American progress not with technology (although pizza seeds do hint at GMOs) but with the cultivation of land. The Captain proclaims, “it’s good to be home,” and home is the soil – the local, organic, the pleasures of growing food that have constituted the 21st-century revolution in eating. The camera rests on a panoramic of Earth in its early stage of flourishing and greening, a romantic image that aesthetically participates in (re)constructing the circularity of time. In this narrative, the key to saving the Earth (thus humanity) is a return to the bucolic ideals of bodily rather than virtual mobility, to revitalization via farming. The material urban landscape is the site of evolution. Where Sobchack asks, “what does it mean to be embodied in the multiple and shifting spaces of the world – not only the familiar spaces that seem of our own making and whose meanings we take up and live as “given” but

also those spaces that seem to us strange or “foreign” in their shape and value?” perhaps the answer may be found in food; in the notion that to eat is to be embodied. As a film, *Wall-E* is subversively political by forcing its present-day viewer to behold the bleak future of food if eating habits and practices are not more consciously approached. While signs of progress in food have, since the postwar, been marked by industrial innovation (the fast, frozen, canned, packaged, ready-made), which have since led to the contemporary farm-as-machine culture (genetically modified seeds), human sustenance, the film shows, depends on heeding the rally of Pollan and other advocates of “slow food.” Though stylistically divergent films – Chaplin’s silence as a medium versus Stanton’s cartoon genre – film is an aesthetic form that has the visual power to force us to actively consume the narratives (of food) that we are capable of disrupting, and so nourishes our basic ideals.

III *That Happy Garden-State*³⁸²: *Slow Food, Seed Politics, Supermarket Pastorals*

Perhaps the obvious antidote to a world like the one satirically depicted in *Wall-E* – in which the “atrophied dimensions of sensory experience” have reduced humans to automatous consumers – is the Slow Food movement, founded in the 90s by Carlo Petrini, whose objective was the education of taste.³⁸³ What began as a protest in 1986 against the construction of a McDonald’s in Rome, has since become a global organization spanning over forty countries. Included in *Time* magazine’s list of “European Heroes” for being an innovator, Petrini is to Slow Food what Marinetti was to Futurist Food, initiating an eco-

³⁸² Andrew Marvell, “The Garden” (my capitalizations)

³⁸³ Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case of Taste* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004) 69. “We need to reconstruct the individual and collective heritage, the capacity to distinguish – in a word, taste...Slow Food endorses the primacy of sensory experience and treats [the senses] as so many instruments of discernment, self-defense, and pleasure. The education of taste is the Slow way to resist McDonaldization” (69). There are now 225 chapters, and the Slow Food Nation Festival in San Francisco in 2008 was America’s largest food festival in history.

gastronomic revolution that focused on a new language of taste, while concurrently spearheading the agenda for an avant-garde aesthetics that would renovate culture. Yet where the Futurist Manifesto promotes “the beauty of speed,” the Slow Food Manifesto is a critical reaction to “the machine” of modernity and incipient globalization, also referred to as “Fast Life,” and advocates for the beauty of slowness in opposition to the fast-food values and disconnective patterns of consumption that continue to threaten agricultural and food heritages.³⁸⁴

At the core of Slow Food is the basic belief that “Taste is a pact of fellowship and a program of cultural integration,” and that the preservation of culture depends on “developing taste rather than demeaning it”; a description that is apropos for the arts.³⁸⁵ To save taste from industrial and agro-alimentary standardization, Slow Food implemented two interdisciplinary initiatives, or what was referred to as “avant-garde response[s] to the minefield of modernity that we have to traverse” – the Ark of Taste and the Hall of Taste.³⁸⁶ Both were as much creative endeavors (centered around narrative and aesthetics) as they were cultural policies (meant to shift political strategy). Through “taste workshops” endorsing the primacy of sensory experience, consumers were put into direct contact with the territory, products, and artisans of food culture, while their individual tastes were retrained to discern more consciously. The treatment of taste as something to be studied and

³⁸⁴ In anti-Futurist language, the Slow Food manifesto includes: “Born and nurtured under the sign of Industrialization, this century first invented the machine and then modeled its lifestyle after it. Speed became our shackles. We fell prey to the same virus: “the fast life” that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us to ingest “fast- food.” / Homo sapiens must regain wisdom and liberate itself from the “velocity” that is propelling it on the road to extinction. Let us defend ourselves against the universal madness of “the fast life” with tranquil material pleasure.”

We can trace the main principles of Slow Food back to World War I national incentive advertising. One iconic war poster by the U.S. Food Administration in 1917, entitled “FOOD,” reads: “1. Buy it with thought. 2. Cook it with care. 3. Use less wheat & meat. 4. Buy local foods. 5. Serve just enough. 6. Use what is left. / Don’t waste it.” Such is the mantra of present-day food activists and environmentalists.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 71, xxiv. Petrini writes, “taste and distaste are the result of historical processes and cultural sedimentation” (19).

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 86. 1998.

learned, an obtainable instrument of “discernment, self-defense, and pleasure,” suggests that being discriminate, rather than a quality of the cultured elite, is an accessible, objective means through which to filter the world, to experience food, to be present as a body within an environment. It assumes that taste is, in some fundamental way, indisputable. And it implies that there is a template through which personal tastes may merge into the collective taste of a culture in order to preserve it via food. Every project of Slow Food aims to reacquaint the consumer with pleasure, but insofar as pleasure (as a purpose, necessity, and aesthetic ideal) is always linked with responsibility, with knowledge. If the midcentury homogenization of taste deadens the sensory pathways to pleasure, Slow Food opens these back up, but it does so in a way that we might associate with art (or food as an art), emphasizing taste as a creative as well as critical vocabulary, generating a new set of habits in food-craft that constitute what has become a culturally-pervasive aesthetics. Like Futurist experiments in gastronomic art, Slow Food uses/makes/defends/reads food as a way through which humanity, culture, and by relation, the arts, are ultimately shaped; as a conduit for global change. This is not to suggest that Slow Food is not grounded in everyday material reality, for it originates there. Yet when Petrini states the clear intention, there is resemblance to Slow Food as a modernist art movement: “to revive a tradition and give it fresh life, often what you need is a new toolkit and some avant-garde ideas.”³⁸⁷

While this is not an argument for Slow Food as an art form, per se, I am interested in exploring how the movement as a cultural force has been an impetus for new aesthetic forms where food and art converge. The basis is, essentially, the integration of taste and craft. Much of the mid-90s “foodie” energy has had various manifestations in the arts, from the

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 26. [Consider inserting this earlier.]

visual (green/sustainable/environmental/eco- art), to a whole body of literature (nature writing, eco-criticism) constituting green studies and food activism.

At the cornerstone of edible education have emerged several agricultural-aesthetic programs. In South Central Los Angeles, fashion designer Ron Finley, most known for his clothing line, recently founded LA Green Grounds, an organization touted to galvanize guerilla gardening.³⁸⁸ Finley and his faction reclaim unused, often abandoned urban spaces and convert them into thriving edible gardens to feed local communities. Through a mixing of metaphors, Finley refers to his “gospel” for growing food in terms of art – “gardening is my graffiti,” he proclaims, and soil is his canvas – and it is this aesthetic approach, specifically, with which he aims to transform neighborhoods.³⁸⁹ Considered an “urban farmer hero,” Finley’s “ecolutionary” politics of food take on combative language as well: in response to the ways in which “drive-thrus are killing more people than drive-bys,” and as he works to remake “food deserts” into “food forests,” he congregates a contingency of “gangsta gardeners” and alludes to his gardening shovel as his “gangsta weapon.”³⁹⁰ Such work is similar to that of the Chicago-based collaborative, Haha, which responded to Mary Jane Jacob’s curated “Culture in Action” (1992) by proposing a project that would, according to the guidelines, create a “compelling conceptual framework that could metaphorically extend this community action into the realm of art” – a hydroponic garden in a storefront in Rogers Park, a racially and ethnically mixed lower and middle-income neighborhood in Chicago that Haha called home. In addition to Finley’s efforts, “campus farmlets” have sprung up everywhere, food studies had become a reputable major in universities (NYU, UC-Davis, New School), and the Edible Schoolyard Project is a revolutionary global

³⁸⁸ Nothing Yet Community Garden is a similar organization in NYC.

³⁸⁹ TED talk

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

example of the efficacy of merging food, land, and stories, of connecting nature and culture, by creating a school curriculum in which the kitchen and garden are equivalent classrooms.³⁹¹ Outside of the academic spaces of edible education, twenty-first century urban agricultural and food justice initiatives have generated new forms where food (agriculture) and design (architecture) meet.³⁹² Ecologist Dickson Despommier has come up with a solution to the shortage of new land needed to grow food based on his reading of demographic trends – vertical farming, a modern idea perhaps inspired by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, of skyscraper greenhouses in urban centers. Straddling the culinary and art worlds even more directly is FEAST (Funding Emerging Art with Sustainable Tactics), a recurring public dinner in Brooklyn, NY designed to use community-driven financial support to democratically fund new and emerging art makers. In addition, Time/Bank, Time/Food constructs a micro-economy in which food is exchanged for time, and Sunday Soup, organized by art groups such as InCubate and Roots+Culture in Chicago, is a grassroots model for funding small to medium sized creative projects through community meals; income from meals is used to support new art.³⁹³ In Los Angeles, *Fallen Fruit* is an art collaboration, a “fruit activist movement” co-founded by artist David Burns and commissioned by the LA County Arts Commission to “fulfill a civic purpose.”³⁹⁴ The project, which has since expanded to other cities, maps fruit trees in public urban spaces, using fruit

³⁹¹ The Edible Schoolyard Project was founded in Berkeley by Alice Waters, chef-owner of Chez Panisse. Also, UCLA hosts a Science + Food conference of events throughout the academic year, and Oxford University hosts a symposium on food and cookery. There are too many other examples to mention here.

³⁹² As Wendell Berry famously said, “cooking is an agricultural act”

³⁹³ Other contemporary locavore events or “happenings” centered around food, space, design, art, and community, include: Ghetto Gourmet, Smorgasburg (Brooklyn), Brooklyn Swappers, Hester Street Fair (NYC), Le Grand Fooding (Paris/Los Angeles), Mealku (NYC), Test Kitchen LA, wolvesmouth (LA), Cheesemonger Invitational (NYC), The Great GoogaMooga (Brooklyn), From Scratch Club, etcetera.

³⁹⁴ *New York Times*, Sunday May 12, 2013. Consider: The Chicago Rarities Orchard Project, Seattle City Fruit, and Beacon Food Forest (Seattle). Revisit Disney’s *Lorax*, which showcases an apocalyptic community in which artificial trees have replaced real trees.

as material and media for site-specific installations and happenings, to interrogate the production and reimagining of urban space, community, and narrative. Fruit trees are approached as cultural symbols, and the hope is that their sustenance in the form of edible art leads to a broader cultural renovation. This act of social art uses urban agriculture as a creative non-commercial possibility in public space, expanding notions of art and community. Art is nourishment, literally and aesthetically. Whether artists use food as a material for social change, environmental sustainability, cultural currency, identity politics, or as a conceptual device (a way to renovate art), it is a complex means through which to apprehend its necessity (use-value) in relation to its aesthetic exchange value.

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Literary Terroir

If there is anyone who has altered the relationship between food and story in our contemporary moment, it is Michael Pollan. He has brought the literature of eating into the mainstream, has made people want to read food, write food (the effect of which has been the proliferation of food blogs), and eat food differently. Called “the demigod food writer and activist” of progressive America, as well as a “liberal foodie intellectual,” Pollan’s influence extends from the everyday citizen consumer to the policymaker, from the local farmer to the culinary writer. And his impact has been felt across diverse spaces: supermarket, barnyard, boardroom, voter booth, kitchen, classroom. His books – *Food Rules* (2009), *In Defense of Food* (2008), *Second Nature* (1991), *The Botany of Desire* (2001), *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), and most recently, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (2013) – have become cultural staples in the movement towards a new food ethics, politics, and aesthetics; one that relies on telling a new narrative of food. Pollan is unapologetically forthcoming in his aesthetic approach to food: “I know, I’m offering an aesthetic judgment

of a system designed not for beauty but for efficiency. Protein is protein, goes the logic of the system, whether you find it in an animal muscle, a soybean or a chicken dropping: this reductionism is the world-beating formula that drives industrial agriculture, and it works, up to a point.”³⁹⁵ But by converting food into an edible form of story in the spirit of his two cited influences, M.F.K. Fisher and Julia Child, he instigates a revolution in eating and a renewed attention to the language of food as a site for political action, to cooking as a bridge between nature and culture.

The Omnivore's Dilemma, his pro-local, pro-organic manifesto, remained a NYT bestseller for years, and is still considered the bible of how to eat into the future. His motto – “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants” – is embedded in the 21st-century shopper’s consciousness, a mantra among various eating demographics nationwide. But what is perhaps especially relevant in the work of Pollan is his atypical style of journalistic nonfiction for how it crosses genre to produce an aesthetically provoking argument, through the use of particular literary devices, for how to eat. Referring to his work as a collection of “food detective stories,” Pollan’s narrator, like Fisher’s, is at once himself and a more general seeker of the mysteries, perils, pleasures, and ramifications of taste, and a crafter of the stories therein. He is foremost invested in language, and spends considerable time attending to individual words and the political and aesthetic power they contain: food, he simply states in one essay, is “a word,” as if to remind us of its materiality not only as the daily physical object we need to consume, but as language, symbolic power, a form of vital communication.³⁹⁶ In another essay, he investigates the word “organic” – ““Organic” on the label conjures a whole story, even if it is the consumer who fills in most of the details, supplying the hero (American Family Farmer), the villain (Agribusinessman) and the literary

³⁹⁵ “The Way We Live Now: Cattle Futures?” *NYT*, January, 11, 2004, 5

³⁹⁶ “The Futures of Food,” *The NYT Magazine*, May 4, 2003.

genre, which I think of as “supermarket pastoral.””³⁹⁷ Pollan’s readings invest foods with plots, in which characters spar across an arc of storyline. He points to the linguistic component of food in such a way that rallies his reader into a more active role as eater; in other words, he emphasizes the importance of reading food as a political action, one that might restore meaning (in food and in story) where it is disappearing, or fill the “cracks” appearing in the narrative of food, asking, “Is the word “organic” being emptied of its meaning?”

For Pollan, labels are stories, “text-heavy,” often marked with “dead language,” a “banquet of storied foods” that can be read as a play on consumer desires in two ways: “a marketing gimmick or the first stirrings of a new politics of food”³⁹⁸ The stories for sale in the supermarket, Pollan argues, are deceiving “pastoral tales” about the food system, predictable farm-to-table narratives that taunt the emotional and ethical heartstrings of consumers in their food choices. If food always already comes with a story, the labels renarrativize, or in Pollan’s evaluation, they fictionalize the means of production: “the proliferation of eco-labels is of a piece with the trend toward “liberation marketing,” in which almost everything is sold as an expression of the consumer’s sense of social justice, environmental consciousness or moral virtue”³⁹⁹ While Pollan has our attention on the page, he calls on us to be more astute readers of a language of food in the public spaces of everyday consumption, using the Confucian model of a renovation of words:

Confucius advised that if we hoped to repair what was wrong in the world, we had best start with the “rectification of the names.” The corruption of society begins with the failure to call things by their proper names, he maintained, and its renovation begins with the reattachment of words to real

³⁹⁷ “Naturally,” *The NYT Magazine*, May 13, 2001.

³⁹⁸ “The Way We Live Now: Produce Politics,” *NYT Magazine*, January 14, 2001.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

things and precise concepts. So what about this much-abused pair of names, sustainable and unsustainable?⁴⁰⁰

His sense of the “real” and “precise,” however, does not limit the range with which he manipulates food objects as literary metaphors and uses authorly conceits.⁴⁰¹

In the chapter “A Naturalist in the Supermarket” in *OD*, Pollan creates the character of corn as the hero protagonist of his story. Corn has a history, a war (the stalks are “uniform as soldiers”), an appetite, sex, and a story; all of the basics. Not only is corn personified, the poetically described “cities of corn” serve as a larger metaphor for the complex inner-workings of humanity. Pollan crafts an argument about agriculture using the tools of literary craft. His idea of a supermarket pastoral positions the supermarket as the storyteller, a text to be read, a food landscape with “legible zones” constructed of language, much like the one Mullen interrogates in *S*PeRM**K*T*:

Yea, I use the term “supermarket pastoral” for the experience of shopping in a place like that. Whole Foods, they’re brilliant storytellers. You walk into that store, and it just looks like a beautiful garden, and there are pictures of organic farmers up on the walls, and little labels that describe how the cow lived that became your milk or your beef, and the cage-free vegetarian hens who got to free range.

They’re creating in your minds an image of a farm very much like the ones in the books you read as children, with a diversity of happy animals wandering around the farmyard. It’s very cleverly designed, but unfortunately like a lot of pastoral forms of art, it’s based on illusions. Not entirely, but if you go to the fact depicted on those labels, you find that in fact, things look a little bit different.⁴⁰²

Pollan directly refers here to the supermarket pastoral as a literary counterpart to other pastoral forms of art, producing for the reader a sense of temporality in which food is so much at the center of the cultural imaginary that something as pop as the supermarket has

⁴⁰⁰ “Our Decrepit Food Factories, NYT Magazine, 12/16/2007, 2

⁴⁰¹ For example, his most recent book, *Cooked*, is divided into four sections: fire, water, air, and earth; just as *OD* is similarly organized around three principal narratives of food chains: industrial, organic, hunter-gatherer. Moreover, *The Botany of Desire* offers a “plant’s-eye view of the world,” and is constructed from four primary desires as they correspond with four types of plants (sweetness/apple, beauty/tulip, intoxication/marijuana, control/potato).

⁴⁰² “Michael Pollan: The Truthdig Interview (truthdig.com, 4/11/2006).

actually become a categorical aesthetic form; if not textual, then visual, for as artist Mark Robbins sees it, “The American supermarket is a museum,” a fantastical amalgam of objects, graphic designs, and jingles.⁴⁰³ If there is an intention to Pollan’s aesthetic politics, it is to save us from a bleak food future, to disrupt this stated anxiety: “The next American cook is going to be the supermarket. Takeout from the supermarket, that’s the future. All we need now is the drive-thru supermarket”⁴⁰⁴

His aims as an author-activist range broadly. He highlights the risks of the food industry’s expansion, the consequences of bad eating habits, and the ethics of consumption with hopes of popularizing cooking, and getting us to rethink taste into action. His idea of the local, as a synthesis of place, diet, and language converging into a single body, is basic yet radical. Eating defines us, he states, but always insofar as it denotes pleasure, and Pollan makes this the bedrock of *OD*: “in the end this is a book about the pleasures of eating, the kinds of pleasure that are only deepened by knowing.”⁴⁰⁵ The central questions driving many of his writing projects – “can a culture of everyday cooking be rebuilt?” – sees the answer to revitalizing a local-food economy as the direct outcome of the home kitchen, where a large-scale effort to make cooking a part of daily life again has the potential to transform the American way of eating.⁴⁰⁶ Eating is, he reiterates, the key to civilization, pointing to Brillat-Savarin, whom he credits with doing “the most to advance the cause of civilization” (rather than the cause of gastronomy), and to Levi-Strauss, who theorized cooking as a metaphor for the human transformation of nature into culture, as well as other anthropologists such as Richard Wrangham for this insight: “it was the discovery of cooking by our early ancestors –

⁴⁰³ Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley, eds., *Eating Architecture* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006) 36.

⁴⁰⁴ “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *NYT Magazine*, August, 2009

⁴⁰⁵ *OD*, 11. Yet Pollan reads the nation’s “eating disorder” as a denial of pleasure: “The future of food, I learned, is toward ever more health and convenience – the two most important food trends today – at no sacrifice of taste” (“Naturally”).

⁴⁰⁶ “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *NYT Magazine*, August, 2009

not tool-making or language or meat-eating – that made us human” and is central to human identity and culture, and its decline profoundly affects modern life.⁴⁰⁷

If we are to remain a civilization intact, and evade a “synthetic food future” it is not through our uses of food as entertainment, according to Pollan, and this is what he coins the “cooking paradox,” pointing to how we spend more time reading about food and watching cookery shows on television, than actually cooking food: “It has been easier for us to give up cooking than it has been to give up talking about it – and watching it.”⁴⁰⁸ One can consume more food vicariously than physically. He pinpoints the contradiction of a nation whose shelves are overflowing with food books in a “perfect media storm,” but who has little sense of food, rather, “a national eating disorder.”⁴⁰⁹ In getting us to seriously consider the physical and psychological consequences of eating, Pollan seemingly hopes to distract us from the screen, where food is an object of play. The shift from thinking about food in terms of its history and production, to seeing it as a symbol of competition and celebrity, is what he blames for the decline of cooking in culture, caused by the “gravitational field” of TV. His critique of the visual consumption of cooking enabled by TV extends to issues of class: “The glamour of food has made it something of a class leveler in America, a fact that many of these shows implicitly celebrate. Television likes nothing better than to serve up elitism to the masses, paradoxical as that might sound. How wonderful is it that something like arugula can at the same time be a mark of sophistication and be found in almost every salad bar in

⁴⁰⁷ He cites Wrangham’s book, *Catching Fire*. “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *The NYT Magazine*, August, 2009.

⁴⁰⁸ “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *NYT Magazine*, August, 2009. Pollan is not overreacting – there are multiple channels airing too many shows to name, but here are a few from *The Food Network* alone: Top Chef, Food Network Challenge, Iron Chef, Chopped, Cupcake Wars, 30-Minute Meals, The Best Thing I Ever Ate, Restaurant Stakeout, Restaurant Impossible, Diners Drive-Ins and Dives, Ace of Cakes, Boy Meets Grill, Chef Hunter, Chef Wanted, Chefs vs. City, Chefography, Ciao America, Date Plate, East Meets West, Extreme Chef, Extreme Cuisine, Fat Chef, Food (911, Detectives, Fantasy, Feuds, Finds, Fight, Nation), Food Network Star, Good Eats, The Naked Chef, The Galloping Gourmet, Two Fat Ladies, The Great Food Truck Race, Worst Cooks In America.

⁴⁰⁹ *OD*, 2.

America? Everybody wins!”⁴¹⁰ Though Pollan’s sarcasm is palpable, and his idea somewhat redolent of Warhol’s praise of the mass production of food as a democratic class leveler, perhaps he is shortsighted in focusing on the false image of food propagated by TV, the pretense of its accessibility for all, and might allow for some potential to be had in the inclusivity that TV has brought to a discourse of food, in the collapse of the high/low, and in a reclamation of its aesthetic quality. Doesn’t everybody win? However, the distinction to be made is that Pollan insists on action, on getting up from the couch and back into the kitchen, and sees the trend in cooking – as what you watch not what you do – as the demise of culture initiated by the food industry: “The formula is as circular and self-reinforcing as a TV dinner: a simulacrum of home cooking that is sold on TV and designed to be eaten in front of the TV.”⁴¹¹

And where food is concerned, regardless of its glamorizing by TV, isn’t Pollan, in a way, serving his own version of elitism to the masses, paradoxical as that may sound? As Pollan points out in “The Futures of Food,” “If the postwar food utopia was modernist and corporate, the new one is postmodern and oppositional, constructing its future from elements of the past rescued from the jaws of agribusiness. It goes by many names, including “slow food,” local food” and “organic” – or, increasingly, “beyond organic.”⁴¹² With his own rhetoric of food as local and organic, and a wholesome approach to eating as pleasure (as aesthetic as much as necessity), for whom are his 64 plus “food rules” intended? Do they apply, as well, to the demographic for whom farmers’ markets are not available, where proximity to the KFC drive-thru offers a more economical option? Who wins after reading Pollan’s *OD*? As an eating disciple of Pollan, it is easy to get immersed in the narrative of

⁴¹⁰ “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *NYT Magazine*, August, 2009.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² “The Futures of Food,” *NYT Magazine*, May 4, 2003. “As an antidote to the “plastic food” dispensed by agribusiness, the counterculture promoted natural foods organically grown, and whole grains in particular.”

food he counter-writes to right the culinary downfall. Yet it seems important to note, as Emily Matchar recently did in her *Salon* essay, “Is Michael Pollan a Sexist Pig?” – a title that seems unnecessarily slandering – that the idealistic view of food choices as political acts (moral, environmental), and ultimately as a remedy to cultural eating ills, belongs to the middle-class, educated, progressive, liberal, privileged class. In fact, many of the buzzwords in contemporary food culture that Pollan has helped promulgate, especially *locavorism* (eating mostly local foods), never reach an eating public who lives off food stamps. It is the privileged contingent (the Brooklyn hipster, the modern day trust-fund homesteader) whose urban backyard chicken coops, community gardens, domestic mini-farms, food organizing, and food blogging (“digital pastorals” of food), pays little attention to the realities of eating outside their bubble. Not to mention, where are the stories of food laborers, how are urban planners reconfiguring the production of space in relation to the production of food (a map of Manhattan tracking farmers’ markets and fast food chains reveals a predictable disproportion of each across racial, ethnic, and class demographics of neighborhoods).⁴¹³ Yet the renunciation of consumer culture in favor of modern pre-industrialism and self-sustenance, what Peggy Orenstein calls “a life that is made, not bought,” is not so pernicious, nor unadmirable, so what is the problem, or more specifically, how responsible are individual eating tastes and consumptive habits for the well-being of others, on a local and global scale? Is there a way of making taste a site for democracy?

The self-righteous, morally-correct “foodie” (even the term is exclusive) who lives off the land, and for whom food is a revelatory and often self-aggrandizing experience, may not be what Pollan had in mind at all, yet constitutes a burgeoning new food culture.

Matchar is critical that the rising “hard-core foodism” and “New Domesticity-style” of

⁴¹³ Courtney Balestier coins the term “digital pastoral” in her essay “Our Revisionist Nostalgia,” *Oxford American*, April 16, 2013.

countercultural grassroots campaigns, are mostly reliant on a picture of change that puts women back into the kitchens, even regressively.⁴¹⁴ She is critical of Pollan, even going so far as to interrogate the sexism of his work, as it reproaches the feminist movement for altering domestic order, and consequently diminishing the importance of cooking; his comments makes her “want to smack Pollan and the rest upside the head with a spatula. Claiming that feminism killed home cooking is not just shaming, it’s wildly inaccurate from a historical standpoint. / The rise of convenience food has to do with market forces, not feminism,” she argues.⁴¹⁵ The recent return to domesticity in response to a broken food system is one that confuses the narrative of *the way food used to be* with *the way women used to be*. In “The Femivore’s Dilemma,” which appeared in *The New York Times* in 2010, five years after the effects of Pollan’s *OD* would have been felt, Orenstein considers how “the omnivore’s dilemma has provided an unexpected out from the feminist predicament, a way for women to embrace homemaking without becoming Betty Draper.” As Orenstein sees it, femivorism legitimizes stay-at-home motherhood, what Matchar refers to as New Domesticity⁴¹⁶ – a social movement that revives lost domestic arts, like canning:

Femivorism is grounded in the very principles of self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal fulfillment that drove women into the work force in the first place. Given how conscious (not to say obsessive) everyone has become about the source of their food — who these days can’t wax poetic about compost? — it also confers instant legitimacy. Rather than embodying the limits of one movement, femivores expand those of another: feeding their

⁴¹⁴ “Though restaurant kitchens are still heavily male (93 percent of executive chefs are men), women are disproportionately represented in the unique-to-the-twenty-first-century worlds of artisan food businesses, urban homesteading, food activism, and food blogging. Women also continue to cook the vast majority of home meals, as they’ve done since time immemorial—American women cook 78 percent of dinners, make 93 percent of the food purchases, and spend three times as many hours in the kitchen as men. And among those attempting to adhere to the slow food or locavore ethos, these meals have the potential to be much more complex and time-consuming than the rotisserie-chicken-and-frozen-veggie meals our own mothers served for us.” (Is Michael Pollan a Sexist Pig? Emily Matchar, Salon, April 27, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/04/28/is_michael_pollan_a_sexist_pig/)

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

families clean, flavorful food; reducing their carbon footprints; producing sustainably instead of consuming rampantly. What could be more vital, more gratifying, more morally defensible?⁴¹⁷

Orenstein's question is obviously not without irony, for as Courtney Balestier argues,

“culinary nostalgia, like any nostalgia, is borne of romance and distortion.”⁴¹⁸

Perhaps a countercuisine, inspired by Pollan's work, requires both the practical and aesthetic embodiment of food, and is relevant to Patricia Parkhurst Ferguson's discussion of taste:

Comprehending producer and consumer, cook and diner, *cuisine* refers to the properly cultural construct that systematizes the culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code... As cooking makes food fit to eat, so cuisine, with its formal and symbolic ordering of culinary practices, turns that act of nourishment into an object fit for intellectual consumption and aesthetic appreciation...this conception of culinarity continues to counter the ephemeral nature of food and to dominate the transitory culinary *gesture*.⁴¹⁹

The transformation of eating into an intellectual and aesthetic idea has manifested lately in the cornucopia of new directions that food has taken in print, and in a widespread gusto for edible words, which Pollan has certainly provoked. His broader aesthetics for how to live (through how to eat) is everywhere in writing. New anthologies on the topic of food are published each year, including the most recent edited by Kevin Young, *The Hungry Ear* (2012), a collection of poems, and *Eat, Memory: Great Writers at the Table* (2009), a collection of essays edited by food critic Amanda Hesser.⁴²⁰ Others have focused more on the material

⁴¹⁷ Peggy Orenstein, “The Femivore's Dilemma,” *The NYT Magazine*, March 11, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/magazine/14fob-wwln-t.html>

⁴¹⁸ Balestier, “Our Revisionist Nostalgia.”

⁴¹⁹ *Accounting for Taste*, 3

⁴²⁰ Also, *O Taste and See* (2003) ed. David Lee Garrison and Terry Hermsen; *Appetite: Food as Metaphor, An Anthology of Women Poets* (2002) ed. Phyllis Stowell and Jeanne Foster; *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry: Poems About Food and Drink* (2003) ed. Peter Washington; *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film* (2004) ed. Anne L. Bower; etcetera. In addition, see poems by Charles Simic, Bernadette Mayer, Jim Crace, Li-Young Lee. The Huffington Post recently covered the best poems about food: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/05/food-poems-the-best-poetry_n_2806968.html

language of food, like Ina Lipkowitz' *Words to Eat By: Five Foods and the Culinary History of the English Language* (2011), which considers the crossings of culinary and linguistic heritage. The *New York Times* devotes an entire issue annually to food, the Huffington Post created a category of news entitled "Taste," literary food magazines and journals, beyond the longstanding (*Bon Appetit*, *Saveur*, *Food+Wine*), appear in growing numbers, such as *Gastronomica*, *Lucky Peach*, *kinfolk*, and *Edible*, and usually cover a range of disciplines, plus are visually crafted as appetizing objects of print.⁴²¹ They reflect a more sophisticated reading (and eating) public, as well as the necessity to link the culinary and literary arts, to approach food as an alternative art form. In addition, eminent food culture critic, Carole M. Counihan, edits a scholarly journal, *Food and Foodways*, and the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery has been hosted by Oxford University since 1981, keeping food part of academic study and discourse. Food blogs continue to multiply, providing eating guides across the map, such as *Eater* and *Grub*, or drawing from the literary culinary tradition of M.F.K Fisher as a stylized pastiche of recipe, story, and travelogue, such as *Smitten Kitchen*, *Orangette*, *A Sweet Spoonful*, and *Cannelle et Vanille: food, life & photography*, all of which have been noted for their literary and artistic merit, often leading bloggers to become major cookbook authors or performers on *The Food Network*.⁴²²

⁴²¹ Also: *Acqtaste*, *Meatpaper*, *The Art of Eating*, *Diner Journal*, *Alimentum*, *Graze*, *Fire + Knives*, *Cereal*, *Garden + Gun*, *Gather*, *White Zinfandel*, *Condiment*, *The Runcible Spoon*, *Remedy*, *Swallow*, *Put an Egg On It*, etcetera.

⁴²² Deb Perelman's following led to the compilation of recipes in *The Smitten Kitchen Cookbook* (Knopf, 2012); Molly Wizenberg's blog (*Orangette*), as well as her contributions to *Bon Appétit*, culminated in *A Homeade Life: Stories and Recipes from My Kitchen Table* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), and she opened a restaurant called Delancey in Seattle, WA; Aran Goyoaga's blog, which she referred to as her "blank canvas" for food stories, recipes, and photographs triggered by nostalgia, were gathered in *Small Plates & Sweet Treats: My Family's Journey to Gluten-Free Cooking, from the creator of Cannelle et Vanille* (Little Brown + Co, 2012).

See also: *First We Feast*, *Food+Think*, *Foodimentary*, *Food Culture Index*, *Philosophy of Food*, *Table Matters*, *Edible Geography*, *Art+Lemons*, *Apples & Onions*, *Beyond the Plate*, *David Lebovitz*, *Dietlind Wolf*, *Sprouted Kitchen*, *Spoon Fork Bacon*, *Chasing Delicious*, *V.K. Rees*, *The Food Dept.*, *Island Menu*, *Istanbul Eats*, and many, many more. There is even a blog focused on cooking the dishes that appear in literature, *Paper + Salt*.

Ferran Adrià is a chef. To many, the world's greatest. And he is so much more than that: inventor, philosopher, rebel, designer, artist. He is even a scientist, doing a type of experimental cuisine that employs techniques of culinary physics, food alchemy, and molecular gastronomy; one invention for which he is known is culinary foam.⁴²³ He most commonly calls himself a deconstructivist, one who takes classic dishes and deconstructs them into new forms; in his words, the process is "Taking a dish that is well known and transforming all its ingredients, or part of them; then modifying the dish's texture, form and/or its temperature. Deconstructed, such a dish will preserve its essence...but its appearance will be radically different from the original's."⁴²⁴ Though Adrià describes his menu as representative of avant-garde cooking in its purest state – his philosophy includes reference to the tasting menu as "the finest expression of avant-garde cooking" for how "the structure is alive and subject to changes" – this is no contradiction of terms; his art manages to preserve the raw simplicity of food with a certain purism, while also honoring its imaginative aesthetic potential in new metamorphic forms. He does so by combining classic and modern techniques and ingredients in order to engage all the senses (his food often requires use of the hands, mouth, ears, nose, and tongue in new ways, much like food did for

⁴²³ A term coined in 1992 by Oxford physicist Nicholas Kurti and French INRA chemist Hervé This, molecular gastronomy is a subdiscipline of food science focused on the physical and chemical transformations of ingredients that occur during cooking, in relation to the social and artistic elements of gastronomy. This style of cooking also refers to sous-vide, a method of cooking invented in the 60s which seals food in airtight plastic bags immersed in water baths for excessively long periods (sometimes 72 hours) at a precisely regulated low temperature. Another feature of molecular gastronomy is the use of liquid nitrogen, and also hydrocolloids, gums that result from mechanical mixing, which allow chefs to create and achieve various (unusual, unfamiliar) shapes and textures without compromising flavor/taste.

⁴²⁴ <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/foodmonthly/futureoffood/story/0,,1969713,00.html>. Deconstructivism actually refers to a school of postmodern architecture that emerged in the late 80s based on the philosophical theory of deconstruction, employing an inside-out aesthetic that involves the manipulation or dislocation of structure and the recomposition of fragments.

the Futurists), and plays with materials (the line between liquids and solids) and their conditions (hot versus cold), in order to break down models and codes and structures of food through which it has traditionally been conceived.

Adrià is also the first cook in the history of haute cuisine to participate in *documenta12*, a contemporary art exhibition in 2007 (traditionally held in Kassel, Germany) with three established leitmotifs: modernity, bare life, education.⁴²⁵ In the show's press release, curator Roger M. Buergel explained Adrià's inclusion as a cook:

I invited Ferran Adrià because he has managed to create his own language, which has become very influential on the international scene. This is what I am interested in, not whether people consider it art or not. It is important to mention that artistic intelligence does not depend on the format; we should not relate art only with photography, sculpture, painting, etc., nor should we with cooking in general. But under certain circumstances, cooking can be considered art.⁴²⁶

I would like to think about what it means to call cooking a language in the 21st century, to read food the way we might any text, as a literary and visual art. In the philosophy delineated for his restaurant el Bulli, which reads as a sort of culinary manifesto, Adrià underscores the importance of rethinking food as linguistic matter in more than one instance:

- 1) Cooking is a language through which all the following properties may be expressed: harmony, creativity, happiness, beauty, poetry, complexity, magic, humour, provocation and culture
- 19) A culinary language is being created that is becoming more and more ordered, and on some occasions it establishes a relationship with the world and language of art

Rather than a classic credo for cooking like the one we find prefacing cookbooks by masters such as Julia Child, Adrià's approach is almost fanciful, a purely aesthetic commitment to food that actually mirrors that of a writer to words or a sculptor to clay. (This is exactly what Harryette Mullen is doing as a poet writing foodstuff.) To consider cooking as the

⁴²⁵ Vicent Todoli and Richard Hamilton, eds., *Food For Thought, Thought For Food* (Barcelona: Actar, 2009) 96.

⁴²⁶ *Food For Thought*, 100. Buergel insisted in the media that Adrià was invited as an artist and thinker, not as a chef, who could interface between the material and immaterial (QUOTE, 82).

articulation of poetic properties is, in one sense, to treat food as poetry, and to compose the menu as a story.⁴²⁷ When participants of *documenta* were asked to share impressions of the meal, British painter and collage artist Richard Hamilton praised Adrià's art of developing and refining a language of food: his "art is 'linguistic' in that he manipulates food as a language that can be remodeled and revitalized so that his creations take their place among other art forms. His genius is directed by an ambition to redefine and develop a medium; from monosyllabic grunts he has created a means of discourse, with all the necessary components: vocabulary, syntax, grammar and rhythm."⁴²⁸ Without ever having eaten at el Bulli, and with only access to the filmic documentary, photographs, menus, and recipes of the restaurant, I can only borrow this firsthand description of the meal as an art object for a discussion of Adrià's avant-garde work in relation to literary texts.

Although Hamilton insists that Adrià's meals are "closer to literature than any other art form," reactions to his culinary exhibition at *documenta*, which was unconventionally held in the actual kitchen of el Bulli in Cala Montjoi for 100 days (a pavilion converted into a workshop and exhibition space, where meals consisted of more than forty courses), convey associations of his cooking with many different types of art. Even Hamilton explains the ambition of Adrià's aesthetic motivation "to provide a wonderment similar to that found when looking at a great painting, listening to an unaccompanied Bach cello suite or reading a Shakespeare sonnet."⁴²⁹ His cooking, with its poetic sensibility and lyrical quality, may effectively enact an avant-garde renovation of a language of taste, but it is most notably conceptual in the manner of certain kinds of visual art. It is no surprise that early ideas for

⁴²⁷ A participant in *documenta*, Heston Blumenthal, chef-owner of the renowned restaurant *The Fat Duck* in London, shared his impressions of the menu as a narrative of language (*Food For Thought*, 218). Dishes arrive in a particular succession, forming what one might call a narrative arc.

⁴²⁸ *Food For Thought*, 50-52.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54

his work were initiated during the time he spent in the Nineties in the workshop of Catalan sculptor Xavier Medina Campeny; it was then that he defined his perspective on the relationship between cooking and art, and their shared commitment to history, rules, and language. Adrià's kitchen is in many ways an artist's studio, a workshop for experimentation, collaboration, and creative process; an art space where the event of eating occurs. By inviting an aesthetic experience of eating that incorporates theories from across disciplines and arts, elements typically related to postmodernist methods – irony, play, humor, provocation, spectacle, surprise – he is able to decontextualize food then reconcoct it with new meaning.⁴³⁰ His belief in such an interdisciplinary practice is part of his overall philosophy: “Knowledge and/or collaboration with experts from different fields (gastronomic culture, history, industrial design, etc.) is essential for progress in cooking.”

Like an architect, his cuisine attends to the design and geometry of forms. After eating one of his meals, gallerist Massimo de Carlo compared him to Catalan modernist Antoni Gaudí, lauding his work for attaining a similar “matter of concentration, a struggle for purity, even when it reaches the most baroque and complicated of forms,” exceeding Surrealistic effect or *divertissement*.⁴³¹ Another eater, experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka, described Adrià's work as “edible architecture” (Dali's term for Gaudí), yet insisted that it was not static, rather the culmination of movement, dance, and rhythmic repetition.⁴³² He was not the first to liken his food to dance – Anya Gallaccio, a Scottish artist who works with organic matter, equated her eating experience to being in the presence of a Pina Bausch

⁴³⁰ In the *el Bulli* philosophy, he addresses the fine line of such tactics: “Decontextualisation, irony, spectacle and performance are completely legitimate, as long as they are not superficial but respond to, or are closely bound up with, a process of gastronomic reflection.”

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 239

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 216

performance, and Adrià's cuisine has also been compared to Greek drama.⁴³³ Like a painter, Adrià hand-makes his cuisine, even with industrial materials and techniques, for as Bice Curiger (art historian, critic, curator) noted in response to her meal, "he paints his dots one by one; he is not interested in the machine."⁴³⁴ In her experience, his tactic is Surrealist for how it aesthetically attacks the senses and reflexes to break apart assimilated conventions, imbuing food with an "illusionist aspect."⁴³⁵

Perhaps this is why *Gourmet* magazine called him "the Salvador Dalí of the kitchen." Dalí's art, in particular his sumptuous cookbook, *Les Dinners de Gala* (1973), theatrically documents gastronomic forays of Rabelasian bodily pleasure with fantastical illustrations and recipes (136 of them), epic depictions of feasts and galas, and ornamental menus. His joy in the pleasures of taste (begun at the age of six when he decided he would be a cook and extended into his connoisseurial adulthood) is evoked in the hyperbole of the food image, in a surrealist gastro-aesthetics that stays true to something he once said: "I am exalted by all that is edible." And, "I hold visceral impulses to be the supreme indicators."⁴³⁶ His artwork is what we might call "food porn"⁴³⁷ today, not only because his cookbook includes a chapter on aphrodisiacs; his obsessive repertoire of gastronomic figures and their odd dislocations (foods, body parts, places) embedded within anthropomorphic landscapes, and his poeticizing of states of culinary encounter from ingestion to excretion, swings somewhere between a Gallic nostalgia for the past (captured in traditional French recipes) and theological fetishization: "The sensual intelligence housed in the tabernacle of my palate beckons me to pay the greatest attention to food...In my daily life my every move becomes

⁴³³ Ibid., 240

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 246

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 238

⁴³⁶ He also said, "All my experiences are visceral"

⁴³⁷ CITATION: Define food porn.

ritual, the anchovy I chew participates in a small way to the shining light of my genius.” He even once referred to the style of Surrealism as the “cannibalism of objects.” Aligned with the “positivist materialism” of Brillat-Savarin, for whom the body is also posited as visceral – according to Roland Barthes, the gourmand’s body in *The Physiology of Taste* is seen as “a softly radiant painting, illuminated *from within*” – Dalí’s cookbook is as much instructive about cooking as it is about ecstatic desire.⁴³⁸ Here is a metaphor that works both ways: Dalí’s painting embodies the “voluptuous” effects of food with an alimentary flamboyancy that is physical, while Brillat-Savarin’s theory of the eating body and the experiences of taste is vividly pictorial. Dalí’s cookbook, like Adrià’s cuisine, presents morphologies of food that move food beyond actual eating, and into the visual and multi-sensorial dimensions of pleasure, for as he once said, “I attribute capital esthetic and moral values to food in general, and to spinach in particular.”

Adrià has literally redefined haute cuisine all over the world, though he does not escape critique of his exclusionary culinary elitism; few have had the opportunity to eat his cuisine (often there were 400 reservations called-in per one table at the former el Bulli), and his food is certainly not serving the poor. But perhaps this goes without saying, and it is more useful for the discussion at hand to focus on how his work reflects a movement that seeks to intentionally bridge culinary practices and design/visual arts, often through the augmentation of the culinary with science/technology, yet also with a certain purist methodology. Here in the U.S., Adrià’s influence can be seen in the restaurant kitchens of many celebrity chefs, whose fame is the result of this inheritance but whose cooking frequently loses the point, bordering on the faddish and the precious at the expense of taste. His effect can also be seen in new culinary literature. The author Harold McGee converted

⁴³⁸ Roland Barthes, “Reading Brillat-Savarin.”

his interest in the chemistry of food into the well-known *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*, (1984), an exposition in writing of the history of foodstuffs and cookery. McGee provides a scientific understanding of food – its molecular qualities and explicative preparations – with visual illustrations and story, even interspersing literary quotes.

More recently his successor, Nathan Myhrvold, former Chief Technology Officer at Microsoft, has authored *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking* (2011), which also applies scientific research principles and new technological methods, but to contemporary cooking specifically.⁴³⁹ Myhrvold’s “encyclopedia,” which is listed for \$625 on Amazon, contains 6 volumes spanning 2,438 pages, most of which are illustrated, and weighs 52 pounds.⁴⁴⁰ It is an art object. The photographer, Ryan Matthew Smith, explains his aim for “minimalist, high contrast imagery that really pops off the page,” which is food porn at its best.⁴⁴¹

It should be noted that chef-artists like Adrià, McGee, and Myhrvold, among many others, as well as the industrial food designers of the 50s, are indebted to the pioneering work at the junction of science and food of George Washington Carver, a former slave from Missouri who studied art but went on to become a successful scientist, botanist, educator, and inventor.⁴⁴² However, he is rarely acknowledged by the white boys club of molecular gastronomy as their forefather. Carver’s most notable and innovative contribution was the development of techniques to improve soils depleted by repeat plantings, such as alternative

⁴³⁹ Also authored by Chris Young and Maxime Bilet

⁴⁴⁰ The volumes include: History and Fundamentals, Techniques and Equipment, Animals and Plants, Ingredients and Preparations, Plated-Dish Recipes, and a spiral-bound kitchen manual. Smith took 3 years to edit his photos. In Myhrvold’s intellectual culinary history, the Modernist movement in cooking began in the 80s. Los Angeles restaurant critic Jonathan Gold defines modernist cuisine as “as driven by technique and nifty tools as by ingredients, and overall by the imperative of originality” (?).

⁴⁴¹ <http://www.featureshoot.com/2010/11/qa-ryan-matthew-smith-seattle/>

⁴⁴² He was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the NAACP (which honors achievements of African-Americans), whose other recipients include W.E.B. DuBois, M.L.K., Jr., and Langston Hughes.

crop rotations.⁴⁴³ He founded an industrial research laboratory much like Adrià's lab at el Bulli and Myrhvold's Cooking Lab LLC, where he experimented on new crops and their applications, which resulted in the invention of totally novel products. Moreover, in 1941, *Time* magazine linked his work to the arts, dubbing him the "Black Leonardo."

What Adrià's work has spurred into the 21st century is a set of culinary trends that gravitate towards performative endeavors of food: underground eating events, avant-garde supperclubs, pop-up dining establishments, tasting-menus, food trucks; in our current era, cooking is the expression of design, eating is a part of performance, and food is a happening.

V *Food "Happenings": Eating Design, Edible Architecture, Feast Art*

nonart is more art than Art art
– Allan Krapow

The radical curatorial inclusion of Adrià as a chef making art of/with food (or as an artist using food) is not so recent, though it has certainly activated a 21st-century trend to reconstitute food in and as art, and renovate art as edible. Adrià, of course, had influential predecessors, such as the aforementioned Futurists, who also experimented and staged culinary events in their Holy Palate Restaurant in Turin, and were featured as part of the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931. In addition, we can draw an even more direct (or proximate) line between the neo-avant-gardist work of Swiss artist and writer Daniel Spoerri as it has led to Adrià and to current intersections of the culinary and artistic. In 1964, the leftovers of Marcel Duchamp's solitary feast at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York – a plate of greasy chicken bones, coffee grounds, an empty wineglass, and cigar stub – were

⁴⁴³ His idea was that by replacing cotton with crops such as peanuts and soybeans, families could have more options, not only for sourcing their own food but for creatively using food in new forms (gasoline, cosmetics, plastics).

affixed to a table by Spoerri, then mounted as a work of art among the repasts of artists such as Harvey Lichenstein and Andy Warhol in an exhibition focused on collective consumption entitled *31 Variations on a Meal*. In a radical project that collapsed distinctions between culture and art, Spoerri's "Eat Art," as it came to be called, incited a taste (or distaste) for a new encounter with the markets of grocery and gallery, testing the line between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience using food as the material of art, and art as the matter of food.

A founding figure of New Realism, an avant-garde movement of the 60s, and Fluxus, a Dadaist group, Spoerri developed a uniquely philosophical and political body of "Eat Art" ranging from uncanny food assemblages, snare-pictures (of eaten meals), table topographies, gallery restaurants, and an exhibit grocery shop in an art gallery with actual canned food for sale.⁴⁴⁴ In Spoerri's imaginary, the edible could be transformed into art, and art objects could be represented as consumables, an approach that critically interrogates the corresponding uses and effects of food and of art through experimenting with their conditions of consumption. At the core of his modernized still-life was an insistence on the chance leftovers of eating and the potentialities of human intermingling over food, rather than a self-fulfilling aesthetic intention.

Where Adrià performs the artist from the role of chef, Spoerri disrupts the culinary as an artist playing the part of a chef. Not only does he make art from food ephemera, he also hosts banquets as occasions for artistic experimentation and social pleasure. Most recently in 2008 he transformed a theatre in the village of Hadersdorf into a restaurant, at the helm of which was a Slow Food chef, and sold culinary specialties made by artists. His approach persists in the belief that the meal is a pretext and site for understanding the

⁴⁴⁴ For this exhibit in Copenhagen in 1961, Spoerri stamped the canned food, "Attention: Work of Art."

experiences of taste, the psychology of food, and the complexities of convivial interactions; the meal is a “conversation piece” as much as it is an artwork.⁴⁴⁵

The restaurant as a live exhibition form and a stage for the spectacle of food is no novelty for Spoerri. In 1963, he opened Restaurant de la Galerie J in Paris, introducing his original idea of the restaurant as a critical metaphor for the contemporary art scene. At Galerie J, attendees would encounter highly inventive meals from an exclusive menu, the tabletop remains of which would be trapped (hence the snare-picture) and made into an exhibit. To further the metaphor, art critics acted as waitstaff, simulating their typical roles as intermediaries in the art world. The success (or failure) of Spoerri’s restaurant at the time depended on “the consumption of the meal, on the preference of “taste” of its consumers, and the word of mouth (or stomach) that follow[ed] (Hatch). This project, and his revelation while living briefly in Simi, Greece that the “preparation and consumption of food are two of the most defining acts of human existence,” compelled him to open his own “real” restaurant in 1968 in Dusseldorf, Restaurant Spoerri, which hosted an Eat-Art Gallery in the space above it (Hatch). During one of the many banquets hosted here, he gave a speech pointing to this motivating principle, which seems to repeat Dal’s fixation on the viscosity of food: “humanity has two basic impulses, survival and reproduction, or, to put it more crudely...eating and fucking” (Hatch).

Spoerri’s philosophy, or *gasrosophie*, emerged as he established his restaurants, and led him to showcase his ideas on food production and consumption as it related to art production and consumption – literally and figuratively – in order to challenge the status of the artwork. He recognized the metaphorical importance of preparing, serving, and eating food as a trifecta of “change, process, metamorphosis, in short a type of gastronomical

⁴⁴⁵ John G. Hatch, “On the Various Trappings of Daniel Spoerri,” *Art Margins Online* (www.artmargins.com), 2003.

alchemy...all part of the cycle of life in both a crude materialist sense and a metaphysical one” (Hatch). He also published cookbooks based on these restaurants, using the recipe as a prototypical form that may be copied and multiplied but never perfectly reproduced, to further critique the role of art; the recipes were Spoerri’s “pragmatic formulation of the objectives of many of the Conceptual artists working in the United States at the time who decided to express their art in the form of an idea, choosing to let the viewer materialize it if they so desired” (Hatch). Moreover, what he envisioned, well before *The Food Network*, was that food could be popular entertainment.

*

Many other projects from self-proclaimed food artists, eating designers, and more traditionally identified chefs, artists, and writers working across disciplines, have since developed from the work of Spoerri and Adrià, pointing back to the Futurists while leading us forward towards new convergences of food and media that our current times seem to necessitate. We are animated in our pursuit of pleasure, communality, and transformation in the consumption of food, art, and their newly evolving, interconnected meanings. Here are some of the more innovative examples:

Allan Kaprow: Though he promoted a concept of “un-art” throughout much of his career, Allan Kaprow’s “art,” which sought to separate from traditional forms in favor of those blurring art/life boundaries, especially beyond the gallery and museum, has significantly influenced contemporary artists, particularly in Fluxus and the installation and performance arts (of which he was a pioneer). Kaprow was a painter, assemblagist, and environmental artist whose theory of “Happening” developed in the late 50s/60s accentuated a concrete art made of everyday materials and ordinary events, and frequently used food. The “happening,” part exhibition part event, deauthorized the artist, making the

viewer an active rather than passive participant (much like Adria's eater), and deemphasized the craft and permanence of the artwork in order to reclaim the perishable, forgettable, and ephemeral qualities. Though his "happenings," which numbered over 200, were scripted adventures, the viewer's reactions made the art piece into an unreplicable moment, incorporating the viewer as part of the art itself in an instance of the ordinary meeting the aesthetic. In one series of "happenings" entitled *EAT* (1964), Kaprow constructed an "Environment" among caves in the Bronx, where attendees (who had made reservations through the Smolin Gallery) moved among various spaces and volunteer performers in search of secreted food, such as hanging apples.⁴⁴⁶ Similarly, "An Apple Shrine," staged in a gallery in 1960, presented the installation of an apple altar (and its olfactory quality) where the visitor was given the choice of eating a real one or departing with a plastic one.

Rirkrit Tiravanija: We can trace the relation of this piece with the work of Argentinian-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija in the 90s, whose performances transformed New York City galleries into kitchens, featuring Thai dishes (such as *pad thai*, 1990) as the material of meal and art. "I can't paint but I can cook," Tiravanija once admitted, and his edible artworks have even been reinstalled in spaces such as the MOMA in New York City. In what has been coined "Thai curry performance art," Tiravanija's installations, such as *free* (1992), involve the cooking of feasts for gallery visitors, freeing gallery-goers from the typical distances between artist and viewer to create new experiential interactions in real-time. The social occasion of the shared meal, not the art object or canvas, is the artwork, a site for the "relational aesthetics" that engage the viewer *within* the art.

Gordon Matta-Clark: Around the same time, the artist Gordon Matta-Clark cooked a whole pig under the Brooklyn Bridge and served 500 pork sandwiches in an event that

⁴⁴⁶ This also occurred in Milan (1991), and Naples (1992). And in 1970, he built a wall of bread with jelly for mortar near the Berlin Wall.

merged the feast with performance. He cofounded a conceptual restaurant called FOOD with Carol Goodden in 1972 in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City, managed and staffed by artists, which served as both a community space for eating and dialoguing, as well as a living art piece. With an open kitchen and exotic meals, Matta-Clark's restaurant used the event of dining as one manifestation of his theory of "anarchitecture" (the compound of anarchy and architecture). He commissioned artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage to create meals, many of which were unedible, and the photographer Robert Frank produced a short 16mm film of his venture, *Food* (1972). Several prominent artists and groups convened at FOOD, and its activities came to represent the art community in Manhattan in the 70s, as a cooperative which strove to challenge the line between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic through radical food experimentations with mixed media, alternative spaces, installation, and performance.⁴⁴⁷

Marije Vogelzang: In her work as an eating designer – a term she created to specify that she designs from the verb *to eat* – the Dutch Marije Vogelzang explores the interactions of eating as they are experientially installed within a diverse range of contexts.⁴⁴⁸ Her artworks, usually edible thus ephemeral designs, take into account the origin, preparation, etiquette, history, and culture of food, honoring its content and background as much as its shape in order to tell a story. One piece, *Eat Love Budapest*, presented a three-day performance on a boat on the Danube river, involving Gypsy (Roman) women feeding visitors (who could not see them) while telling their life stories. Another, *Pasta Sauna* (2013), inspired by the Futurists, invited visitors into a sauna created by boiling water to eat pasta; servers wore pasta-suits which said "No More Pasta," and the pasta machines doubled as

⁴⁴⁷ Matta-Clark's complete body of work was featured in a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 2007.

⁴⁴⁸ Her cookbook, *Eat Love* (2009), lays out many of her food concepts, and includes her 8-point philosophy of eating design.

music boxes. In many of her artworks, Vogelzang plays with sensory boundaries, sometimes eliding sight in favor of taste (using the tablecloth as a physical barrier or an edible unifier), testing the line of the real versus the edible (*Faked Meat*), interjecting music into the eating experience (to consider taste as a musical composition), encouraging social food sharing, creating the space for storytelling through eating that triggers memory (in food memory workshops) – all of these examples point to how her art tests the potentialities of intimacy through food, where design, as something eaten, is literally incorporated into the body, and is also something that connects humans across the distances and divides of contemporary society. In 2004, Vogelzang opened *Proeuf* (the name means tasting + testing), a restaurant and design studio in Rotterdam, later relocated to Amsterdam), where her eat design experiments went live, and her art forms were ingested.

Marti Guixé: Vogelzang’s approach to design is similar to that of Marti Guixé’s (though he uses the term food designer), a trained interior and industrial designer based in Spain who started an ex-designer movement (like Kaprow’s un-art movement), which focuses not on food objects and forms as static or permanent, but on their metamorphic possibilities when reinvented and eaten by consumers as art: “I am only interested in food, as I consider it is a mass consumption product and I like the fact that it is a product that disappears – by ingestion – and is transformed into energy.” Guixé dissociates food from nostalgia and cooking (in much the same way that Poppy Cannon does), turning it instead into “an edible designed product that negates any reference to cooking, tradition, and gastronomy.”⁴⁴⁹ He insists on food designs that are functional, communicative, and interactive; that alter the relationship between industry and consumer, and radically change perceptions, such as his three-dimensional tapas shaped like atomic models, hands-free

⁴⁴⁹ <http://www.food-designing.com/about.htm>

lollipops, geometric potatoes, flavored stamps, post-it chips, and peas engraved with iconic 20th century women.⁴⁵⁰

Bompas & Parr: Twenty-first century futurists, Sam Bompas and Harry Parr are perhaps the most exciting artist duo working at the edge of food and design today. Joining forces in the UK in 2007, they began experimenting with food art using gelatin (for its plasticity and historic role) to form jellies into large-scale, edible, architectural constructions, but have since expanded into manifold directions to create food art that is “a mixture of architecture, demolition science, performance, physics.”⁴⁵¹ Their designs invite the spectacular, the fantastical, the absurd, using cutting edge technology at a grand architectural scale to explore how taste is altered by location, theatrics, and synaesthesia. Within the Bombass & Parr studio, a team of cooks, architects, technicians, and graphic designers are drawn together by the mysterious and unthinkable metamorphoses of food into new aesthetic forms. Here are some of the wackier artworks they have produced: a chocolate waterfall and climbing-wall; a mini-golf course with cake-inspired obstacles; a cloud of breathable cocktail; a Brutalist cake; glow-in-the-dark jellies; and scratch + sniff cards for a screening of Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook His Wife The Thief and Her Lover*.⁴⁵² Their banquets have been themed in jelly, dirt, Elizabethan desserts, and black-colored food, and their *Futurist Aerobanquet* (2009) commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Futurist movement. Other pieces have veered towards literary interpretation, such as *A Culinary Odyssey* (2012) which prototyped the dishes of science fiction, and *The Waft that Woos* (2012) at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-Upon-Avon, a mirror maze navigable by the nose based

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ <http://www.jellymongers.co.uk/about>. Their book of designs, *Jelly with Bompas & Parr*, was published in 2010 (Anova Books, London). They also compete in culinary artwork competitions, such as the Architectural Jelly Design Competition organized by the London Festival of Architecture.

⁴⁵² They also cooked a feast for the Architecture Association in 2010 inspired by Greenaway’s film, cooked and served in a gallery.

on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, which aimed to create "a tangible Shakespearean experience, exploding narratives, characterization and criticism at an architectural and inhabitable scale," and simulating the visual trickery of the play.⁴⁵³ Many of their projects test the spatial dynamics of the body in relation to eating, such as *Infinity Pleasure Pod* (2012), a bio-responsive food installation in which visitors enter pods, and their bodily pleasure is registered in the act of eating, then projected onto the interior of the pod. Another, *Mercedes Drive Thru* (2012), created for London Fashion Week, uses a light installation to illuminate foods in a revolving restaurant with a choreographed soundscape.⁴⁵⁴ This year, Bompas & Parr produced *Fruit Weather* (2013), a "fruit-based weather system for your tongue," aka, an installation in which humidifiers saturated the air with fruity vapor to enhance taste perception via the collision of meteorology and pomology, spatializing flavor to become an "immersive and inhabitable cloud."⁴⁵⁵

To say that Bompas & Parr have pioneered at the junction of culinary practices and design arts would be an understatement, but in *Eating Architecture*, editors Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley collect a wide variety of examples in which cuisine is considered as an architectural intervention, proposing that "the rituals of dining, the design of meals, and the process of cookery form and inform a distinctly expressive architecture," and have done so throughout history.⁴⁵⁶ With an interest in the analogous aesthetics of the preparation of a meal and the production of space, they argue that "the exchange and transformation of generative practices in food and architecture" gives insight into the social production of

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., The design of both the installation and menu were developed via meta-research into the gustatory implications of in-car dining by Dr. Rachel Edwards-Stuart.

⁴⁵⁵ They also produced an epic installation *The Complete History of Food* (2010), a walk-through multi-course installation in which 730 years in food could be experienced. Another recent project in 2013 was *Heinz Beanz Flavour Experience* (2013), which explored the sensoral implications of Beanz by designing eating kits to choreograph gustatory experience for each variety; they created a musical spoon to transmit soundscape while the visitor ate from textural bowls.

⁴⁵⁶ 5

spaces, domestic and otherwise. Recent projects across the country have explored what Dalí, in his description of Gaudi, called “edible architecture,” in the spirit of Bompas & Parr. The luminous culinary topographies in jell-o of Liz Hickok, a San Francisco-based artist who plays the role of architect with food, engage similar spatial reimaginings of cities. Hickok’s elaborate scale models of urban sites in jell-o, lit from below, are constructed as movie sets (with photography, video, props, backdrops), and in the case of *San Francisco in Jell-o*, use gelatinous material to reflect the “geological uncertainties” of the landscape.⁴⁵⁷

In Los Angeles, former architect Natasha Case and real estate developer Freya Estrella have turned an innovative architectural lens on food with Coolhaus, a high-concept company (truck and brick-and-mortar) based on their developing ideas of “farchitecture” (food + architecture), where they design and sell architecturally-themed gourmet ice cream sandwiches with flavors named after architects and architectural movements, such as *Frank Bebry*, *Mintimalism*, *Mies Vanilla Robe*.⁴⁵⁸ Coolhaus is the name and fusion of three concepts: Bauhaus (the modernist design movement of the early 20th century), Rem Koolhaas (the Dutch architect and theorist), and the form itself, deconstructed into a cookie roof and floor with ice cream walls – a “cool house.”⁴⁵⁹ With an interest in how design can enhance the eating experience, Coolhaus combines the high and the low – architecture, urban planning, food (cookies and ice cream, staples of Americana) – using new food geometries and inventive edible packaging to challenge perceptions of food and space in relation to form, and in doing so, bring architectural and design theories into mainstream language. Just this year, the Helms Bakery center in Los Angeles hosted an event entitled “Design and Architecture in LA” (2013), which brought together architects, designers, urban planners,

⁴⁵⁷ She has also done *Jelly NYC*, as well as models of Scottsdale, the White House, Wilmington, North Adams, and Las Vegas.

⁴⁵⁸ Their trucks can now also be found in New York, Austin, and Miami.

⁴⁵⁹ <http://eatcoolhaus.com/about>

and chefs to discuss the relationship of design and food, and in New York, a similar event occurred at The New School, “Dining + Design: Conversations with Chefs and Architects on Creating the Ideal Dining Experience” (2013).

As the German Fluxus, Happening, and performance artist and sculptor Joseph Beuys once said, “By adding food to the work of art, life turns into art, in order to lead art back to life.” There is no way to do justice in this brief discussion to the large body of visual artwork (painting, sculpture, collage, photography, etcetera) focused on food that has expanded in the twentieth century in response to and as a critique of various facets of American food culture. From still-lives to banquet scenes to vanitas tableaux, many artists have found food to be an immediate material with which to test out the status of a work of art, yet also a metaphorical image pointing to the idea of art itself as human nourishment. From Picasso’s fruit to Hopper’s diner to Thiebaud’s cakes, food has always been an object of representation and, more recently, of artistic media. To highlight the energy and power of food, Beuys utilized mundane, edible materials such as fat, margarine, gelatin, and butter, which had the potential to transform over time through chemical reactions, decay, and regeneration.⁴⁶⁰ Influenced by Beuys, Matthew Barney’s incorporation of foodstuffs emphasizes the body’s machine-like metabolism and metamorphosis. In some instances, the artwork as a product is literally defied by the decomposition of the composition, in the style of Spoerri’s snare-pictures, whose friend, Swiss artist Dieter Roth also assimilates found food materials that begin to rot, making his artworks at times biodegradable (and putrid).⁴⁶¹

Several artists after Warhol and Lichtenstein have explored the seductive and repulsive elements of fast food culture from the 50s to the present, including the sculptor

⁴⁶⁰ Installation entitled *Fat Corners* (1960, 1962) and sculpture entitled *Fat Chair* (1964).

⁴⁶¹ *Staple Cheese (A Race)* was an exhibit in the 70s featuring 37 suitcases filled with cheese, and Roth also produced a series of multiples using foods such as cake and chocolate. Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, known for “Casserole of Mussels (1966), also uses found foods, like mussel shells.

Claes Oldenburg (known for his public art installations and large-scale replicas of everyday objects, such as “Burger” (1962), a giant soft sculpture), Jon Feinstein (whose photographs present typologies of popular foods, stripped of their logos and names, in his series *Fast Food*), and Dutch artist Roel Roscam Abbing (whose series *Fast Food* uses still-life devices to play with images of food in their natural and synthetic states).⁴⁶²

There have been many recent installation performances, including Sonja Alhauser’s, “Flying Buffett” (a catering performance with costumes), Marina Abramovic’ dessert performance (part of Creative Time’s Artist-Chef Project in NYC), East Coast Artists’ *Faust/Gastronome*, directed by Richard Schechner (in which performers passed chewed food from mouth to mouth), and Alicia Rios, *Organoleptic Deconstruction in Three Movements* (1993), (which performatively turned the entire body into a mouth, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s speaking figure in *Not-I*). Parodying action painting, The Kipper Kids stage ritualistic performances involving food, in which the end result is the accretion of food and debris upon the floor.

This is similar to Carolee Schneemann’s “Meat Joy” (1964), an improvised, conceptual “happening” in which eight partially-nude figures dance and play with food objects such as sausage, raw fish, and raw chickens. Janine Antoni, a Bahaman artist, also interrogates materiality and the body through a feminist lens in “Gnaw” (1992), using her mouth and the activity of eating or chewing to carve two 600lb cubes – one of chocolate, one of lard – after which the chewed bits are the materials with which she creates new things (lipstick tubes, chocolate boxes) for a mock storefront; as she said, “Lard is a stand-in for the female body, a feminine material, since females typically have a higher fat content than males,

⁴⁶² In addition, inspired by designs of pharmaceutical packages, Damien Hirst created *Last Supper* (1999), a series of screenprints using names of British canteen foods as copyright brands.

making the work somewhat cannibalistic.” With a different angle on domestic culture and gender issues, Nadine Boughton collages images from vintage magazines for *The Pleasures of Modern Living* to explore “food as an object of desire and comfort, and the grip of materiality.” Pushing the line between raw food, body, addiction, and desire, Emily Burns’ food paintings depict women whose faces and body(parts) are smeared, slathered, or stained with food, in a way that plays on the conventional idea of beauty, and the renovation of the image of the model as a sensual mess. In addition, Lee Price’s figurative realist paintings poignantly center on the image of her body in private spaces (in the bathtub, in bed), sometimes nude, sometimes clothed, often lying supine, while indulgently consuming large quantities of (junk) food. The self-portraits are painted from a bird’s eye view, inviting the viewer into a voyeuristic role (though the eater is self-focused and unaware of being watched), and raising questions about American women’s relationship to food as pleasure, guilt, obsession, discomfort, and desire, for as Price explains, she is interested in “how we imbue food with qualities that it does not have.”

In their play on landscape painting, British photographer Carl Warner and Christopher Boffoli use food create very different culinary topographies. Warner’s fantasy food landscapes (foodscapes) are photographed three-dimensional vignettes with real food. Boffoli (*Disparity*) makes miniature representations of everyday scenes using tiny, meticulously detailed toy figures posed in giant, real food environments. In his series of still-life photographs of sculptures, he references the cultural fascination with excess in the realm of food.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶³ <http://bigappetites.net/>. Works from *Disparity* include: zesty mower, cupcake golfer, podcaster, exotic pets, deep tea divers, banana riders. His book, *Big Appetites* (2013) is a collection of these photographs.

The world of fashion has also been impacted by food culture.⁴⁶⁴ Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's flesh dresses of the 80s, later recreated by Lady Gaga for her 2010 MTV Awards appearance, were sculptures made of 50 pounds of raw flank steak stitched into a gradually rotting garment to controversially critique the cultural cravings of female flesh. More recently, Sung Yeonju, a Korean artist, tests the ideals of high fashion (the functionality and meaning of forms) by producing edible dresses made of fruits and vegetables, then photographing them for a series entitled *Wearable Dresses*.

The film world has also been impacted. The Food Film Fest has occurred in New York, Chicago, and Charleston. Eat/See/Hear is an outdoor movie, food truck, and live music event series in Los Angeles. Recent films include: *Forks Over Knives* (a film about rejecting animal-based and processed foods in order to control or reverse degenerative diseases); *Super Size Me* (a 2004 documentary following a 30-day period in the filmmaker's life during which he only ate McDonald's food); *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (the 2011 story of 85-year-old Jiro Ono, considered by many to be the world's greatest sushi chef); *Butter* (a 2012 comedy about a butter sculpture competition); *Mr. Okra* (a 2009 film about a man who travels the Bywater, Tremé and 9th ward selling his vegetables from his truck); *The Benevolent Baker* (a film about doughnuts); *Liza de Guia* (a food-curated, online video storytelling series); several films from Japan (*Sushi, Handcrafted Happiness, Ramen Dreams, New York Cooks for Toboku, Tako NY*); *Zergut* (a 2011 film about food detritus); *A Matter of Taste* (a 2011 documentary about the chef Paul Librandt); and most recently Jon Favreau's culinary indie dramedy, *Chef*, just released (2014).⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ The Huffington Post covered the 2014 Agenda Show and its 38 pieces of food-inspired clothes and accessories, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/foodbeast/38-pieces-of-food-inspire_b_4676572.html

⁴⁶⁵ Also older films: *Big Night*; *Eat Drink Man Woman*; *Babette's Feast*, *Tampopo*, *Ratatouille*; *Like Water For Chocolate*; *Five Easy Pieces*; *The Scent of Green Papaya*; etc.

The meal, from daVinci's *The Last Supper* in the 15th century to Judy Chicago's second-wave feminist installation "The Dinner Party" (1979), has been a prominent trope in the art of food. More recently, Lee Mingwei's "The Dining Project" (1997) and Laura Ginn's "Tomorrow We Will Feast Again on What We Catch" (2012) have experimented with food as performance art; Ginn's multi-course rodent dinner in a gallery in Manhattan, for which she wore a dress made of 300 rat pelts, included gourmet dishes such as braised rat, rat terrine, and rat crostini for \$100 a head, was meant to examine urban self-sufficiency in a post-apocalyptic world. Ginn was not the first to create an uncomfortable feast. In 1969, Barbara Smith hosted a dinner party entitled "Ritual Meal," in which guests were obliged to dress in medical scrubs and eat with surgical instruments while film footage cast images overhead of outer space, naked bodies, and open-heart surgery.⁴⁶⁶ The Dutch artist Mella Jaarsma created a "wearable table" entitled "I Eat You Eat Me," an intimate performance in which people were required to order for and feed another as a way of engaging and experiencing the other's taste (rather than their own).⁴⁶⁷ Craig Thornton's *wolvesmouth*, an underground supper club, a dinner party held in his home kitchen at his downtown Los Angeles loft, is described as an "intersection between food, music, and art...an exploration in social dynamics." Thornton selectively curates a food community (emphasis on communion), using food to test the edges and continuities, the language and silences,

⁴⁶⁶ In her well-known piece "Feed Me" (1973), Smith installed herself unclothed on a mattress in a women's bathroom during a performance festival, surrounded by things like food while a recording looped the words "feed me." Bonnie Sherk also inserted herself into a public artwork in "Public Lunch At the Zoo (1971), for which the artist was served a gourmet lunch in a cage at the San Francisco zoo, while in proximity to her tigers devoured a meal of raw flesh.

⁴⁶⁷ This exhibit happened in places such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Sweden. See also: Mary Ellen Carroll's, "Itinerant Gastronomy" (site-specific pop-up meals, the first of which was a feast of 500 oysters in front of a cookbook store in New York City in 1996, merging food, location, people, and dialogue); Alison Knowles' "Identical Lunch" in the late 50s early 60s (what she named the everyday routine of mundanely eating the same tuna fish sandwich as a performance, reminiscent of Warhol's cans and O'Hara's lunch poems); and Suzanne Lacy's "International Dinner Party" (1979), a simultaneous dinner on the eve of Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" exhibition at SFMOMA which involved over 200 dinners with women around the globe during a 24-hour period.

between his eaters, creating a spectacular event that feels like performance art (some resemblance of dance, music, abstract expressionism, and poetry), while still rooting his 9-course menu in the foraged foods of local places.⁴⁶⁸ His aim, he says, is to tell a different story of food, and the narrative of his meal is full of surprise at every turn. Eaters are not given a menu nor charged for the meal, but can choose to leave a donation in the art object centerpiece of the table. Thornton insists that the relationships made by his food are as important as the food itself. If there were a model for how food, as a prop for social interactions – or the dinner table, as a site for democracy via taste – could function, this is it.

Food has also served as a medium for important political artworks: Abramovic's *Communist Body/Fascist Body* (1979), Michael Rakowitz's "Enemy Kitchen" (2004), Robin Kahn's interactive installation "The Art of Sahrawi Cooking" (2012), Leslie Labowitz's installations about food and ecology ("Sprout Time" 1980/1981), and Theaster Gates' "Soul Food Pavilion" (2011). And all within the last year, art museums have created special programming of exhibits to feature the intersections of food and art for the mainstream public: "Julia Child's Kitchen" at the Smithsonian in D.C. (2012), "Food: Transforming the American Table, 1950-2000) at the National Museum of American History in D.C. (2013), "Good Enough to Eat: Food as Medium for Craft" at Craft in America in Los Angeles (2013), and "Our Global Kitchen: Food, Nature, Culture" at the Museum of Natural History in NYC (2013).⁴⁶⁹

By alluding directly to many of the more significant food-art projects and designs mentioned, "happening" artist Jennifer Rubell pays homage to them in her epic project *Icons*

⁴⁶⁸ <http://wolvesmouth.com/>. *The New Yorker* featured it in its 2012 Food Issue, in an essay by poet Dana Goodyear: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/12/03/121203fa_fact_goodyear. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to dine here this March 2013.

⁴⁶⁹ See also *Delicate* (2011), ed. R. Klanten, K. Bolhöfer, A. Mollard, S. Ehmann, which documents the visual endeavors of a diverse scene of entrepreneurs who are using foodstuffs and eating as a creative challenge. Also, Caitlin Freeman's *Modern Art Desserts*, a cookbook of desserts inspired by artworks; her café at the SFMOMA features pastries designed to resemble famous works of art by artists like Mondrian.

(2010). As described on her website, participants enter various rooms, galleries, and spaces where: a cutout of Vito Acconci's body in his performance piece *Seedbed* (1972) grows carrots which may be washed and eaten by visitors; casts of Rubell's head in Fontina cheese hang from the ceiling; giant roasts of meat are positioned on pedestals (including 150 roasted rabbits tied in the form of the hare in Beuys' "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare"); 600-foot tables are stacked with cutlery and tableware; and a piñata of Warhol's head is hung 20-feet above, from which explode classic prepackaged desserts like Twinkies and Ding-Dongs upon impact.⁴⁷⁰

If that wasn't meta-visual (or meta-culinary) of much of the eat art, food design, gastronomy, and taste happenings that have colored the twentieth century, then conceptual artist John Latham's "Still and Chew" in 1966-1967 is a radical mastication of the idea of art. Teaching at St. Martin's School of Art in London at the time, Latham took out a library copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture*, which had cult status at the time, and invited his students to participate in an event-based artwork at his home by chewing pages of the book into a pulp, then spitting them into a flask. When the regurgitated pieces eventually dissolved and distilled, he sealed the fermented liquid into glass vials clad in leather cases like the book), and upon his overdue notice from the library, attempted to return the book in its new form as a vial. The librarian refused the book, Latham's teaching contract was not renewed, and the artwork was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where it is kept today.

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⁴⁷⁰ <http://www.jenniferrubell.com/index.php?sec=projects&details=39>. Abramovic also performed *Seedbed* as part of her *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005). Another of Rubell's projects, *Incubation* (2011), addresses "the creation of food, the creation of life, and the creation of art, through an installation performance of nurses making yogurt.

The Last Course

inque epulis epulas quaerit
(food had simply become a reason for food)
– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8⁴⁷¹

In the modern tradition, the function and meaning of aesthetic systems is rooted in taste. Aesthetic dislocations and dissociations of food open a particularly thriving point of inquiry, as this study has attempted to show, of the cultural reciprocity between the culinary (cuisine, taste, eating) and the artistic, and in this way, cuisine is inarguably a legitimate site for a discussion of aesthetics. The question Pollan poses – “how do the alchemies of the kitchen transform the raw stuffs of nature into some of the great delights of human culture?” – is one that we ask of art.⁴⁷² Foodstuffs, like artworks made of food, “decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination.”⁴⁷³ Or, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “Any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain.”⁴⁷⁴ By reading food as a metamorphic concept, physiologically and aesthetically, as the living matter of culinary and literary production, we open the way for apprehending its role in the material or spiritual reparation of culture.

The narrator at the end of Anthony Trollope’s novel *Barchester Towers* (1857) concludes: “the end of a novel, like the end of a children’s dinner party, must be made up of sweetmeats and sugarplums.” The ending he proposes, if made up of desserts, must surely be a happy one, even if it results in temporary dyspepsia. Here are the “sweetmeats and sugarplums” to end this project:

⁴⁷¹ Erysichthon searches for food in food.

⁴⁷² *OD*, 9.

⁴⁷³ Bill Brown

⁴⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Solid Objects.”

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To eat is to attend to the modern world, to incorporate it, ingest it, and ultimately expel it in new forms. The intricacies of this anatomical bodily process may be directly transposed onto the creative process in readings of food. In Galway Kinnell's meta-narrative poem "The Bear," the speaker's hunt for the bear – prompted by the material conditions of the natural world (it is late winter) and the visceral sensation of the bear's body, which parallels his own (the breath, odor, blood, digestion) – is a metaphor for the making of the poem. Midway through the poem is a stunning climax in which the speaker, with a sort of violence of appetite bordering on lust, recounts the ravenous act of devouring the bear, and the tender aftermath:

I hack
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,
and tear him down his whole length
and open him and climb in
and close him up after me, against the wind,
and sleep.

Here, the compilation of the conjunction "and," which appears seven times, imbues the voracious meal of the bear with the desire and gratification that comes in the artistic production of the poem, which is itself, as an object, sent back to the world of the reader as something to be consumed, too: something to *open* and *climb into* and digest. Kinnell may be forthright about the connection between eating and writing (which transfers to the reader's association of eating and reading in the experience of the poem), but this disclosure does not deter from what the poem awakens – "I awaken I think," the speaker announces at the opening of the last stanza. The reader, too, is awakened to think about the power of food as aesthetic, and subsequently, about the power of poetry as necessity, a form of sustenance

and nourishment. In the final line of the poem, he asks: “what, anyways, / was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I lived?”

*

In a recent essay for *The New York Review of Books*, poet Charles Simic described a similar seasonal proclivity linking not the hunt for food but the cooking of food with writing:

In New Hampshire, where I live, with five months of snow and foul weather, one has a choice of dying of boredom, watching television, or becoming a writer. If not in bed, my next writing-place of choice is the kitchen, with its smells of cooking. Some hearty soup or a stew simmering on the stove is all I need to get inspired. At such moments, I’m reminded how much writing poetry resembles the art of cooking. Out of the simplest and often the most seemingly incompatible ingredients and spices, using either tried-and-true recipes, or concocting something at the spur of the moment, one turns out forgettable or memorable dishes. All that’s left for the poet to do is garnish his poems with a little parsley and serve them to poetry gourmets.⁴⁷⁵

Simic’s nostalgic reverie, though it leans towards the sentimental, identifies something fundamentally (if not conveniently) analogous about food and language; their processes of concoction, but also their effects on the body and the imagination. As Pollan argues, “even the most ordinary dish follows a similar arc of transformation, magically becoming something greater than the sum of its parts. Every dish contains not just culinary ingredients but also the ingredients of narrative: a beginning, a middle and an end.”⁴⁷⁶ Or to extend Simic’s metaphor, food is a poetic language, and poetry is a nourishing food – it may be garnished, served, and eaten. It is the antidote to boredom, it is pleasure, something we need to stay alive.

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⁴⁷⁵ *The New York Review of Books*, February 14, 2012.

⁴⁷⁶ “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch,” *NYT Magazine*, August, 2009. Here, Pollan is specifically discussing the visual narrative of food, or what he calls the drama of food, which unfolds on TV.

At the beginning of Juzo Itami's 1985 "spaghetti western" film, *Tampopo*, a man and woman dramatically enter a cinema to the music of Franz Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3 "O lieb" in As ("Love Dream"), and are seated in the front row to be served an opulent feast of roasted meat with champagne. Early in the meal, the man rises, stares into the camera, addresses the viewer: "So you're at a movie too? What are you eating?" Meta-filmic, gastro-intertextual, in this instant the language of food – as poem, film, sculpture – interpolates the reader, who cannot but confront the paradoxes, consequences, communications, and spectacularities of taste prescribed in consumption.

Yet it is equally important to note that what we've come upon in all of the recent food-art doings is, essentially, a renaissance in pleasure. As Lily Briscoe famously says in Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, "One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy." Food puts us on a level with ordinary experience, and at the same time, it is a delight. Through literature we may more poignantly understand what Gaston Bachelard would call the "intimate immensity" of food.

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

– W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”

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